

July 12, 2009 Amos 7:7-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; Psalm 85:8-13; and Mark 6:14-29

Story: Gilbert Tuhabonye is a track star from the African country of Burundi. He now lives and trains in Austin, TX for the Olympic Marathon, as well as other races. But there was one point in his life when he had to run for his life. The day was Oct. 20, 1993 and something wasn't right. During the summer presidential election, a Hutu (majority party) came to power for the first time since 1960. Gilbert was a part of another group – the Tutsis. Things were about to change. That morning in October, Gilbert couldn't get anything on his radio before he left for school. During his walk to school there wasn't any hustle and bustle on the streets and no traffic noise because there wasn't any traffic. When he arrived at school, he realized that none of the teachers were there and now Gilbert was really getting nervous. Soon, he heard the news from a few classmates – an attempt had been made on the President's life and the President was dead. Suddenly one classmate and track teammate, who was a Hutu, came up to him and angrily told him that it was his fault that the President was dead and that he was going to kill him. The Hutu students then gathered Gilbert and the other Tutsis together and tied their hands. Then, the beatings began. Ears were cut off. They were pushed into one of the buildings and it was set on fire. By now, Gilbert looked around him and could see some of his friends catching on fire, so he burrowed underneath the mound of bodies to get as far from the fire as he could. When he was able to free his hands, he felt his way to a window and fell through it to the outside. He was spotted by his angry classmates and he began to run. He ran until he found a hole in the ground to hide in and then he ran again. He doesn't know how long he ran, but he was finally rescued and brought to safety. Gilbert was unable to run for an entire year because it only brought back memories of that horrible day. Eventually he applied for and was accepted to a small, Christian college in Texas and began his studies there in 2001 on a full scholarship. He married his girlfriend, also from Burundi, and today lives in Austin, TX with his wife and children. Besides his own training, he also works with young runners. Most of his family remains in Burundi. Gilbert didn't let his identity only come from the violence around him, but from what his name means – child of God. (story from former issue of *Runner's World* magazine)

Scripture: Herod was nervous about Jesus and his power. Jesus' name was everywhere and Herod wondered who he was -- wondered if maybe John the Baptist had come back from the dead.

Herod's flashback occurs between stories of Jesus and the disciples healing/teaching and the feeding of the 5000.

Herod's flashback explains why Herod is nervous about Jesus b/c of what happened to John. John had condemned Herod for marrying his brother's wife and although he didn't like that, Herod was both afraid and intrigued by the man and his message of "repentance, for the kingdom of God is near." Herodias also carried a grudge against John the Baptist and when given the opportunity for revenge – she took it. She knew that Herod must keep his word for his leadership to remain credible. So, when Herod told her that she would get anything that she wished, she consulted with her mother, and returned to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Even though Herod was upset by this request, he did not deny it because he, too, knew that he must keep his word. And so, it was done.

So you can see, Herod was nervous about this guy named Jesus being so well known. The story about John's beheading explains Herod's fear as well as tells the readers that Jesus is not John, but the one about whom John preached.

The text from Mark reminds us of the confusion we can get into over identities. Gilbert's identity brought violence into his life, and yet, he did not let that define or limit him because he knew he had a more powerful identity given to him by God. There also was a question about Jesus' identity, who himself would be surrounded by violence. And yet, despite that violence, the power of eternal life gives us hope.

The gospel text today is a difficult one to think of having on the day of a baptism because it is filled with violence. And yet, our world can be a violent place and we can't ignore it. It is a blessing that we do not have to stop in the message of violence. With all that happens in our world, witnessing the baptism of a baby reminds us of the hope that we have been given through Jesus. It reminds us that God's word is stronger than anything else. Today, we are blessed with a glimpse of God's love and reminded that we, too, are marked with Christ's identity and not the world's identity.

The world can be a dangerous place, especially if we allow the world to tell us who we are, if we let the world give us a name. But we have a different identity, an identity of one who loves us and an identity that we receive in our baptisms. We are already named and claimed by Christ's identity. We already carry the mark of the cross on our forehead and I am here to remind you of that identity, not the identity that the world wants to give to you. We are blessed today to witness God's word working through the waters of baptism as K.R. receives his identity in Christ. Today, K.R. is given a new name, child of God, and will take the mark of Christ with him because Christ has reached out to him in love.

Story: A volunteer for Special Olympics was the lane 5 coach. Two kids approached the starting line. The gun went off. The race began. The volunteer coached the kid in lane 5 towards him. Suddenly, the kid slowed down, waiting for his friend. When his friend caught up, they ran

together with matching strides across the finish line. “We tied! We tied!” They insisted. In a world where coming in first comes before friendship, it’s funny that it takes a child to show us what really matters. In a world where power uses violence to come ahead, this story gives us a glimpse of hope, a glimpse of God at work in the world.

Your identity is this: You are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen