

“Identity Issues”

Sermon Preached by David D. Colby

Central Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, Jeremiah 18:1-6, Matthew 5:11-16

Working with church youth groups, we emphasize the need for warm up exercises that will help build trust and respect. For adolescents who are trying out new identities amidst the changes of puberty and school, without there being an environment of trust and respect a church youth group stands no chance of delving deeper into issues and activities. We call them icebreakers. I know our new Christian Education Coordinator Faith Holschbach has been planning icebreakers for the Sunday school class upstairs today, and it made me recall a particular ice breaker I once used. It went like this: I was to pick two kids who had a certain amount of self-confidence and who were not shy and ask them to sit in the two chairs facing each other. And for sixty seconds, one would do nothing but ask the other the same question, over and over and using different inflections for emphasis. “Who are you?” And the other would answer.

The first few answers come fairly easily. Who are you? If I were to respond I might say: I am a minister. I am a husband. I am now a happy but sleep-deprived father. I am a son. I am a brother with two sisters.

That’s about fifteen seconds of the exchange. But then it gets harder. What do those relationships mean to my core identity? Do I trust you enough to tell you who am I emotionally and socially? What if I like to do things that are not popular? Now put yourself in that chair and keep answering the same question: Who are you?

The goal in this exercise for youth is explore ways in which we are similar as well as understand the differences. I learned from doing this icebreaker once that it was too challenging. Sixty seconds of answering this question from a stranger quickly became too intimate. But the question, “who are you?” is worth asking over and over after trust is established.

Mark Penn has written a fascinating book called Microtrends. He writes, “in today’s splintered society, if you want to operate successfully, you have to understand the intense identity groups that are growing and moving, fast and furious in crisscrossing directions.”<sup>1</sup> And Penn examines seventy-five groups that he says form small, but intense identity groups: young knitters, the working retired, video game grown ups, old new dads. (By the way, I was pleased to see that he defined that group as men who became dads after age 40.)

The trap is, of course, that we fall into using labels, thinking that one answer provides a complete definition of who we are. That we are not so much individuals but representatives of a group of people who all think and act alike. Pick your category. Democrats or Republicans, Christians or Buddhists, soccer moms, Nascar dads. Labels can be helpful, but in our time of divisive polarization, it can be harmful if we allow ourselves to be defined by those labels.

For our identity is much more multi-faceted than any single label can convey. Today, at the beginning of a new school year, and a new year of programming at church, today is a good day to think about our identity. Who we are, and who we are becoming. Do you remember the first day of school? Finding your classroom and trying to locate an open seat. The teacher going through the roll for the first time, mispronouncing names, confusing you with older siblings. That first day of school is a key time in establishing identity. A chance to reaffirm those things you liked about yourself, and correct or change the things that no longer seem to fit.

And even if you are long past your school days, take this as a new opportunity to think about your own identity. Maybe you are young, just getting established with a new job and a new apartment as you settle into life in the Twin Cities. Maybe you are coming out of a relationship, and now must figure out who you are again - not who you are as a couple, but who you are. Maybe you are approaching retirement, planning who you want to be when you no longer have to be at work by eight every morning. Maybe you are facing health issues that leave you wondering what will come next, and now you must discover anew where your strengths are and what will motivate you.

Who are you? The person in the chair asks. And our Bible stories for today offer some starting points. These three stories articulate some of the basic themes of our faith.

Who are you? In fact, this is the first question and answer in a new Presbyterian study catechism. Who are you? I am a child of God, the catechism suggests as the most important starting point in learning about our faith. The prophet Jeremiah describes it this way. That our creator God works with us like a potter at the wheel, taking the clay and shaping and reshaping it into an object of beauty. Who are you? You are a child of God, created by a loving God who desires nothing but the best for our lives and for the entire creation.

Who are you? Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount answers the question this way. “You are the salt of the earth. . . You are a light to the world.” Those who follow Jesus are to be salt and light, examples to the larger culture in which we live. To add seasoning. To provide rays of hope. Don’t hide your light under a bushel basket, but “let your light shine before others.”

It is not always easy to let our lights shine. It is not always easy to live into our full identities. Temptations abound. Those who are try to live out the teachings of Jesus will not always be appreciated, and will face persecution.

I heard a story recently on National Public Radio. I don’t know what show it was on, but it was an interview with a fifth grader about being bullied. And the interviewer was gentle, but continued to ask probing, painful questions.<sup>2</sup>

“Why were you teased?”

“It started because I was short, and they teased me about that and they saw I got upset and they knew they could bully me.”

“Do you know what they said?”

“That I was so short I belonged in kindergarten.”

“Did the teacher try to help?”

“Did you cry?”

“What did you do?”

And this incredibly articulate, vulnerable boy said that when he started to cry in class, he would ask to be excused and go to the bathroom. And there he would pray.

“Do you pray silently in the bathroom, or do you say words?” the interviewer asked.

“I speak,” the boy said.

And my heart went out to this poor, teased boy picked on for being short who sought refuge from his bully in a school bathroom. “What do you say?” the interviewer continued.

Using words remembered by heart from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the boy said this was what he said when he prayed.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt. 5:12-13)

And then with no pause, he rapidly quoted these verses from our Psalm. “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.” (Psalm 139:13-14)

In my book, he’s the tallest kid around. There will be more pain in his life, but he’ll do fine. That is why we give the children of Central their own Bible at the beginning of the school year. I hope they learn it as well as him.

On this day, we celebrate our identity. On this day, we celebrate our identity as Christians. As individuals who come together to be part of something larger than ourselves. To acknowledge that like clay on a potter’s wheel, we are still in the process of becoming.

Here at Central, we are in the process of living into the fullness of God’s plan for us. We are a people, coming together, celebrating our individual differences, working together, eating together, praying together, dreaming together. I am so glad you are here today as we celebrate who we are and who we are becoming.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Penn with E. Kinney Zalesne, Microtrends: The Small Forces Behind Tomorrow’s Big Changes (New York: Twelve, 2007) xx.

<sup>2</sup> What follows is my recollection of excerpts from the portion of the interview I heard.