

2021 – Lent – Counseling: Identity

This lent we are looking at some reflections from an amateur counselor (Yours Truly) and we are receiving Hope from the Mighty Counselor.

This week we will focus on Identity. So I put forward this premise: “In Christ, the Christian has an identity that is supreme, true, and lasting.”

“Who am I?” This is a question that pops up in the counseling office from time to time, and it is a significant question! It is also one that has many answers. Not to mention a fair bit of controversy surrounding it.

Some would answer, “Who am I?” By stating their preferred pronouns, because those things you can’t assume in 2021. But do those little words encapsulate all of you? Are they true? Does an inner feeling, or a disconnect with your body change your ontology?

And yes, ontology has a lot to do with who you are. Ontology is the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being. What is a thing? Is a chair different from a table? How so? What if someone is sitting on the table – does it become a chair? The NFL fan is well acquainted with the deep philosophical question: is it a catch or not?

Silly conundrums aside, languages assign gender to many things, for example: it’s el dormitorio, the room, masculine, and la rosa, the rose, feminine. But does that

give us the power to assign gender to the biological sexes? To supersede them? Does it change their ontology? I don't think so. A rose is still a rose, even if the new Spanish speaker confuses the gender, ya? Blasphemous as it may be, but to alter Shakespeare a bit I might ask, "If a rose went by any other gender, would it still smell as sweet?" So they will argue gender is different than sex and I would agree and point out that gendering something, doesn't change it's sex. So we want identities that are true, honest. In Christ we can be honest about who we are, body, mind, and spirit – struggles and all.

Who are we? Are we random bags of molecules interacting? If so, then where can we find morality and truth? Why should I not take what I want if it is merely survival of the fittest? Do we find morality in society? Oh, societies have been wrong before! Much more individuals. Yet we still wonder why depression is on the rise when we are told we are accidents and life is meaningless and if you screwed up or missed out, well, "better luck next time – o wait, there is no next time because you die and stay dead. Enjoy!" In Christ we have no accidental or temporary identity, we have a lasting one – an everlasting one!

Some answer "Who am I?" by simply stating who they are attracted to. Is that all we are? Our passions? Is there no depth of character to go along with who we are? Is there not more to life than food, clothing, and what gets-you-going? I've heard the accusations, "You Christian counselors, you are telling those poor kids to just

‘pray the gay away’!” Perhaps so, or perhaps I am also trying to tell them they have a greater identity and, like literally everyone else, the capacity and call to fight against whatever particular temptation they struggle with. Is there not honor, as Paul says in our epistle, in endurance, in character, in fighting for God’s design that is good. And I won’t get into the sociology – we did that a few weeks ago and you can look up how God’s design is good. But my point today is: our Lord offers an identity that isn’t skin deep, but that claims all of us even as he gave all of himself for us.

Or is it for no reason the Lord tells us *all* to pick up our crosses and follow him? Or did Jesus say, “Pick up your cross and follow me, unless it has to do with sexuality, or greed, or racism, or pride, or money then you can leave it right there.”

Now I do think there is room for criticism in how we often harp on other’s “identity” issues. Why are we kicking kids out of the family who struggle with these things? Why are we demeaning them, or Lord-forbid casting stones at them? It’s one thing to say, “I don’t want to get sued for giving this sermon,” it’s one thing to say, “don’t show it under my roof”, it’s another thing entirely to say you aren’t *welcome* at all under my roof. And do you see the difference? One wishes to keep a sinful act out of the home, the other reduces the person, their identity, down to *just that issue* and banishes them for it. And in that act, what have we done different than society? We have just reduced their entire identity down to who they

are attracted to! Rather, let us remind them of the richness of their identity and how, perhaps, the King might want something more, something deeper, for them.

Controversial enough? Well, there are still more answers to “Who am I?” I’ll try to keep it short. Some answer with ethnicity. I don’t say race - there is only one race: the human race. But some answer with ethnicity - there is merit here. Praise God for rich heritages, praise God we can learn from not-so-rich heritages. But let’s keep in mind the identity Christ gives has no borders.

Some answer “Who am I?” with religion: “I’m Muslim,” “I’m Christian,” “I’m Mormon.” Right or wrong, at least we are getting deeper here. We are getting into how we see the world. But once more we want an identity that is true. So, you believe something: good, do you know *why* you believe it? Our identity in Christ rejoices in public, historic, testimony and evidence of the One who beats death.

“Who am I?” Let’s not overlook the most common answer: our names. Do names matter? Ontologically? Not really, they are a bit superficial, actually. “The rose still smells as sweet by any other name.” But that is not to say it is devoid of meaning. In our Old Testament lesson, God changes Abram and Sarai’s names. Do they morph into something different ontologically? No, but is there meaning there? You better believe it.

And God has given us a new name too. In baptism, God's name is placed on us. There is meaning there! A label, an identity, is given to us that sets us apart and gives us meaning and hope. It's an identity that has been placed over top of anything else we might be. And I think that is a real good place to start when you ask the question, "Who am I?"

But do you see how many layers there are to this onion? To what makes up our identity? I can't possibly cover all the nuances in one sermon. And speaking of which, forgive me, I've been a little heavy on philosophy and a little light on counseling thus far.

It's usually the teenagers and college kids who ask their pastor or parent, "Who am I?" Their bodies are changing, they are being pressured by ads, culture, music, friends, family, cliques at school. If you dropped into my high school in 2003 or so, you would have seen your future pastor in all black, hair even longer than this, a wallet chain, converse shoes, and a punk or metal band T-shirt. It worked for me, it made me fit in with my friends. We were a bit nerdy, but you could do worse. And because I fit in, it gave me a sense of identity, a place in the school, and maybe even life. Sadly, kids nowadays when they are struggling for a place to fit in aren't told to change their shoes, or dye their hair. They are challenged to change their whole worldview.

But the struggle of identity isn't just for teenagers. It's the mid-life crisis, it's the widow who feels a part of her is missing, it's the single person who feels unloved, it's the married person who feels trapped, it's the sinner scared of a Holy God.

These are all identity issues. And so when someone is struggling with identity I don't particularly care about cliques or clothes or the new car. I do care they remember they have an identity that is true, that is lasting, that is deep, that reflects the Name of God they are baptized in. I do care that they anchor their identity in Jesus as a child of God.

The anchor is not uncommon in Christian art, but it doesn't show up in the Bible much. One verse: Hebrews 6:19 – “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain.” What a beautiful verse. There is an anchor holding firm, linking our soul, us, ontologically, emotionally, spiritually, biologically, to the One who goes beyond the curtain – into the presence of God to plead our case and say, “they *belong* with me.”

Imagine a ship anchored on a lake with rolling waves. There is room for it to roam, it will sway this way and wear some converse, it can sway this way and be a tom-boy. It can sway this way and change careers. But the anchor holds it fast so it doesn't get lost in dark waters of sin, doesn't slam into rocks that bring such pain. And we will sway to-and-fro in this broken world of temptation, with our feelings that are all over the place and our hearts that are so fickle. But the person who is

united to the King, the one who is anchored in Jesus, they need not fear. For he has made them, forgave them, and will raise them up. Because he is the Risen One.

The Christ.

Jesus in our Gospel lesson asks an identity question of the disciples, “Who do the people say that I am?” There are a lot of answers to that question isn’t there? Even in this town. Peter gets it right, though. “You are the Christ.” Christ means: chosen one. Chosen to, as Jesus tells them, die and rise. Why? Because we, on our own, have an identity of people who are sinfully unclean and worthy of death. We say, “Not me I’m pretty good, I’m better than those nutjobs out there!” Or we say, “I’m a free American no one can tell me what to do and I don’t need help from anyone,” or just go down the list of all the identities we claim are lasting and saving.

But God’s identity supersedes them all. God on the basis of his creation, on the basis of his mighty power, and on the basis of his love that was given to you before you were even born, in that he died for you, he alone claims the authority to place an identity over you that supersedes any other. And in lent we remind ourselves once more that our attempts at rebellion, our pride, all our desires, interests, political affiliations all become second and Christ becomes first. Oh, and that isn’t easy is it? The prideful beast riles inside us as we submit to the King.

But let's remember who our King is. Does he lay crosses on us because he enjoys torturing us? Or perhaps, for our growth and refinement. Is he a harsh taskmaster who cares nothing for us? Is he an absent minded, imperfect, factory worker who made a few "oopsies" when he made you? Is he unfamiliar with rejection, pain, sorrow, loneliness? Or has he himself born our sorrows, sins, and a cross upon which he died! That is our King, who has overcome all and done it for you to ensure that you will fit-in in his Kingdom that has no end. Because he has died for you, claimed you as his own, washed you, and will raise you up.

May that be our identity, our anchor, our hope in the midst of a world that rages against his order. In Christ, we have an identity that is supreme, true, and lasting.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.