

September 8, 2019

Who are you?

When we're asked that question at some social event, how do you respond? Often, we define ourselves by our profession. I am a teacher, or a carpenter, or, in my case, an Episcopal priest. Sometimes, I hesitate to tell people I don't know about my profession. When Cherie and I were first married, she was a bit nervous about the folks in her home town, Hammonton, knowing that I was an Episcopal priest. After all, the whole town is Roman Catholic, and she went through 12 years in Catholic school, and then she ended up teaching at St. Joseph's parochial school. So, in Hammonton, when someone asks what I do for a living, I tell them I run a non-profit on the Jersey shore. That's a true statement, btw.

So, beyond your profession, who are you? Well, in Southern California, I'm Paul's son. In Northern California, I'm Michelle's dad. In New Jersey, I'm Cherie's husband. Son, father and husband. Our family ties do define us. This was even more the case in Jesus' time. Back then, when someone introduced themselves, they would say their name, then add their father's name, as in Jesus, son of Joseph. Sometimes, if they had a famous ancestor, they would add that ancestor's name, as in Jesus, son of David, to identify Jesus as a member of the House of David.

Sometimes, in today's culture, some of us find it necessary to separate our identity from our families. There have been times when my kids did not want to be identified with me; usually when I was doing something terribly uncool like singing Elvis songs or wearing black socks with shorts. And, to be honest, there have been times that I did not want to be identified with some of my children, like when my boys took to wear pants 5 times too big so that they looked like clowns, or when my daughter started getting piercings. And then there are those more serious separations, when families are hurting for reason, and the divisions become painful.

Now then, if we cannot use our profession or our family ties to define ourselves, who are you? Perhaps now we begin to be identified by our possessions. I have a house in Greenbriar, you might say. Or I drive a Mustang. Or perhaps, as I might say, I ride a Harley. I must admit that identity has become one that I enjoy. I now have a Harley denim vest and Harley t shirts and Harley hats.

Occupations, family relations and possessions. Are those good way to define who we are? Perhaps. In and of themselves, there's nothing wrong with them. But, perhaps they are not enough?

The tension comes in when we begin to recognize that each of those things are really just extensions of our personal ego. My job, my family and my possessions become extended branches of myself. In the end, those identities are very self-centered, in that they make our own personal world the center of the universe. Most of the time, that kind of self-centered awareness of the world, a very subjective perspective, is simply the way we humans have always made sense of our reality. But sometimes, such a focus on the self can be unhealthy, and even harmful to those around us. My family is the most important thing can expand to my neighbor is the most important, my town is the most important, my state, my nation, and on it goes as

those branches of our personal ego spread out. The problem with that kind of thinking is that it excludes a whole lot of people. And perhaps those other people, who are not of our family or our tribe or our nation, are also very important in the bigger picture of things.

This is the issue Jesus is addressing in his strident words this morning. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." Harsh. Do keep in mind that Jesus now has a large crowd following him. These are curiosity seekers, not disciples. They've come out to see the best show in town at the moment, a wandering rabbi cures the sick and says provocative things.

So, we can assume Jesus is using some exaggerated language here. If your family is more important than following me, you cannot be my disciple. So much for our self-identity being derived from family. You can imagine many in the crowd quietly slinking away. Then he continues. "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." Ouch. There goes our identity being wrapped up with our possessions. There goes my Harley!

Jesus is stating very bluntly that to be his follower, to be a part of the new Kingdom of God that he is bringing into this world, your number one priority has to be your relationship with God. I am a child of God. That is your primary identity.

This is how we are different from the secular world. Since Descartes, and his famous line "I think, therefore I am," many people have started trying to make sense out of this world with the basic truth "I am." From that foundation, everything we know, everything we experience, everything we think, feel and do, is derived from that center; "I am." Our Christian life calls us to a different perspective. We begin with the affirmation "God is." Then that secular claim becomes, "God is, therefore I am." We identify the source of everything we know, everything we experience, think, feel and do to be rooted in our relationship with God.

Now, if you get that idea, it can be transformative. Everything you do, not just on Sundays, but everything you do, everything you say, on Monday through Saturday, as well as Sunday, becomes an expression of that primary relationship; your relationship with the living God, who claims you as his beloved child. From this perspective, God walks with you through every experience, every situation, every moment of your life. Your thoughts, and the actions springing from those thoughts, become part of a prayer that never ceases, as you are constantly in the presence of the living God.

Now, making your relationship with God your primary focus is not going to always be easy. As a matter of fact, it will be quite costly sometimes. In this morning's Gospel, Jesus said "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Taking up your cross. That's about making sacrifices because of your relationship with God. Sacrifices that you are under no compulsion to take on, but sacrifices you choose to make. Biting back those unpleasant words about your neighbor. Refusing to make a profit from another's misfortune. Giving freely without expecting pay back. Denying the needs of your personal ego if they damage your relationship with God. Being a channel of God's love to others, even when they don't deserve it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who was put to death by the Nazis, wrote an important book entitled “The Cost of Discipleship.” I highly recommend it, if you want to explore some of the themes I have lightly brushed on this morning. In that book, he speaks of “cheap grace.” Unfortunately, I think some of the Christian Church have been offering just that. Here is how Bonhoeffer defines it:

*Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.*

May we acknowledge the costly grace by which Jesus reconciled our relationship with God. May we make that relationship with God our primary identity, our highest priority, and allow that relationship to influence every moment of our lives. Let us take up our cross, and choose to follow Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer.