Year A, January 19, 2020
2 Epiphany
Christ Church, Mexia

John is the only gospel that does not report the actual baptism of Jesus. The writer chooses to focus on the beginning of Jesus' ministry with a reflection of the baptism as Jesus begins calling his disciples. Even these accounts differ somewhat from the synoptic gospels, which is OK. One of the major points of the scripture today is to emphasize that Jesus is the "Lamb of God," a term used exclusively in this gospel.

The lamb is significant for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the image of the sacrificial lamb, Paschal lamb, of the Passover. And this is the identity of Jesus as portrayed by John. And that is what I'd like to discuss today – identity.

How we define ourselves and others is very important. For example, "A certain college student needed a small two-hour course to fill out his schedule. The only one that fit was Wildlife Zoology. He had some reservations as he heard the course was tough, and the teacher a bit different. But as it was the only choice, he signed up. After one week and one chapter, the professor passed out a test for the class. It was a sheet of paper divided into squares, and in each square was a carefully drawn picture of some bird legs. Not bodies, not feet, just different birds' legs. The test simply asked them to identify the birds from the picture of their legs.

Well, the student was absolutely floored. He didn't have a clue. He sat and stared at the test and got madder and madder. Finally, reaching the boiling point, he stomped up to the front of the classroom and threw the test on the teacher's desk and exclaimed, 'This is the worst test I have ever seen, and this is the dumbest course I have ever taken.'

The teacher looked up at him and said, 'Young man, you just flunked the test.' Then the teacher picked up the paper, saw that the student hadn't even put his name on the paper and said, By the way, young man, what's your name?' At this the student bent over, pulled up his pants, revealed his legs, and said, 'You identify me." (Hodgin, 926)

Biologists have for many years created taxonomies for classifying, identifying, all manner of living things. Producing good taxa however requires criteria that allow classifications to be mutually exclusive and

exhaustive – that is one can only be classified in one category and all things in the specific population must be included in the taxon.

Maybe this is why we tend to want to classify everything or everyone; or maybe it is just to try to simplify our complex world/environment. But don't we use classifications, stereotypes, whatever for people?

But Ashley Bean Thornton wrote a very interesting piece that was published in the Waco Tribune-Herald several years ago. In it, she talked about a Nigerian woman, Chimamanda Adichie, who gave a TED talk entitled, "What are the dangers of a single story?" Adichie said: "I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so, we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So, the year I turned 8 we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice and our old clothes to his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner, my mother would say, 'Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing.' So, I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then one Saturday we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them." (Waco Tribune-Herald, 1/16/14, p. 6A)

Adichie also experienced the effects of single stories when she came to America as a student. Most Americans think of Africans as deprived and backward, and that lens distorted their perception of her. She concluded "the consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of their dignity (especially when based upon a negative connotation). It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult (and we should recall that our Declaration of Independence acknowledges that all people are created equal by God)." (Ibid) And we should note that our categorizations emphasize how we are different rather than how we are similar.

How often do we use opposing groups? How many ways do we have? Republican, Democrat; Christian, Jew, Muslim…; liberal, conservative; poor, rich; straight, gay; normal, challenged; citizen, immigrant: blue collar, white collar; - oh so many ways to label. But people do not fit

into taxa! At least none that I have ever seen. The Episcopal Church is not "the Republican Party at prayer," as it used to be called, for example. Our identity as a church, as individuals is much richer, much more complex – and that identity can change over time. The word Muslim has taken on new meaning/connotation in the post- 9 11 era, for example.

If we want to be able to live together, solve problems to our mutual benefit and satisfaction – if we want to see the Kingdom of God on earth, to be better Christians – we need to stop looking at ourselves and others in terms of single stories, single or limited labels, or stereotypes, because none of those truly define us or our neighbor. And none of them define God. To identify ourselves, each other and God, we need to gather and to understand many, many stories, characteristics, attributes and combinations. But most importantly, we all are children of God. We have that in common.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and Spirit.

Amen.