

Psalm 8
Luke 9:18-24

“True Identity”

R.P.C.
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Daniel D. Robinson, Pastor

When Ethan Allen, the Revolutionary War hero, was courting his favorite young lady, he would frequently cut across the town's cemetery to save time as he rushed off to woo his sweetheart. The people of the town began to complain and openly criticized him about his lack of respect for the dearly departed, walking right across their graves at night. The town council even met and then confronted him, insisting that he take a route around the cemetery.

But Allen was far too impatient and eager to see his sweetheart, so he continued to take that short-cut across the cemetery. Several townspeople then got together to plot a way to cure him of his disrespectful habit....

One moonless night, Allen jumped the cemetery fence at the usual place only to find himself at the bottom of a freshly-dug grave. A ghostly figure covered in a white sheet appeared above him and uttered in a ghostly voice, “Ethan Allen, what are you doing in my grave?” Undisturbed, Allen replied, “Well, what in thunder are you doing out of it?”

Did you notice how quickly the momentum changed in that encounter? The ghostly figure was quickly put on the defensive. We can imagine the sheeted individual standing there for some moments trying to figure out how to respond to Ethan Allen's disarming question and quick wit.

Ah, a change in momentum... We hear it referred to all the time in such things as baseball, football, golf and political campaigns. It has to do with the abrupt halt to the proceedings – a reversal of the flow of things.

Momentum even happens in scripture as evidenced in the scripture lesson this morning from Luke's gospel. Jesus and the disciples had just returned from the feeding of over 5,000 people – that amazing miracle of turning scarcity into abundance. Surely Jesus and the Twelve were exhausted from the attention shown to the crowd - feeding, teaching, healing.

Jesus was off by himself to pray alone – the disciples somewhere close by. Then Jesus, apparently pondering the crowd they had recently left, asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples reply, “Some say you are John the Baptist, others say Elijah; and others say that one of the old prophets has risen.”

Then comes that change in momentum as Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Maybe Peter was not caught quite as off-guard as the others. Maybe he

had already considered the question, answering it in his own mind. So, as if speaking for the entire group, he replies, “You are the Christ of God.”

Apparently, this question of identity was important to Jesus. It was certainly important that his disciples know who he was....

Parker Palmer in his book, *The Active Life*, offers the suggestion that what is happening here is a re-visit of one of Jesus’ initial temptations as it occurred in the wilderness after Jesus’ baptism, marking the beginning of his ministry. We recall how that third temptation had to deal with jumping off the pinnacle of the temple so that God’s angels would protect Jesus from the fall. Such an act in front of a crowd of people would have surely secured his reputation as a miracle-man. The scripture that follows those temptations says that the devil left him, “to return at the appointed time.” So now, following the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, Palmer suggests that the temptation may have returned as Jesus struggles with what do with his growing reputation as a miracle-worker, hence his question “who do people say I am?”

It was essential then to Jesus for the disciples to know who he was if his message was to be effective. He was quick to declare that he was not some recycled prophet, nor John the Baptist returned. He was not to be confused with any who preceded him, as important as they all were to God’s plan. He had to be recognized by the Twelve at least for who he really was, so he asked, “Who do you say I am?”

In the same chapter of Luke’s gospel, just prior to the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, Herod had heard of what Jesus was doing and asked his advisors who this Jesus was. Their response was just like that of the people as reported by Jesus’ disciples. So rumors and speculations must have been rampant among the people as to the “true identity” of this itinerant preacher, who healed the sick and offered words of comfort and hope. The crowds thought of him as some reincarnation of someone from the past; but he was the incarnation of what God was doing in the present – something fresh and new.

So it was essential that Peter, and perhaps a few others of the Twelve recognize the uniqueness of their Master. Peter could thus affirm that Jesus is the Messiah – “the Christ of God.” He was something unprecedented in all of history – the New Creation of God.

Yet Jesus understood that even Peter and the Twelve could not fully grasp the impact of their own words of confession and profession. He knew they would not understand the totality of his identity until after the act of suffering redemption was complete. For only those who witnessed the suffering and the resurrection

can be in a position to know who Jesus is, and what he has come to do and be. Only those who are led by God's grace into the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection could know what it completely means to say of him, "You are the Christ!"

A number of years ago now, *Newsweek*, ran an extensive article entitled, "Who Was Jesus?" The article stated that what can be known about the historical Jesus based on all the historical writings of the times is rather scant. (Quoting the article) "He was born in the last years of Herod the Great (exact year unknown) and died during the reign of Tiberus Caesar when Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea. He was an itinerant rabbi; his thinking was close to the more liberal school of Pharisees of his day – some of whom actually did dine with tax collectors and sinners. He was regarded by some as a prophet and religious visionary; he aroused the antagonism of some influential Jewish leaders, and violated at least some of the Sabbath laws. He entered Jerusalem during a Passover celebration, was interrogated by the Sanhedrin, was tried before a Roman court, and due to pressure from the Jews, and was crucified as a common criminal." (End of quote)

That statement is the sum of all the facts known about his identity. But those historical facts do not complete his true identity. We know him as the Son of God – the promised Messiah. We know that he was 'crucified, dead and buried... that he arose on the third day, ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.' His true identity is known and complete only as we understand him to be the Word made flesh, the Lord of our lives – our Redeemer and Savior.

To know him is not just to know OF him – to carry some historical, statistical facts about him in our heads. It is to feel him at the very center of our lives in a living relationship; to believe in him as the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Yes, it was essential to Jesus that his disciples know who he was, and it is equally essential that we know ourselves in relation to Him as well. That is why Jesus constantly reminded us of our identities – of who and whose we are: "You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world." "You are my disciples." "You are my brothers and sisters, God's own people." Christ would have us know our own identity in and through our relationship to him."

The story is told about the German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer which illustrates the struggle we face concerning our identities. The philosopher went for a walk through the streets of Berlin one night, burdened with personal problems that were deeply troubling him. That night it seemed as if his world had become nothing but a dark, hopeless riddle. Late in the night a police officer

found him sprawled on a park bench and thinking he was a transient asked, “Who are you ... and what are you doing here?” The great philosopher replied, “ Ah, those are precisely the questions troubling my mind. I wish I knew...I wish I knew: Who am I, and what am I doing here?”

The psalmist of old offered up that same question before the holiness of God. “When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established, what is humanity that you are mindful of us, and people that you care for us?”

In the face of such questions, we realize, just as we have noted about Jesus, that our true identities lie far beyond the statistics and historical facts about ourselves. We are more than our date of birth or our place of residency – more than the child of certain parents – more than the product of a certain cultural heritage. We are more than a member of a particular race or nationality of socio-economic lever. We are more, so much more than the total sum of our parts. There is a wholeness about us which is beyond what we can express or verbalize or characterize. So we have this relentless yearning to learn ‘who we are and what we can do or become.’

When Carl Sandburg finished his many volumes on the life of Abraham Lincoln, a newspaper reporter asked him, “What are you going to do now?” The poet/writer thought for a moment, then replied, “I think I’d like to find out who this fellow Carl Sandburg really is.” It’s the same struggle all of us face – the discovery of our true identity.

There is an old Benedictine rule that anyone admitted into a Benedictine monastery is to be received on the basis of who they are at that particular moment. When a man seeks admission into that order, they don’t ask for any other information beyond the person’s name. There is no inquiry as to where the person is from, or where they went to school; there is no fingerprinting or background check. They don’t ask about past awards or achievements, or monetary worth, or check for past failures. They simply separate the individual from any masks, titles and or labels and the man begins a life with a fresh, new identity.

In a sense that is what God does for us in Jesus at the beginning of our Christian faith. As the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Galatians: ‘We are no longer to be identified as Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female...’ There are to be no such categories in the Kingdom – For we are all one and Christ, and we are all his.

Jesus declares with honesty and candor, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me.” That entails giving up all of one’s pseudo-identities - labels and masks; but it allows the process of discovering who and whose we are. For in Jesus Christ we are free to be who we really are: no more facades – forgiven and redeemed sinners; all equal in the eyes of our Lord; all equally loved.

Helmut Thelicke, a German pastor and theologian, opened a sermon with these words some years ago: “Several years ago I set my infant son in front of a large mirror. At first he did not recognize himself, because he was so young... but all of a sudden the expression on his face changed as he began to recognize the similarity in his motions with those of the person in the mirror. Though he could not talk, he seemed to be saying with that smile on his face, ‘That’s me, that’s me!’”

What a thrilling moment it is when we discover our true identities for the first time. What a thrill to be able to behold and appreciate our own uniqueness – to celebrate, not only who we are, but our connection with the rest of humanity as unique, yet interrelated. What a thrill it is to be able to believe and to claim “who and whose we are” as a loved and accepted child of God – as a brother or sister of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is always a defining moment when Jesus disrupts the momentum of our lives to ask, “Who do you say that I am?” Before we answer, it would do us well to pause to remember God’s promise to us of a Savior; to remember Jesus’ sacrifice on that cross, followed by his resurrection; to remember his words of forgiving grace; to remember his challenge to take up our cross and follow him. For it is in such remembrance that we can identify him as “the Messiah – the Christ of God.”

Likewise it is only in and through our Lord that we will ever be able to find our true identity: In and through him we can marvel at our uniqueness and the uniqueness of our call. Through him we are given our true identity as the children of God – accepted, forgiven and loved. Amen.