

Priority: Identity
317 Vision Series

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Hey Creek family! I am glad you have dialed in and joined us today. I know we would love to all be together, but given what's going on, clearly we understand why that's not possible right now.

I want to commend you as a church family - I have heard so many stories of neighbors helping neighbors, of people looking out for the elderly in their community, of folks from our church taking meals and care packages to workers at the grocery store so they can be blessed and encouraged while they are working so hard to provide for the rest of us. I love that followers of Christ at the Creek are stepping up and truly being for the 317 during this time. As we have been saying since the beginning of the year: we are not just followers of Jesus who live *in* our city, we are followers of Jesus who are *for* our city. And we have such a wonderful opportunity to show that, not just with our words, but with our actions.

To refresh: as a church, our three fold mission is to love God, love people, and make disciples. Our singular vision is to connect people to Jesus. And we have seven priorities: we have talked about worship, gospel, and kingdom. Last week Emerson talked about Scripture, and today we get to talk about the priority of *identity*.

When I think about identity, I think about all the different ways we have to verify who we are. We have our driver's license, which we have to produce on a regular basis. When that is not enough, sometimes we have to produce our social security card. When that is not enough, sometimes 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 make sure people are able to confirm that they are who they say they are. Even our phones have built-in technology to recognize our fingerprint or even our face to ensure that only the right person is able to turn on the phone and use it!

All that to say: *establishing* our identity is important, and *forgetting* our identity is tragic. One of the hardest things any individual or family can go through is someone losing the full function of their mind. It might start with small things like misplacing objects and forgetting normal routines, but it can culminate in not even being able to remember the closest people in their life, sometimes even forgetting who they are.

There is a former NFL player by the name of Scott Bolzan, who, on a random day in 2008, a few years after retiring from the league, was walking through a public restroom, slipped on a wet floor, hit his head, and woke up in a hospital room. To this day - over a *decade* later later - he still cannot remember a single thing prior to that event. He can't remember his wife, his children, anything about himself. His family has shown him pictures and videos and done everything possible to restore his memory, but in his own words he said, "My first date, my first kiss with my wife, our wedding day, the birth of my children -- all of those memories are gone. The best words I can use to describe it is just being lost. I lost who I am."

I think you get where I'm going with this: those are just a handful of examples to help us realize how important it is for us to *know* our identity, and how tragic it could be to *forget* our identity. I think there are three primary ways our identity can be developed and shaped, and I want to walk through each of those together today.

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 and fun, you're old and boring, 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 make a great follower, 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. **Others give us a new name.**

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.**" 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 *three* predominant truths God says about us. Number one is true for all people everywhere, regardless of their faith or belief, and the second and third 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.

According to the Scriptures, **you are an image bearer of God**. I want you to hear that truth declared over your life. No matter who you are, no matter what you have done, no matter how much or how little you have accomplished, no matter how much or how little you think you have to offer, whether you are living your life for God or not, *you are an image-bearer of God*. When God created humanity, this is what the Bible says in Genesis 1:27, **"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."** Hear me on this: your life is an image, a reflection, a representation of God. Your mind, your heart, your relational capacity, your passion, your *life* is covered with God's fingerprints. And here's what that means: Because your life was made by God, and you bear the image of God, your life always has and always will have intrinsic and incalculable value, worth, and dignity. There is nothing good you have to do to earn it, there is no mistake you can make to lose it. You have value and worth and you are loved, just because you *are*. You are made in God's image.

So everyone everywhere can say about their identity, "I am an image-bearer of God." Those who have placed their faith in Jesus and made him the Lord of their life can also say, **"I am a child of God."** Now, contrary to popular sentiment, this does not come by birth, and this does not come by virtue of existing - this comes as a gift to those who receive Jesus Christ. Listen to what it says in **John 1:12**, **"Yet to all who did receive Jesus, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."** Being a child of God is an indescribably great gift that God gives us, and it is a gift that we believe in Christ and place our faith, our trust, our hope, our confidence in his name! When we do that, it changes everything about us. It *transforms our identity*.

Listen to how the apostle Paul describes this in Galatians 2:20: **"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."** He is saying that his old life, his old identity, is no longer in existence - it was crucified with Christ. That is one of the beautiful aspects that is portrayed by baptism. When we go under the water it is a picture of our old self actually dying with Christ, joining him in the grave, and then being left there in the water. When we come up, it is a picture of having a new life with Christ in us. The old is gone, and the new has come. Like Paul says, it's not longer I who live, it's Christ who lives in me. The phrase with Christ, which is also translated in Christ, is used quite a few times in the New Testament. Take a guess how many times that phrase appears. If you are sitting with someone, tell them the number you are thinking - how many times does the phrase, "In Christ" appear in the New Testament. The answer: 151 times.

That's a lot. And that's not just interesting bible trivia. That has *enormous* implications! What are those implications? Since we are in Christ and Christ is in us, God views us as he views his Son. When he looks at us, he looks at us through the lens of Christ. And how does God the Father view Christ? We get a glorious window into the Father's heart over his Son during Jesus' baptism. 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.’”

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 we view ourselves and talk to ourselves, it changes how we view others and talk to others, it changes our priorities, our values, and commitments, it changes how we respond to criticism, what we post online, how we respond to crisis and difficult moments - there is no end to the impact that knowing we are children of God makes in our lives.

So let’s review: Everyone can say: “I am an image-bearer of God,” those who have accepted Jesus can say, “I am a child of God,” and there is one more thing: those who have accepted Jesus can also say, **“I am a friend of God.”** This is such a marvelous truth to be able to claim for your life and declare over your life. Listen to what Jesus said to his disciples in **John 15:13-14**: **“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.”** Those who spend time with Jesus, follow Jesus, and walk in obedience to Jesus are called friends by Jesus. And it’s not just in John 15 - in **James 2:23** we are reminded, **“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,’ and he was called God’s friend.”** Isn’t that beautiful?! Sincere faith doesn’t just bring about justification by God, sincere faith brings about *friendship* with God.

We’ve heard the old adage, “friends are the family you choose.” We don’t get to pick our family, but we do get to pick our friends, and typically we pick people we want to be around, people we want to spend time with, people who we like and enjoy. This is something I think a lot of people who have been Christians a long time need to hear: God doesn’t just love you, he *likes* you. He enjoys you. He cherishes you. He calls you a friend, and that is who you are.

Everyone can say, “I am an image bearer of God.” Those who have placed their faith in Jesus can say, “I am a child of God.” And those who are walking in the way of Jesus can say, “I am a friend of God.” So instead of allowing others to determine our identity, and instead of trying our best to determine our identity, let’s allow God to determine our identity and live out of who he says we are.

The world changed Joseph's name and tried to define him by what he could do. Naomi changed her own name and tried to define herself by what happened to her. Do you know that God gives people new names, too?

Abram was given the name Abraham, Jacob was given the name Israel, Simon was given the name Peter, which means rock. Which is interesting - when Peter was walking on water and took his eyes off Jesus, he sank like a rock. There were certain messages that Jesus spoke again and again to Peter, and he just didn’t understand them, and on several occasions he even argued with Jesus. Can you imagine telling the Son of God, who you have personally witnessed calm the

storm and heal the sick and raise the dead, “You got this one wrong Jesus, I think you need to change your mind and agree with me.” There were times Peter’s head was as hard as a rock. But that’s not why Jesus gave him that name. If you wait and see what happens when the Holy Spirit comes to live inside of Peter, you realize that Jesus used Peter as a rock upon which he built his church. Peter went from being obstinate and terrified and concerned only for self-preservation to being bold, courageous, and putting his life on the line to tell thousands upon thousands of people about Jesus. From the very beginning, Jesus saw that in him, and declared that over him. Jesus gave him a new name - and he does the same for us. The book of Revelation is filled with many incredible promises, but one of my favorites is spoken by Jesus to the church in Pergamum: **“To the one who is victorious I will give a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it” (Revelation 2:17).** We have to live out of the identity given to us by Jesus.

There was another disciple who followed Jesus who got a new name: John. Do you remember what he was called? **“The disciple whom Jesus loved.”** The gospel of John was written by him, and even though the story is 21 chapters long, and John himself appears on many occasions, John never mentions his own name a single time. Everytime John writes himself into the story he simply refers to himself as, “The disciple whom Jesus loved. The disciple whom Jesus loved.”

Here’s what I want to leave you with: What if you came to view yourself that way? What if you claimed that as your identity and lived from that place of unconditional, eternal love? That’s what God wants for you! And that’s what we are building around as a church. At the Creek, we are going to prioritize **identity**, which means **we receive God’s love and embrace our adoption as sons and daughters**. We are going to let what God says to be true of us become the hallmark of our lives.

A theologian by the name of AW Tozer once said, “The most important thing about a man is what comes to his mind when he thinks about God.” I think he’s right. It is so, so important that when we think about God, we think about him accurately, and we think about him as he truly is. But I think it’s helpful to play with his words just a bit - what if we also said that one of the most important things about a person is what comes to their mind when we think about what comes to God’s mind when they come to his mind.” I know that may have sounded confusing, so stick with me: One of the most important things about us, is what comes to *our* minds, when we think about what comes to *God’s* mind, when we come to *his* mind. What do you think God thinks about you? In order to know our identity, we have to know who God says we are! And we can go into God’s word, see that we bear his image, that we are his children, that he calls us his friend, and then we have to lean into that identity - the identity God has given us - so that we can live the life and accomplish the purposes God created us for.

Prayer.