Who Do I Say That I Am?
An Introduction to the Service
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All Souls Church Unitarian, Washington DC

Who am I? Who are you? It's an ancient question; it's a Biblical question. When Moses questions the mysterious Presence in the burning bush, this Presence can only say "I am that I am" or - a more accurate translation would be "I will become what I choose to become." Jesus asks his disciples "who do people say that I am" and they project past prophets on him. The poet Walt Whitman in his poem "Song of Myself" mused on this question when he asks: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes." This dance between who we say we are and who the world tries to force us into being is both deeply personal and political. The issue of identity goes to the heart of who we are – and to our right to name and claim multiple identities and that they change over time. This morning' service is a meditation on the religious and spiritual questions surrounding our identities.

Who Am I? Most of you here at All Souls know me as Kathleen. But my mother's name for me was Chatty. My friends from college knew me as the performance artist formerly known as Magda. And my birth family knows me as Kathy. When I became a minister, I decided to use my birth name of Kathleen instead of the family name I had been called my entire life – Kathy. I've now been Kathleen for almost thirty years, yet my birth family has never been able to embrace this name change. They still call me Kathy. I understand that for them, Kathy was the person they knew – and loved – and this Kathleen is an identity that is unfamiliar to them. Over the years I've just let it go, but it's made me wonder about why – for some – it can be so difficult to accept the fact that our identities change over time. Our faith tradition differs from those mor orthodox in that we say "revelation is not sealed" – new insights, new selves can emerge. We honor and accept the fact that our identities can evolve and change over time. Wanting to go by a different name than the one given at birth is only aspect of this.

Larger battles around changing identities are happening all over the country right now. In Texas, Governor Abbott has attempted to criminalize a family's support for gender-affirming care for their transgender children, calling this "child abuse". Family and Protective Services staff are sent to investigate the parents of transgender children receiving gender-affirming care.   This legislation is evil – evil because of the irreparable harm this law would cause to trans children and their families. It is evil because it is a blatant disregard for an individual's agency to determine their own answer to the question: Who do I Say that I Am? It is evil because it denies this most basic human right. Of course, this is political move, throwing red meat to the conservative base, but it is an offense is deeper than politics, because being human is about so much more than one's social and political identity.

Today's service can't dive deep enough into the multi-layered and multi-faceted experience we have of being human, but what we can do is to hear from three members of this congregation; of their experience of naming and claiming multiple identities.

In the hearing, we hope that you will consider two questions; first – what are the aspects that make up who YOU say you are and why? And second, are there identities which others claim which you struggle with accepting? And why? Just like my family – beloved though they are to me – who can't accept me as Kathleen, but rather Kathy; or grandparents who continue to insist on misgendering their grandchild; or the struggle to gain acceptance for the pronouns of a person's choice. Who Do I Say That I Am? I like Yahweh's answer the best"; I will become what I choose to become. Who Do I say that I am? This beautiful intricate, and interconnected essence that we call the self is a precious jewel we carry, like a diamond, multi-faceted, shimmering and priceless beyond measure.