

Sermon: A Case of Mistaken Identity
Scripture: Matthew 4:18-22
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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Here we go folks - into a new administration in our country. Let us not forget to pray for our leaders and our people and let us hold firm to what the church believes; that all of history including this moment is bound for redemption not dissolution; for paradise not perdition, for fulfillment not ultimately frustration. And if at various points along the way because of personal struggle or global crises, you doubt that, that's ok, let the church believe it for you; cause ultimately it's not up to us. Where we are bound is not dependent upon our own worth and our own capacities but God's and God's been working hard on this grand redemption project for much longer than we've been around. We are invited into it but we are not responsible for it. We really aren't primary here, we are secondary, creatures of a Creator, derivative of God.

The Original Sin is that we forget that – who we are and whose we are - and try to establish our identity by lesser things. The Philosopher Soren Kirkegaard defined it in this way: "Sin is, in despair, not wanting to be oneself before God (but before something else); while faith is the self wanting to be itself grounded transparently (fully) in God." Sin with a capital "S" is seeking to acquire an identity for ourselves apart from God. The only problem is that identity derived from anything less than God is inherently unstable.

So for instance trying to be a good parent is a good thing. But if that's our *prime* identity, we've got a problem. If something goes wrong with our kids, God-forbid, then our very being is called into question.

This over-identification is a strong temptation for any parent but a particularly gnarly one for primary caregivers while their spouse goes out and has another setting with which his or her identity can be derived. But that's no less a predicament – when our job is who we are - I am a minister, I am a doctor, I am a lawyer, I am a teacher. And we foster total identification of self with the work we do when we ask one another upon meeting “what do you do?” I find in certain circles that my response to that question can be a conversation killer. “So, Will, what do you do?” I’m a minister.” And the conversation grinds to a halt right there. “ohhhh,” they say. And I don’t know what they are thinking but my guess is that they are going back over the conversation we just had to see if they said a curse word or something inappropriate!

In any case, if the work we do is our *essential* identity, we’ve got a problem. What happens when we lose our job? What happens when we fail at our job? What happens when we cannot find the job we most want? What happens when society respects and honors some jobs and demeans others? What happens then to our sense of self? What we do of course defines us to some extent but it is not ultimately who we are.

We also tend to base our identities not just on what we do but how we behave and who we believe ourselves to be. I am kind, I am helpful, I am busy, I am smart. If our identity is based upon something even as good as being a moral person, it is still as problematic as any other mistaken identity, because when we fail to be morally upright, which we all do, or when we realize that we have ulterior motives for our moral behavior, then our identity is shaken, our sense of self rattled, sometimes profoundly. Or if we base our identity on our religion, on being a faithful person, then again, when we fail to be faithful, which we

always will at some point, and when our churches and our church leaders are revealed as sinful or corrupt, then the foundation we have rested sure on for our identity is upended, we lose our footing and are lost. If we fully identify our selves with much of anything, we set ourselves up because what happens when that flimsy or insubstantial foundation for our identity meets the inevitability of failure and disappointment is we either go to shame or blame, shame in ourselves or blame of others. For when our identities are unstable, we tend to bolster and shore up those identities over and against others. I did my best as a parent and he is simply hateful and ungrateful! I was a model employee and my boss was evil. I am moral and those people are immoral monsters. I am a Christian who believes and lives the truth and they are Muslims who are wrong and their beliefs false. I am anti-Trump so I am righteous and Trump supporters are awful people or visa versa.

We have to be seriously careful there, in particular, these days to be overly identified with our political party, because it's so easy to go to pride, blame or despair. We are justified and victorious and "the giant of our dreams" or we are crushed and defeated, the dwarf of our fears (to quote a poem from Dr. Richard Beauvais), but none of it truly has any bearing on our essential selves and it's an illusion to believe it does.

So what do we do if most everything, actually every-*thing* that we base our identity on is ephemeral and fleeting and leads us to self-focus and shame or rivalry with others? We look to establish our identity in the One who made our identity in the first place, our Creator, the One in whose image we are made. That is our only salvation.

Jesus came walking along the Sea of Galilee and called to the disciples. They were fishermen, out fishing for their living and likely

overly identified with their work. That is why it is so remarkable that when Jesus called, they simply left what they were doing and followed. Jesus didn't say "hey, you can make more money over this way" or "you can get fame on this path" or "I've got a more interesting job that will engage your skills more fully". He just said "come" and they had an intuitive sense that whatever they had built their identity on before - fishing, village life, their particular family or tribe, their fight against Rome - was thin and transitory before this man. Somehow they must have known intuitively that he held their true identity which was deeper and bigger and more transcendent than anything they had known up to that point. So they just up and left without a second thought!

And man were their lives upended and re-ordered. Oh, they still were under the sway of mistaken identities, as we all are, like when James and John asked to sit at Jesus' right hand in heaven. They still got off track at times with their disordered desires but in the end they realized that their identity was no longer based on those lesser things but on Jesus alone. As one of the early Apostles, Paul of Tarsus, described it, "Somehow, it is no longer I who lives but it is Christ who lives in me." That was the experience of those who came to know the resurrected Jesus in their lives. Suddenly his or her identity was no longer tied to anything but Him and it was profoundly liberating.

That was then and this is now and yet the resurrected Christ is no less present here and now, to you and me, than he was then and there, to all of them. When people speak of and experience of Christ, a giving of their lives to Jesus this is what they refer to - an experience of their old mistaken identities being given over and finding their true identity

in God. It's a grace-filled moment but one that requires commitment and work to remain in that grace, acknowledging how frail and easily we can fall out of that true identity and back into the more fragile and dangerously unstable identities around us. That's why we need to be in some kind of spiritual discipline of prayer, of reading scripture, of community commitment, to remind ourselves who we are whose we are, ultimately... we are God's.

Once that is established then we take up our cross and follow. Then we protest. Then we fight nonviolently for what is right. Then we stand with the marginalized and the oppressed. Then we make decisions for the good of the earth. Then we welcome the foreigner, the stranger, the criminal and prisoner. Our identity in God doesn't in any way let us off the hook, but actually puts us more ON the hook! The difference is that our ego, our flimsy mistakenly identified selves, will not need to be violent, aggressive, resentful, vengeful towards others and what is happening around us to shore up and protect ourselves and what is ours, but we will be focused otherwise, on listening carefully and being faithful to the One from whom we all come and towards whom we are all going, altogether participants as we are in the grand redemption project of God... not bound for dissolution but redemption, not perdition but paradise, not frustration but fulfillment, amen!