

The introduction to Ephesians is quite a mouthful! In the original Greek, Ephesians 1 contains the longest sentence in the entire Christian Scriptures. There's a lot to unpack here, but the questions that I want to focus on today are, who am I and who are you? These questions strike a deeply personal core. It can make you feel vulnerable to be under the spotlight and asked to describe yourself. As we said together in the prayer of confession, we might begin to describe ourselves by expressing our relationships with our family members. "I am married to \_\_\_\_\_, or I am a mother of 2 and a grandmother of 3. You might describe your work or your home by saying, "I work for Electric Boat, or I'm originally from Charlestown."

In the children's moment, we asked the question, do you identify with how you look or with the way you were raised or with the people you call family? And can that change over time?

I want you to think for a moment and reflect on this question, how do you identify yourself in just a phrase or two? My name is blank and I am . . . .

The words or phrase you choose to begin describing yourself speak to the core of your own identity. You are a million things. You could write an enormous biography if given the time. You could befriend someone or start a new relationship, and they would continue to learn things about you for ages to come. But the first words you use when you say, "I am blank" speak to how you see yourself most importantly.

Now, as we're talking about who we are, it has occurred to me that you don't yet know me very well. Calling a new pastor is a tricky thing. Nine people from this whole congregation interviewed me several times and researched what they could about me by calling references and listening to sermons. Then you all received a few short paragraphs of description about me. If you were here on June second, you got to hear me preach, but who here really knows me? That's the risk with calling a pastor.

You deserve to know more, and you will as time goes by, but I want to tell you a bit more about myself today. But then there's the question of, where do I begin? What are the

most important things to share with you today? In just a few minutes, what can I tell you that would be valuable and what is just superficial?

It's interesting, isn't it, how introductions often revolve around three things - our family and our job and our geography. For example, I'm Gin. I have an incredible family with a partner and three great kids. I work at Dunn's Corners Community Church, and I just moved to Connecticut from Texas. Socially, those are the norms.

But your identity is so much more than that. Family is foundational, of course, the one you were born into and the one you chose in adulthood tell a lot about who you are. Your job speaks to who you are or who you were, too. Your geography can define you, but you are so much more than that. You might be a New England Patriot fan or a Yankees fan or a San Antonio Spurs fan like me. You might be known as a cook who always can be counted on to bring food for the church, or someone who willingly moves chairs and tables when needed. You might love children or be a lover of pets. Clearly from the book sale tables there are many avid readers among us. And I cannot tell you how many times I've heard this phrase, "He's an eight o'clocker, or she's a ten o'clocker." You all are being identified to me in that way every time!

Sometimes, our descriptors are very loaded with meaning. As a child, I used to begin introducing myself by saying, "I'm an army brat." In one sentence, I could convey that I had moved around a lot, that one of my parents had to be away from home a lot, that my household had a sense of toughness and responsibility and loyalty and patriotism. It meant that we were always on time for things because if you weren't fifteen minutes early, you were late. It also implied that we were a lower middle-class family who had a steady income but weren't wealthy. The descriptor "army brat" could express a lot in one small phrase.

I liked to add this story when I was little. I was born in Hawaii in 1981 when my father was stationed there. The doctor who was there at my birth named me Kaliko-A-Pua-A-Ka-Lani which means, Newly Blossomed Flower from the Heavens. That's always a fun way to

describe myself. My official name, Virginia Ann Courtney, comes from both of my grandmothers: Virginia Irene Cartwright and Zula Ann Courtney. Some of you might wonder where “Gin” comes from, so let me explain. I am the third of four Virginias. My grandmother, Virginia Irene, her oldest daughter who is my aunt, Virginia Lee, myself the oldest granddaughter, Virginia Ann, and my oldest, who is officially named Virginia Sara. None of us use Virginia as our everyday name. That’s why I’ve been Gin since birth. It’s unusual to pass female names that way, but it’s a sweet family legacy to me. In fact, all of my children’s names come from other family members.

If you wanted to know more about me, I would say, “I’m the oldest of four girls.” Again, that’s a short sentence that could express a lot of assumed stereotypes. It implied that I helped my mom with the younger kids, that I grew up fast and had to be more independent, as my mom, often running the house on her own, had to take care of my younger siblings. My three sisters are younger than me in these increments - one is just a year and a half younger, then the next is seven years younger, and the third is thirteen years younger. I started college when she started kindergarten. That means there was always a very dependent child in the house, but it also meant that Christmas was always a magical time for the littlest one in the house and that our home was always full of the sounds of a little person playing or fighting bedtime or asking for help – sweet sounds of a young household.

I also always loved church. Always. I used to sit in the balcony all by myself when my father was away and my mother was volunteering in the church nursery with my sisters. I would follow the bulletin and take sermon notes even as a seven-year-old. I had the best Sunday School teachers, too.

But I struggled with self-confidence throughout childhood and in my teens, as many people do. And as I grew into adulthood, the way I described myself continued to evolve. In college, I rowed on the Vanderbilt Crew Team and worked for a big church in the summer as their summer youth intern. In seminary, I had a part time job as the construction supervisor

for Habitat for Humanity. In 2009, I fell in love and became a partner in life. Shortly after that, I was ordained into ministry and became Reverend Gin Courtney. Then in 2016, I gained a new name – Mom. In 2019, I transitioned from being a hospice chaplain to being an Associate Pastor, and then the twins came along, and I became a mom of three kids under five years old. That may be the toughest title I've ever had!

Now I have a new title. Pastor of Dunn's Corners. Titles and roles change over time. We evolve, but I have come to learn that there is one identity that has always been and will always be. Before I explain it to you, I want to make you this promise, I will be very conscientious and limited in my use of this phrase – "at my former church." You all don't need me to tell you about what other churches do, but I tell you this story today because of its relevance to our conversation. So . . . at my former church, we begin each and every worship service in the exact same way. First, we do the announcements, and then we proclaim that we are going to worship God and three people come forward and join the minister up front. One holds a pitcher of water and stands near the baptismal font, one stands at the communion table, and one stands at the Bible. The first official words of worship, every Sunday, are "This is the font of identity," and they pour water into the baptismal font so you hear the water splashing. This is the font of identity. Then we hear, "This is the table of sustenance." And "this is the book of memory and hope." Then the minister says, "People of God, welcome home." It's a lovely, theologically loaded, meaningful and symbolic way to begin worship, and it all begins with, "This is the font, or source, of our identity."

The font of our identity – our baptism – is God's grace given to us before we are aware we need it. Our inclusion into a family of faith that nurtures us. Our foundational core that *cannot* change no matter how much we ebb and flow in our devotion to God and the church. The source of our identity is the love and mercy of God that claims us and will not let us go. From the day we were born, we are God's, and our baptism seals that in us, as

the writer to Ephesians says. You were marked with the seal. For the Gentiles in Ephesus, they were baptized when they heard the Good News. For many of you, you were baptized as infants. Our core identity, the thing that does not evolve as we grow up and have different roles in families and job titles and such is as beloved, Spirit-filled, baptized, children of God.

If that doesn't fill you with hope and joy, peace and assurance, I don't know what will. No matter what differences we have, you and I, we have this in common, we are, as Ephesians 1 says, inheritors of God's love through Jesus Christ. We are marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. Eugene Peterson's translation of the scripture says, "It is *in* Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. We are God's own people. Regardless of the other labels you carry, no matter how relationships and careers have evolved over time, you are first and foremost, a precious and beloved child of God.

I look forward to getting to know you better, and I hope this morning you have heard what makes me, me. I am a pastor, a partner, a mother, a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a home builder, a lover of dark chocolate and hiking and the music of Carrie Newcomer and Brandi Carlisle. I'm forty-three years old and have blue eyes and type O blood, but most importantly, the source of my identity is grounded in the unconditional love that God has for me. Everything else, everything else about us is added to that foundational truth that we can all depend on. If you hear that every single Sunday, it really changes how you see yourself. So let's all try it together. Repeat after me. I am a child of God. I am baptized by grace. The source of my identity is found in the love of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.