

Sermon: Crafting Identity

January 12, 2020

Rev. Rebecca Jess

Identity in today's world is an interesting thing. We live in a time that is often referred to as the age of authenticity, where identity must be carefully crafted in a way that best reflects who you truly feel you are. There is no room for being fake. You must be fully authentic. We hear this told to our children, youth and young adults, in particular: be true to yourself. Find something that makes you happy and pursue it. We think it terrible for someone to do a job that they are at odds with. We value sincerity in our leaders and in ourselves.

Now, this isn't a bad thing. In the past, and to this day, in certain cultures and places in the world you were born into your identity; your race, gender, culture, class, religious beliefs, they all determined your identity. There was little freedom in an identity. But in our culture today, there is freedom to live out your authentic self. The trouble is, we risk crafting an identity that feels authentic but really keeps us isolated within a particular group, or leading a life that falls flat.

In our reading from Acts, Peter speaks of God showing no partiality—that God loves all people no matter what nation they come from. This is no small proclamation coming from Peter. Peter believed in Christ, but his roots were Jewish and he still followed many Jewish laws and rituals. One of those was not eating anything that was unclean. And because Gentiles—that is, folks who were not Jewish—ate anything and did not follow Jewish food laws and rituals, Jews and Gentiles who followed Christ continued to stay separated. Their identities grew out of Jesus but in very different ways and, therefore, they did not mix together.

It took two visions to end this group isolation. First, the Gentile Cornelius saw a vision that told him God had heard his prayers and wanted him to send for a man named Peter in Joppa. The second vision was in a dream Peter had where God presented him with animals of all kinds and told him to eat, even though the animals were, as Peter saw them, unclean. When Cornelius and Peter met, it was then that Peter realized what his dream meant; that God is for all people, not just Peter's people. God is for Cornelius and his household. God is for Jews and Gentiles. God shows no favoritism. God is for all nations.

It is suitable for us to be sensitive to the issues with which Peter was struggling when he encountered Cornelius, because they are issues deeply rooted in the human experience. People isolate themselves from others. People find their identity within a group, and fear that they will lose that identity if they do not guard their separateness. People find it difficult to relate to and associate with those who are different from themselves. People have a sense that they will lose their status within their own group if they dare to reach out to those on the outside. We identify and separate on the basis of sexual orientation. We identify and separate on the basis of religious conviction and practice. We identify and separate on the basis of cultural mores. And we have the freedom to do this, but we must be careful not to use it as a reason to keep ourselves from associating with those who think and do and believe differently from ourselves.

In a similar way, we can isolate ourselves by living into this idea that we must craft an identity so unique that we spend all of our time creating and curating. This is likely more true for teenagers and young adults, but could apply to any one of us. In a world where broadcasting your identity on social media or in your social circles is the norm, the daily focus becomes “what new thing can I do to show the world I am being authentically me” rather than simply *living* in authentic ways. In this model, you must continually come up with new ways of expressing your identity and it becomes impossible to keep up, leading to a life that is flattened from placing unnecessary social pressures on ourselves.

Let’s look now at Jesus’ baptism. This is a story many of us are familiar with. Jesus comes to the Jordan River. He asks his cousin, John, to baptize him. John does not feel worthy of the task, but with Jesus’ insistence, performs the baptism. As Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens open, the Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and a voice proclaims that Jesus is God’s beloved Son with whom God is pleased. Jesus’ identity is, in many ways, determined in this moment. Or, at least his identity is set on a particular course; the journey from here will continue to define and refine Jesus’ identity, in particular his public identity. Jesus is the Son of God. So often we place emphasis on the descending Spirit and voice of God. It is a way for us to know that Jesus is divine, is God’s child, is filled with the Spirit. But there is another part of this story that we often miss when we think of Jesus’ identity, and it has to do with the baptism itself.

Baptism is a way for us to be cleansed and made new. As people who sin, who make rash and regrettable decisions, who act before thinking, who react with apathy, who need forgiveness and must turn back to God and repent, we are in need of baptism.

We use this visible sign of God's invisible grace as a way to know we are loved and forgiven and made new, over and over again. We use baptism as a way to show that we have been accepted into the family of God, are filled with the Holy Spirit, and are all siblings of Christ in whom we live and move and have our being. Jesus, as God's Son, did not need to be baptised. Already filled with the Spirit, and blameless, Jesus could have skipped out on the baptism part. God could have used some other way to identify Jesus as Lord. John knew this, which is why he was resistant to baptizing Jesus. But Jesus insists; because through his baptism, Jesus shows all those present that he identifies himself not with God who judges, but with the people who are themselves facing that judgement and needing to repent.

Jesus identifies with us. He came to this earth as both human and divine. But in his humanity he humbled himself. Humbled himself and was baptised in order to show that he is for us, for all of us. In our age of authenticity, this action is radical. Jesus isn't being authentic for the sake of himself or cultural norms, but in order to identify with those he talks with, eats with, worships with, prays with, and heals. He identifies with our need to come to God, to ask for forgiveness, to repent.

So what does this mean for us and our identities? How are we to take this understanding of Jesus' identity with us? His identity of humility, of being for all people? The thing is, this baptism story doesn't do much for us without the rest of the story. Identity isn't static; it grows and evolves and deepens. This moment of baptism isn't the culmination of Jesus' ministry, but the beginning of it. The beginning of a remarkable journey that led him to the cross and beyond. Jesus' identity comes to us through the stories we are told about him and his ministry. And we have the joy of narrating our own identities through these stories of Jesus. We don't need to give into the cultural norm that states that we must craft an identity that is so unique and so new that we never get the time to truly live into it. We don't need to isolate ourselves into a particular group so thoroughly that we lose sight of the beauty in other identities beyond our self-built walls. We can reach beyond and weave our identities through the stories of others.

The church is a community of stories. The church offers space to share stories, to reflect on our own stories and how they intersect and mingle with the story of God working in and through the world. When we tell our stories we start seeing what's real. And when we tell those stories in community we have others who are able to help us interpret our stories; to help us see them with a different perspective, from a new angle,

in relation to one another's experiences. Our lives, our stories, our identities don't become flat, but enriched.

Here's a story about my own identity. While I was working as the director of the Cairn Family of Camps, I began to have this inward calling toward a different kind of ministry; toward, what would eventually become, congregational ministry. Now, it is generally understood that, if you are to go into ministry there must be both an inner and outer call. God calls you in a way that you feel inside—a knowing, a drawing toward, a desire to think and question in ways you hadn't before. And there is an outside call—essentially, people around you confirm what you are feeling inside, whether you ask them to or not. I felt that inside call, but mostly tried to ignore it. But eventually I began to receive outside calls, too. God's voice came to me through my mother who, out of the blue one day told me she'd been thinking recently about how she could see me in the role of a minister. It came through the voices of people at churches I would visit to talk about camp; people I'd never met before would ask me if I was at Knox College or assume I must already be a minister. And I was stirred.

I felt compelled to know more about where all this might be leading me. And the way I did that was by asking to hear other people's stories about their journeys with God. I asked other ministers about their calls and about when they first knew they were being called. One minister knew when the most troublesome boy in his middle school, despite all previous bullying, wanted to tell him about the abuse he was enduring at home. One minister knew as a small child, sitting in the back of her church, looking up at her minister in the pulpit and just knowing she was meant to do that job, as well. One minister spoke of a longer journey that involved starting in a totally different profession and through many twists and turns and support from his church, ended in congregational ministry. And I shared with them my stories. My worries and fears about what God could want with me, about how God was shaping my identity. But also the excitement I felt about feeling drawn into a story I had heard so many times before in a new and very real way. I was journeying with Jesus in a totally new way. And it was scary. And it was revelatory. And it brought me into that journey and they journeys others had taken before me in an impactful way.

You are here. Use this space to tell your stories, to hear others' experiences, to craft your identity in Christ. But also, reach out and beyond. Your stories belong outside of these walls, and so do the stories we know about Jesus. And know that Christ, who humbled himself in a river, builds his identity through each one of us. May we all live in such a radically authentic way.