A Matter of Identity

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Shalom Mennonite Fellowship
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**Purpose:** To declare the shared identity which is found in the answer of 'who do you say that I am.'

**Message:** As disciples of Christ, we are called to a new identity in declaring the Christ who calls us.

**Scripture:** Mark 8:27-35 [I will read], Phillipians 2:5-11, 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23

**Synopsis:** Our sense of identity, as central as it is, is deceptively hard to define. There are so many influences—our context, our values, our meaning by what we mean by stating who we are. Things are even more complicated when we try to answer the question of who Jesus is. There are myriad identities for the Savior and Lord, each one pulling out a different aspect of the life, ministry, and meaning of Jesus. Yet as people who dare answer the question at all identifying Jesus as the defining force in our lives, we are called together across our many definitions and many incarnations to call upon the one who goes before us.

**Mark 8:27-35** 27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28 And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” 34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.
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What is in your wallet? I ask this question as far more than just a reference to a cheesy commercial, but a serious question. What is in there? Take it out and go through it; most of use would have a driver’s license, credit cards, and the other necessities of day to day life. We might have some business cards declaring who we are by way of organization and profession, or with whom we would like to do business with in the future. A library card associates us with a life of the mind in what we read, and there may well be those trinkets in our pocket or on our keys that tell where we shop and who we are by what we purchase. Who am I is a question that we usually relegate to caffeine fueled collegian passion, a thought to be processed, thought through, decided upon once we find our specific course, and then pursued as we follow that course with vigor, fleshing it out. Yet the question of identity, of who we are, is one that is always with us, is always changing, and always pertinent.

This is because who we are, really are, is not defined by those things that we carry in our wallets, but rather by those elements much more hard to define than simple identity. Who we are is a contextual question, and is determined by who is asking. For many, it is our vocation that determines who we are, and when it comes time change our vocation, voluntarily or not, our identity and how we think about identity changes as well. Often, too, as we see our children achieve different stages in life, our identity as mom and dad must too change, which demands us to adapt to what it means to parent now, as opposed to the way things have been. Through the many changes that come to us in life, how we understand our identity, and how we express that understanding, evolves and changes as we shape our lives to reflect the reality in which they inhabit now.

Jesus had an identity problem too. Not so much about who he was as he understood it. He knew what his mission was and how things were supposed to be. Rather, for him the problem comes with who he is understood to be. He is not asking who am I as much as who do people think that I am. And he gets this wide variety of identities that those with whom he has been traveling have heard conjectured about him, each of which falls well short of this radical proclamation which Peter produces-- You? You are the Messiah. You are the one sent to liberate us. You are the one sent to make things right, once and for all. A heady self understanding to be sure, one which Jesus does not attempt to correct from him.
Which makes it all more inexplicable when Peter is chastised for getting the answer right. Peter is the one who gets it, the one who comprehends the true identity of this teacher from Nazareth, and is able speak it out loud before all who would listen. It is when Jesus starts to explain what this would mean for him, and how this identity would lead to a path of challenge and suffering, Peter corrects him, not because he misunderstood what Jesus had in mind, but rather that he understood far too well what this would mean. If you would be subjected to this, if you are the messiah and would need to suffer, then by the very meaning of what it means to be messiah, this cannot be. If you are who you say that you are, who I say that you are, then this travesty of justice, this question of your suffering is just out of the question. It does not fit your identity. It does not fit a messiah, a powerful political champion to take on even Caesar, to be speaking of things like this. If you say this, if you do this, then you cannot be who I say that you are, which means I am not who I think I am. Peter objects here because he understands all too well that what Jesus is saying, and wants to put a stop to it not just because it would ruin Jesus’ creditability, but also because it would challenge his own identity as the prize pupil of the coming Messiah.

You see, much of the time, when we set out to follow Jesus, we can all too easily forget what it will cost us, what it might mean for us, how it will redefine who we are, and change us, over and over again. But in response to Peter’s identity crisis, Jesus lays it out wholly; ‘any who would come after me will deny themselves, pick up there cross, and follow after me.’ Yikes. Now that does not fit will on a brochure. Deny yourself? In a culture that is all about individuality and self expression we are given a gospel whose core is about denying identity and taking on the character of the one whom we follow? How radical is that? How challenging is it to allow our identity to be changed by the one who we follow? I know it is for me. I know that I must confess that when I am asked to identify myself, my identity as Christian rarely makes the top five of fun facts about Bryce, usually falling somewhere in between my region of origin and my enjoyment of games played with a Frisbee. There is a huge number of reasons for this, cultural and otherwise, not the least of which is that when we identify ourselves as followers of Christ, we find ourselves wanting to put in a giant asterisks, to explain exactly what we mean by
that to sort ourselves out from all the other identities of Christian with which we would just as soon not associate with.

Its kind of like the *The King’s Speech*—a great movie if you haven’t seen it. I am not taking much from the plot by saying that is the story of King George the 6th and his unconventional speech therapist who helps him overcome a severe stutter. Part of his approach is to examine the psychological reasons why speaking might become difficult—the implied threats of childhood which can develop into subconscious reasons to remain silent. In the same way, we want to protect our identity because we know how the Christian identity has too often been misused to justify the worst of the world. We don’t want to be confused with those theological cousins that make us uncomfortable with the way they shape their identity, so we opt rather to say nothing at all, and retain our identity in tact rather than take the radical step of declaring openly the Lord to whom we owe all allegiance. We give so much weight to what THEY say about who Jesus is, that we never find our own voice to declare our identity, and speak of who we say Jesus is—a messiah of Justice and peace, that calls all people to new life over and over again.

But if we could, if we would dare to move past our stuttering attempts at explaining who we are, and to more fully integrate the identity of Christ into our identity, I think we would be surprised by the results. We would have to say that we are part of a family of millions which spans the globe because of our identity in Christ, of which this week we get to enjoy a small part of. We would be reminded to declare our solidarity with all who are hurting, everywhere, in every circumstance when we are obedient to the call because it is an intrinsic part of our identity as those who follow Christ. We would be challenged to define ‘who am I’ less by our present occupations and definitions of life and more by our spiritual identity, and our calling to be about the work of the kingdom that is our primary calling, less and less by what is our wallet or in our driveway, and more and more by what is in our calling as people of God. We would find our identity is found not solely in who am I as any individual but also who I am as a follower of Christ.
In doing this, we must remember that Jesus calls us to follow not just to the cross, not just to suffering. Being part of a tradition that has suffered, and greatly, we tend to focus with keen intensity on the part about ‘those who would save their life would loose it and those who would loose their life will save it and get an incomplete vision of what is being discussed here. In speaking of his own passion in verse 31 here speaks not just of suffering and death, but also clearly and cleanly about the resurrection that is also to follow that reality. Our challenge is to in ways big and small to more completely die to our own identity and live into the new life promised in the identity of Christ before us, following after in the way of the one who goes before.

I invite you to share a challenge with me this week. I invite you to come out, if you will, and take the risk of identity. Identify yourself as a Christian as the opportunity presents itself. Nothing more than simply answering straightly the question of why you do what you do, why you are who you are. See what happens, and open yourself to the new life yet to come as we claim the identity of our messiah that lies before us even yet.