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Rev. Danny Walker

MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

IN GOD'S IMAGE

I remember the first time it happened. The words were strange to my ears. A man referred to his wife as “mom” and she responded back with “dad”. This couple had been married 50 plus years. Not just their children, but their grandchildren were fully grown, and knowing the definition of the words mom and dad, it was strange, weird and even a little creepy to hear them identify each other as mom and dad. Later however, I began to understand. The role of being mom and dad had been an integral part of their life. Being a mother or a father had been so ingrained into their identities, these words became like a second name. However, is there another even deeper identity ingrained in who we are as people?

Often, when we are asked to introduce ourselves, one of the first, if not the first, thing we say is our job, our vocation. “I am a minister, teacher, lawyer, etc.” Most of our day and week, we spend at work. It's only natural that this becomes a significant way that we identify ourselves. Our jobs often shape how we relate to the world. However, is there another identity even more central to who we are that claims us and shapes how we relate and work in this world?

I remember a commercial, I believe it was a Reebok commercial from the 90s, where the slogan was “you be you”. As if, looking just within ourselves subtracted from everything else, we can find that kernel that is uniquely us and therefore know ourselves. In college, I had a friend who tried this very thing. One day, out of the blue, he left Bloomington, stopped going to class so that he could “go find himself”. He was searching for his identity, and knew of no other way than going out alone, separated from all external realities, to discover that unique reality called “him”. How do we discover our identities, who we are?

It's not hard to have an identity crisis. Something can happen in life that shakes up what we think we are or who we are. There are so many roles that we are supposed to play, so many hats that we are supposed to wear; so many images that we are supposed to live into. Images of professionalism, success, or beauty, where if we do not live up to that image we somehow are incomplete, less than, or not as important. It's no wonder that it is hard to know who we are. We live in a fragmented world where who we are is divided into so many things. Is there something more, something we are missing or even being stolen from us, taken away because of all this confusion? Who are we? How do we know?

I don't remember where I heard or read this story, but it has always stuck with me. There was a Jewish mother in World War II who was being separated from her son, separated by the Nazis into different camps. This mother had one moment, one final opportunity to say her last words to her son as they depart. Can you imagine what you would say?

If it were me, I would have said something like “Son, remember, I always love you.” Or, “Do whatever you can to stay alive. Don't make waves just stay alive.” This Jewish mother said neither of these things. In the final moment, the chance to say that one last thing to her son, she said, “Son, remember, KEEP THE SABBATH.” Doesn't that sound strange to our ears? However, this mother wanted her son to remember his identity, who he was. Throughout the ages, it has been the practice of Sabbath keeping that has marked the Jewish people and enables them to know their identity. To have that one day where you do nothing, but remember that God is God and we are not. To place our lives before God, so that God again can remind us that we

are God's children. The world does not rest upon our shoulders. We find ourselves by participating in what God is doing in this world. This Jewish mother did not want her son to forget that his identity was found in being one of God's children. For this mother, her son knowing his identity in God seems to be the most important thing he can know.

This is also true with us. Our identity, who we are, does not come from looking deep within ourselves, maybe into our intestines or stomach. Our identity comes from discovering who we are in God. Our Genesis text this morning reminds us that we are created in God's image, male and female we are created in the image of God. Therefore, to discover ourselves does not begin by looking within, but discovering God. It is when we place our lives before God, and know the presence of God that we begin to discover and know ourselves. By encountering God and glimpsing the image of God, we learn who we are and created to be. Thomas A Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ* states, "I have lost You [God] and myself by my disordered self-love; by seeking You [God] again, I have found both You and myself."

That is why we come to worship every Sunday over and over again. We do not come to receive a good message, some kernel of truth that we can take to our already ordered lives. We come to place our lives before the God of all life to discover life. We come to encounter the living God so that we can again know who we are--God's people. In a society where we can easily forget who we are and struggle with an identity crisis, through communion with God, entering the presence of God, placing our lives before God, we begin to discover not just God, but ourselves. Now this can be dangerous. God is beyond our creation and understanding. Therefore, we do not know what we may discover when we seek God, but we will discover life. We will begin to see our world differently, both the good and the not so good. In the baptism of Jesus, a voice declares, "This is my son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased." Likewise, when we allow ourselves to be claimed by God, we discover who we are as God's beloved children.

We have already talked about all the different hats, images and roles placed upon our lives; therefore, it can be hard to remember who we are as God's people. However, God has given us a great grace, a great gift to remember and live into our identity. That grace is the gift of each other, the gift of being together the One Body of Christ.

I have been married for almost three years, and I remember the first time it began to happen. Phrases that Amber would say or gestures that Amber would do, I began to say and do. When she gets excited, Amber will often proclaim, "Yes", and pump her fist. The next thing I knew, I was doing it also. By sharing life with her, Amber was becoming a part of me in ways that I did not expect. Likewise, when we share life and surround ourselves with the people of God, God's compassion, God's justice, and God's life seen in them more easily finds a home in us. Our identity is reinforced by people who share the same hope of God. Our identity is found not just as individuals, but as part of the collective identity as the people of God. This collective formation from community is happening no matter if we choose or don't choose it. The question is not do we allow those we share life with to shape us. No, the more appropriate question is, which community is the community that is being or should be formational in our lives. Christianity is entering into the community of God so that God's grace can continue to create us in ways that we could not be created alone.

One day, a man came into my office for help. He needed some money. He began the conversation by saying that he wanted to start over, change his life. He needed new friends. The man continued by saying, "I still remember what my grandfather said, 'If you hang out with people who own an old Chevy, all you will want is an old Chevy. If you hang out with people

who want a Mercedes, you will hope for a Mercedes.” Discarding the desire for old Chevys or Mercedes, I think this phrase speaks a truth that we too often practically deny. The communities that we identify with shape our hopes, visions, and understandings of life. We identify ourselves with the people of God, each other, so that the hope of God that each other seeks, can reinforce our desire to seek the hope, vision, and life of God ourselves. Our identity is never just self-determined. It also comes from the community of people we identify with. Therefore, God has given us the grace of each other, so that in our mutual seeking of God, we can remember who we are through each other. We travel this journey of life and faith together, seeking the mystery and hope of God.

We also find ourselves by hearing and participating in God’s continued work. In Greek mythology, there were sirens who sang beautiful music that lured sailors to their shores. However, the shores were rocky with strong waves leading these unsuspecting sailors towards a shipwreck. The voices we hear, that describe who we should be, what we should look like, and the life we should lead, these voices where do they lead us? Do they lead us to shipwrecks? Well, Orpheus was sailing those same waters, when the sirens began to sing to distract his sailors. He pulled out his lyre and began to play a music even more beautiful. Therefore, his sailors followed his music and traveled through safely. We, as people of faith, in a world with many voices, seek to listen to the voice of God as we navigate through. We find our identity not just through communion with God and communion with each other. We find our identity by entering into God’s song and letting that song lead our lives.

Today we are invited to partake in communion. This sacrament is the invitation to enter God’s music, God’s drama that is unfolding in our world. As we come to the table, we encounter the God who has given of God’s self so that we may have life. In the bread and the wine, body and blood, we see it happening again, God in Christ breaks his body for our new life, sheds his blood for our forgiveness and reconciliation. And then, we are invited to ingest this very body and blood. Literally, through the bread and wine, the acts of God enter us, nourish us and become a part of our very living so that then we can leave from the table and participate in the drama we just encountered. We go forth participating in the acts of God which are giving of our life so that new life, God’s kingdom, comes. In communion, we enter the drama, story, music of God, and as we live our lives singing this music, living this drama we see God before us each day. Like any novel, characters find their identity from the story they participate in. Likewise, when we live God’s story, our identity in God and in this world become even more known.

Let God’s image be before you so that it can remind you and reclaim you. Seek communion with God and therefore discover yourself. Listen and live God’s song, see it in each other. Let it be the music you play, the life you lead. It is in faith, in God, and God’s kingdom come that we discover ourselves. Seek God. AMEN