

Last year I was working on finishing up my masters degree and was in Chicago for a class. I had been studying with the same students for about three years or so, but we had a brand new professor. So the students knew each other well and had become close friends, but the prof didn't know any of us. On the first day of the class, he said, here's how I want to begin: I know you all our friends and have been on this journey for a while, I want to get to know you... so let's go around the room, and instead of introducing yourself, I want your classmates to introduce you. When its your turn, you can't speak, I am going to rely on everyone else in the room to tell me about you. It was encouraging and comical to hear what everyone had to say. If you were in that room and your family or closets friends had a few minutes to describe you and introduce you to someone, what do you think they would say? What words would they use? Take a moment, turn to the person next to you, and tell them what 2 or 3 words you hope someone would use if they were introducing you to someone new.

We live in a world where it is important to be able to establish your identity. When you are applying for a loan, when you are getting on a plane, if you are ever stopped by the police, we have various ways to proving who we are: Sometimes we can pull our our driver's license and that is enough. Other times we we need a two step process and we have to pull out our social security card. Other times, even that is not enough and we have to produce our passport, and when that is not enough, sometimes we even have to bring our birth certificate. All in an attempt to help validate and establish our identity. Even our phones have built-in technology these days, where it takes a picture of our face, and once it identifies us, it lets us in.

We are in a sermon series called seven, where we are talking about the priorities of our church, **worship, gospel, kingdom, scripture, identity, community, and generosity**, and today we get to unpack the priority of **identity**. When we talk about identity, of course we are talking about way more than what a Driver's license can tell us, we are talking about way more than a few words used to deceive us, we are talking about who we are, at the core of our being. Sadly, this is something where I feel many people, even many Christians, are either unaware of their true identity or, even though they are aware of their identity, the truth of their identity has not yet come to permeate and impact their life the way God designed.

There are three primary ways a person could come to understand their identity: First, we can shape our identity by saying: **I am who others say I am**. We all live in a world that has an incredible ability to shape our understanding of our identity. Typically those around us evaluate us based upon external qualities and attributes, by what we can produce or generate, and then they assign us a corresponding identity. For example: you are white, you are black, you are Asian, you are Latino. You are young, you're old, you're the life of the party, you have your pj's and slippers on by 6:30 pm, you're beautiful, you're not so beautiful, you're smart, you make us wonder about the viability of the public school system. You make a great leader, you are successful, you've underperformed. You get the idea: these are ways the world around us evaluates us, and people then speak that over us again and again, and what people say about us shapes how we come to understand ourselves. When the world around us and the people around us say something about us over and over, it eventually seeps into us and shapes our understanding of our identity.

We actually see this on a few occasions in the Bible. In the book of Genesis, there is a story of a man named Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers. He ended up in prison and was given the ability by God to interpret dreams, and he was able to use that ability to be released from prison and even

interpreted a dream for Pharaoh himself, who at that time was the most powerful man in the world. Joseph's ability to interpret dreams multiplied Pharaoh's wealth and power exponentially, and resulted in the saving of many lives. And because of what Joseph could do - because of what he could produce for others - Pharaoh gave him a new name. **In Genesis 41:45 we read, "Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah,"** which means "the one who reveals mysteries." Did you see that? Joseph is no longer called by his *given* name, his Hebrew name which means God will add, God will provide the increase. Now he is called by an Egyptian name based upon what he can produce for others around him. The world can shape our identity, people can give us a name and speak something over us, and then we can end up living *out* of who others say we are.

That's the first possibility. But it's also possible to try to drown out others, silence the loud noises and turn inward and declare, "I am not who *others* say I am, **I am who I say I am.**" Some resolve: I am not going to let the world decide my identity; only I can decide my identity. We take back control, focus on positive self-image and positive self-talk. And that may have some value, but here's the thing: no matter how intentional and purposeful we are, our self-determined identity inevitably ends up being shaped by circumstances outside of our control. Maybe you define yourself as successful, but then the economy takes a turn or you are wrongfully sued and lose your business and money, and you are no longer successful in the traditional terms. Maybe when you were younger you defined yourself as a great athlete who could break any record and win any competition. For years your world was wrapped up in what you could do on a field or a court, then time happened - you got older, you had kids, now you don't even play sports anymore. You pull your hamstring getting up from the couch while watching other people play sports! As circumstances change, so does your understanding of your identity. Or maybe you understand yourself based upon your relationship status: I'm the single person, but then you marry. We are married but don't have kids, then you have kids. I'm a mom of toddlers, I'm a dad of teenagers, I'm an empty-nester. At some point, many will heartbreakingly have to say, "I'm a widow, or widower." Do you see what I'm saying here? Our human tendency is to define ourselves based upon what's happening in the moment, but the moment is *always* changing!

There is a powerful example of this in the Bible, with a woman named Naomi, and her story is found in the book of Ruth and begins with her and her husband, their two sons, and their two son's wives. Naomi is as happy as can be with her family. Her name means pleasantness - and there is a lot of pleasantness in her life. Then her husband dies; she grieves but she still has her sons and daughter-in-laws. But then some time later, both of her sons die, too, and she's left with basically nothing. And we can imagine her life in ancient society: she has no father, no husband, and no sons to help provide for her, she has no life insurance policy, no social security - she is *destitute*. One of Naomi's daughter-in-laws goes back to be with her family, but the other daughter-in-law, Ruth, stays with her, and the two of them travel to Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem. Now it has been a long time - about 10 years - since the people in her hometown have seen her. In Ruth 1:19 we are told: "**When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, 'Can this be Naomi?'**" And do you know how Naomi responded?? **Ruth 1:20: "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara."** She gave herself a new name, based upon what had happened to her in life. She no longer wanted to be called Naomi, which means pleasantness; now she wants to be called Mara, which means *bitterness*.

Naming ourselves might not seem like that bad of an idea...so long as all of our circumstances are alright, and so long as things are always up and to the right. But what happens when life gets hard; what happens when we blink and our reality changes? We're left in a freefall, and we don't know who we are or where to turn. So the all-important question is: if we aren't going to determine our identity by saying I am who others say I am, or I am who I say I am, *how should we determine our identity?* The Bible tells us we should determine our identity by saying: **I am who God says I am.** This is an *enormous* shift. Instead of allowing others to determine my identity where I end up like a wave, blown and tossed by the wind;

instead of shaping my own identity where I claim to be the captain of my soul, we look to God, the one who knew us before we were born, the one who knit us together in our mother's womb, the one who knows every hair on our heads, and allow *him* to determine who we are.

Now, if we decide to do that - if we decide to determine our identity based solely on who God says we are - where does that lead us? I believe that as we look through the Scriptures, there are *four* predominant truths God says about us. Number one is true for all people everywhere, regardless of their faith or belief, and the latter three are specifically true for those who have placed their faith in Jesus and have determined to live their lives for Christ, walking in intimacy with him, submitted to his Lordship, committed to his kingdom and his glory in all they do. Let's talk about each of those.

God calls you his unique creation! The Bible teaches us that every person who has even lived is made in God's image, is imprinted with God's fingerprints and endowed with dignity, value, and incredible worth because they were given life by God himself. Nowhere in Scripture is this more poetically celebrated than in Psalm 139:14-16 **For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.** You might be here and you don't have a personal relationship with Jesus yet, you're still trying to figure out what you believe about God and if you are to the place where you want to place your faith in him. What I would tell you: no matter what you decide about God, this is true of God. God created you. God gave you life. God made you in a unique and specific way. He crafted your life. No one looks at a beautiful vase or an intricate designed painting and assumes it self generated. We know it was fashioned and designed by an artist. The same is true of your life. God is the one who knit you together. He knows everything about you. The Bible tells us God chose the time and place you would live, and he did all of this because he cares for you, has a purpose for you, and wants to find him and have a relationship with him.

God calls you his beloved child. Every person is God's creation, but those who place their faith in Jesus are brought into God's family and called God's beloved child. We see this in **John 1:12, "To all who did receive Jesus, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."** A few years ago a family in our lifegroup adopted three children. Those kids spent the first part of their lives not in that family. Then after tragedy struck and the social workers got involved, and they lived in this new home for eight months, they all walked into a courtroom, the gavel dropped, and the judge declared, it is official, these kids are now your children. There was an official shift of identity, status and last name. The same is true for everyone who places their faith in Jesus, we are brought into God's family.

And we are not neglected children or second class children, we are beloved children! We get a window into the heart of the father during the baptism of Jesus. The Bible tells us that when Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens parted, the Spirit descended upon Jesus, and then God spoke over him and said **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).** Usually, when I am standing in the water with someone, I look them in the eye and I say, "Because you are placing your faith in Jesus, you are dying to your old self today, you are being made alive with Christ, and when you come up out of this water, what God the Father says is true of Jesus becomes true of you. God looks at your life and declares: 'You are my child, I love you, and I take great delight in your life.'" 1 John 3:1 says **See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!** Friends, so much of the Christian life is simply learning to hear those words, believing in the core of your being that they are true, and then living like it. Knowing that you are a child of God who is loved, cherished, and delighted in changes *everything* about you! It changes how you respond to criticism, failure and heartbreak...those things don't defined you, God's love does. It changes how you

respond to victory, success, and accomplishments, those things don't defined you either, God's love does.

Everyday, usually 2 or 3 times a day, I pick up my little girl who is three years old and I dance with her. I say, "I got sunshine on a cloudy day. When it's cold outside, I've got the month of May. I guess you'd say, what can make me feel this way? My girl. My girl. My girl." She has a smile that stretches from ear to ear. After I'm done saying My girl you always takes her finger, points to her chest, and says, "That's me." One of the most important gifts parents can give their children, that friends can give their friends, that a pastor can give their parishioners, is a strong sense of conviction and confidence that they are loved!

God calls you his dwelling place. In the Old Testament we used to see God's presence dwelling in the temple, after Jesus' death cleansed us from our sins and made us holy, God's presence now dwells in those who believe. We become his temple! On the last night of his life Jesus said, "**Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them**" **John 14:23**. Last year I was in Oxford, while I was there, everyone I was with wanted to go to the house where CS Lewis lived. There was like 12 of us, hanging out in his living room, standing in his kitchen, sitting at his desk, everyone wanted to see the house where one of the best selling authors throughout history has lived. If you go to LA, you can pay \$59, get on a tour bus, and spend a few hours being escorted around the city to see where all the celebrities live. People love to see the homes of famous individuals. But if you have placed your faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit now lives in you, and you are the dwelling place of God!

One more: **God calls you his chosen instrument.** When I was about 12 years old, my dad switched careers. He went from being a commercial printer to being an electrician. When he worked in the print shop he worked on large machines with ink and paper. When he became an electrician one of the first things he had to do was get a new set of tools, wire strippers, voltage testers, digital multimeter, drills, conduit bender, pipe threader...he needed specially designed instruments for each project he worked on. God doesn't use drills and screw guns and wrenches to build his kingdom, he uses people. He uses you and me. And every person has been perfectly designed for the task God has called us to. Ephesians 2:10 says **10 For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago (NLT)**. That word **masterpiece**, comes from the Greek word for poem, we are an example of God's creative genius, and we have been perfectly designed, down to the very last detail. But we are not a masterpiece designed like a work of art meant to hang on the wall for people to look at and admire, we are a masterpiece designed **so we can do the good things he planned for us**. When God created you, he created you with a purpose, and there are specific things he wants to accomplish through your life. Just like you are unique, your mission is unique. And you are God's chosen instrument to accomplish specific tasks and assignments that he has designed for you. No one can love your spouse like God has called you to love your spouse. Your kids. Your grandkids. Your friends...your neighbors, your friends, etc.

This is our identity! Not who others say we are, not who we say we are, but who God says we are! His unique creation, beloved child, dwelling place, and chosen instrument! Many of us know this, our problem is that we tend to forget it! In 2008, **Scott Bolzan**, a former NFL player, fell on a wet floor in a public restroom, hit his head, and not only lost consciousness, but lost all of his memories. To this day, 15 years later, he cannot access memories of his wife, kids, job, or any other events of his life prior to his accident. Losing your sense of identity is tragic! We need to be grounded in God's word to continually remind ourselves of who we are. Almost everyone in this room recognizes the name **Usain Bolt**. The fastest man to ever live. He's obviously blessed with incredible genetics and a world-class work ethic, but he pursued running as a passion because of what was spoken over him and spoken into his identity as a

kid. When he was just a boy, his friends loved his last name. Usain bolt, you're a lighting bolt. You're as fast as lightning. And in his own words, it was the continual declaration of that identity over him that propelled him to run faster than anyone ever before.

That's what we want to do as a church: search the Scriptures and let God declare our true identity over us, have the sort of relationships with one another where we constantly get to speak the identity that God has declared to be true of each other over one another...and we do that over and over until it gets deep in our bones. Jesus had a follower named John. John followed Jesus for 3 years during his earthly ministry and then after Jesus died and rose again, John continued to believe in him for the rest of his life. Toward the end of his life, John wrote down a biography of Jesus, an account of what Jesus said and did, it's called the gospel of John. And because John was one of Jesus' disciples, he occasionally has to include himself in the story. But when he does, he doesn't call himself John, his identity had been so shaped by God's truth that he refers to himself, every time, as "**The disciple whom Jesus loved.**" That's what we want to be true for everyone here. To spend so much time in God's presence, to spend so much time in a love-filled, grace saturated environment, that deep down in the core of who we are, we know we are loved! What is our **Identity: We receive God's love and we embrace our adoption as sons and daughters.**

Pray.