

SERMON: “Who Am I?”

Text: Psalm 8

Purpose: The purpose of this sermon is to define human identity as a gift of the Creator (made in God’s image) the Redeemer (saved by grace) and the Sanctifier (shaped by Spirit).

Introduction:

Many years ago, there was a ‘Charlie Chaplin Look-A-Like’ contest held at a county fair. For those who may not know, Charlie Chaplin was likely the most famous film celebrity from the years of silent features. His character, “*The Tramp*,” was known and loved throughout the world. Anyway, there were many contestants who sought the coveted cash prize, and they were evaluated by an impartial panel of judges who had studied the films of Charlie Chaplin. Eventually, the judges narrowed the field to three, then to two, and finally, to one who was ceremoniously awarded the cash prize. As the judges prepared to leave the podium, they were approached by one of the contestants who had been eliminated before the top three were chosen. “Your Honors,” he said, extending his hand in greeting, “I enjoyed your contest very much. Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Charlie Chaplin.”

Identity. All of us, probably, feel like we know who we are. We know our likes and dislikes, our memories of yesterday and our dreams of tomorrow, our cultural heritage, our physical characteristics, and our religious convictions. We identify ourselves by means of vocation (doctor, teacher, mechanic). We identify ourselves by means of geography (Gladys of Auburn), relationship (This is Kary, daughter of Betty and David Young), or sometimes, by hobby (Dr. Richard Marshall was a pianist).

But who are we really? Sometimes we look in the mirror and shriek, “Is that what I really look like?” Sometimes we are startled by something we’ve said and ask, “Did I really say that?” And sometimes we actually face an identity-crisis and confide to a therapist, “I’m not really sure who I am anymore.” It may lack definition, but at least it has honesty going for it.

During the past few weeks, we reflected on the identity of God (Creator who loves with a love that will not quit), the identity of Jesus (Savior who redeemed the human heart by giving himself) and the identity of the Holy Spirit (Comforter who awakens the soul to its God-given potential). Today, I invite you to reflect with me on our own human identity. Who am I truly? Who are you really? Are we the sum total of the food we eat, or the things we do or the choices we make? What are the defining characteristics of our nature?

The Bible speaks of those who received a new name once they discovered a deeper identity. Abram became Abraham (father of nations), Sarai became Sarah (mother of nations), Jacob became Israel (Struggles with God and Prevails), and, in the New Testament, Saul became Paul (Apostle to the Gentiles). Though others may not have received a name change, they certainly received a fresh identity as a result of their encounters with the divine. The boy Samuel became Samuel, Judge, Prophet, Anointer of Kings. David the Shepherd became David the King, Mary Magdalene the Prostitute became Mary Magdalene the Disciple, the first to encounter and proclaim the Risen Savior. Just recently, incidentally, in Roman Catholicism, the Pope elevated Mary, the Magdalene to sainthood with a memorial Feast Day.

Once again, who are we really? Sinner or saint? Three-quarters of a sinner? One-half of a saint? When I first began serving communion in the United Methodist Church, I struggled terribly with some of the liturgy. Especially the part where it said, “We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under thy table, but thou art the same Lord whose property is to have mercy...” I didn’t appreciate the image of crawling to God for crumbs of mercy. And how do you feel when we read David’s lament in Psalm 22:6, “I am a worm and not a man...?” Sometimes we have this image of a High and Mighty God who towers over us with one finger poised above the ‘smite’ button. Even in insurance lingo, we call disasters, ‘Acts of God,’ as if God arbitrarily punishes some for being especially ‘worm-like.’

We are not worms, but we are not gods either. In the story of the Tower of Babel, we read of ambitious humans who determined to make a name for themselves by scaling the heights of human accomplishment. God looks upon their work and sees that they, like Adam and Eve, wish to be like God in their ability, and so God confuses their speech. One of the lesser-known, but most striking biblical examples of hubris is that of King Nebuchadnezzar. In Daniel 4, he gloats over his magnificent Babylon, “Is this not magnificent Babylon, which I have built as a royal capital by my mighty power and for my glorious majesty?” Even as he speaks, he loses his mind and spends the next seven years eating grass like an ox, until God restores his sanity.

I believe we discover who we really are by encountering and embracing God, who restores us to our genuine self within. We find an accurate, celebratory assessment of who we are in the poetic praise of David in Psalm 8. Let’s read it together... (Read Psalm 8) Notice that he does not begin by speculating about human identity in the order of things. David begins the psalm by celebrating who God is! We cannot discover the purpose of our life without first discovering the intent of the One who formed us. What is the purpose of a wildflower? It may provide pollen for bees, oxygen for humans, food for animals, but mostly it grows for the purpose of looking and smelling pretty. In short, it glorifies its

Creator. And at our best, so do we. We are created with potential for many things, but the core of our purpose is to ‘love God with heart, soul and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.’

David celebrates the name of God and then turns his wonder to the cosmos. “When I look at the heavens, the moon and the stars, what are humans that you are mindful of them?” In Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town*, he tells of a letter that Jane Crofut received from her minister when she was sick. It was addressed like this: “Jane Crofut; the Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God—that’s what it said on the envelope.”

David continues in psalm 8, “What are mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor.” Wow! That doesn’t much sound like the worm of Psalm 22! We are, in fact, wonderfully made and of incomparable value to One who formed us. David describes this even further in Psalm 139: “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

My chemistry teacher once told me that if you reduce the organic parts of a human to their basic form, they would be worth less than six dollars. That’s a depressing thought, but to God, the human life is precious—so precious that God came to earth to live and die for it. Jesus put it this way, “I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly!”

God values us highly, but sometimes, we don’t much value ourselves. We know our sin, our false intentions and affections. We know our hypocrisy and the harm we have done to others. Sometimes the mistakes are so consequential that they actually become our identity: Steve, the thief or Steve, the adulterer or Steve, the murderer. If someone calls you a Judas, you know it is not a compliment. They have branded you as ‘disloyal to the core.’ The branding may not be sensational, but still damaging to one’s sense of identity: ‘She’s a Gossip’ or ‘He’s a chameleon.’

There were once two brothers who lived in a small shepherding community. They were a terror, and everyone dreaded when they came around. The shepherds knew they were stealing sheep to sell for their own benefit. The shepherds banded together, caught them one night in the act, and pressed charges. Part of their sentence included a branding burned into their foreheads which consisted of two letters: ‘S-T,’ for ‘Sheep-Thief.’

The branding sobered the boys. One left town and was never heard from again; the other remained in the town and began to make amends for all he had done against his

neighbors. When they were in need, he would drop what he was doing and go to their aid, even in the middle of the night. If they needed food, he worked extra hours to get it for them. If one couldn't work, he would step in and do the chores. Gradually, over time, he recovered the trust of his neighbors. One day, a newcomer noticed the letters on his forehead, 'S-T.' "What do those letters on his head stand for?" she asked a local. The man thought for a moment, trying to remember, finally he said, "I think they're short for 'saint,' for no one is as kind as he is!"

"Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asked the Twelve. "Some say, Elijah; others, the Baptist, and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "Who do you say that I am?" he pressed. Simon answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!" "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Jesus knew that Peter would later deny him, but he also knew that Peter would surrender his life for the sake of the Gospel. In Christ, Peter found his identity and life's purpose.

In Christ, we, too, confront who we are, good and bad, but we also discover who we are created to be and whose family we belong to. We are King's Kids—Kids under Konstruction, for sure, but King's Kids, just the same!