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Sermon Series: *Show Me Your ID, No. 1*

Who Are We, Really?

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Genesis 1:26-2:1

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

²⁹ Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day.

³² Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

We will eventually be in Genesis, Chapter 1, this morning, if you'd care to turn there with me. The book of Genesis, toward the end of chapter 1.

The word for the day, and for a few Sundays to come is *identity*.

Identity.

Now, I approach it with some trepidation because, honestly, I've heard it spoken so much over the past few years that I'm rather sick of it. For the first 45 years of my life, I could probably count on both hands the number of times I heard the word. Now, it's everywhere.

Maybe you know what I mean.

First, we're constantly reminded about the threat of *identity theft*: the danger of people stealing, or at least borrowing for a while, our identity. It's serious business with which some of you, I'm sorry to say, have had to deal.

Fortunately, so far, nobody seems to want to be me, which I try not to take personally.

Still, we hear all the time about the potential theft of our identities.

And then, for the past decade or so especially, you hear a lot about *identity politics*: the notion that certain groups of people either are all, or should all be, part of a certain political party. All Christians are Republicans; all Jews or African Americans are Democrats; that sort of thing.

The more polarized we get as a nation, the more you hear about that.

And then of course, we all hear more and more *and more* about people adjusting or adapting or altogether changing their identities to whatever they choose. The term is, "*identify as _____*," and then you can fill in the blank from there.

A person of a certain race chooses to *identify as* a member of another.

People of one gender *identifying* as members of the other.

A person of a certain ethnicity or color choosing to *identify as* that of another.

Even people of a certain age *identifying as* someone of a different age.

You remember that guy – it was three or four years ago – from the Netherlands, I think, who tried to legally change his *age* from 69 to 49 because, "he didn't feel as though he was 69."

It goes on and on, and though it's taken very seriously by some in our society, let me just ask this:

Even apart from Jesus or faith or Scripture or anything else like that, what happens to the simple notion of objective truth when changes of those sorts are allowed to happen?

The societies who embrace this stuff just aren't dealing in reality, and they're certainly not being fair about it.

When a 70-year-old says he's *identifying as 50*, and when he can *legally* change his age to 50, the sophisticated of our society applaud that.

But what happens when that 70-year-old decides he's going to identify as a 7-year-old and enroll in second grade?

How about when someone *living* decides that, from now on, he's going to *identify* as someone who's *dead*, and claim his life insurance benefit?

Where are the lines of identity drawn, and who gets to draw them?

My sister-in-law is a teacher and the same age as I am (53). Her state education department is basically forcing teachers to completely embrace *anything* and *everything* someone else chooses as their identity. A little girl can identify as a little boy, as a cat, a hamster – you name it – and the teacher has to abide by it.

So, I told her, "Well then, submit to your principal your decision to identify as a 67-year-old teacher who has 35 years teaching experience and is now retiring expecting her state retirement benefits.

If she really tried that, we all know where that education department's inclusivity and broad-mindedness would end, you see?

Even if you take the Bible and Jesus and faith out of it, still, —there are lines; —there are limits. There *is* *reality* about *identity*.

The question is, who gets to determine it?

Who draws the lines?

Who determines identity?

What makes up identity anyway?

Can we *change* our identity—or can we *not change* our identity? Or, can we *change certain parts* of our identity?

Is our identity something we are left to discover? Is it something that is assigned to us? Is it something that we're supposed to create ourselves?

More people than we may think in our culture are really struggling with those sorts of questions today, which is why we're going to talk about this for a few weeks anyway, and because the Bible and the Church really can contribute meaningfully to the discussion.

For those who will listen, God *does* have something to say about this.

Now, let me say one other thing here about *manner*.

One thing Christ-followers need to grasp in discussions like these is that people who embrace some of these ideologies about identity that seem so strange to us—they're not our enemies, OK? They are people whom God loves and people whom God wants to be redeemed, but who are struggling with ideas that are contrary to the way He made the world to work.

And so, insulting and calling those people names does not serve the cause of Christ.

At the same time, neither does saying nothing serve the cause of Christ.

It's neither kind nor loving to affirm people's errant understandings of identity, any more than it is kind and loving to let your children play in the freeway.

Certain practices are just destructive. Broken ideologies hurt people and kill people just as surely as a speeding car will, and those dangers have to be identified for what they are, but *not* in *anger* or *resentment* or *conceit*. We speak, rather, out of *love* for those whom they hurt.

The way forward is to "speak truth in love," as the apostle Paul puts it in Ephesians, Chapter 4.

To really love someone is to tell them the truth.

If my little boy wants to jump off the roof of the house, and in order to affirm him, I tell him, "Sure, that's fine, you won't get hurt," is that a loving thing to do?

We have to speak truth.

But our truth-telling had better be grounded in genuine love for that person. If it isn't, it will never land in their hearts, because the old saying really is true, "People don't care what you know until they know that you care."

People know when they're nothing more than a project to us, or an outlet for our arrogance or our anger about the direction of society.

And the church has been guilty of all that through the ages.

God Himself, John says, "*did not send Jesus to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him*" (John 3:17).

So, before we go out to correct someone else, we'd better honestly and carefully examine our motives and manner, because whatever we say or do apart from love isn't going to make much difference for Jesus.

At the same time, let me say, too, that even with the purest of motives, some will still take great offense at anything we might say that disagrees with them. Even if we approach with true kindness and love, some will accuse us of hatred or intolerance.

Look at what they did to Jesus.

About that, we can do very little, except what Jesus did: we keep engaging, we live and interact with them, we keep loving them, and we keep praying that they might see truth for what it is.

All of that underlies our response, as followers of Jesus, to this issue of identity.

So, what is identity and from where does it come?

There are many nuances to this, but I'd suggest to you that, at its most basic level, identity is our sense of self and self-worth. It's our value as persons. And our greater culture, here in the United States at least, has determined this in different ways through the years. It's actually undergone a recent, and pretty dramatic, shift.¹

For generations, really, it was that most people's identities were determined by their roles within the greater community.

Generally speaking, people did not do things simply because they *wanted* to or because it *felt good* to them. People did things because those things contributed to the good of some greater group of which they were a part.

Vocationally, my grandfather ("Pup," we called him) was a *tender*—someone who mixes mortar for brick and block and for stone masons.

Pup didn't do that because he always dreamed about mixing mortar all day. He did that because he had to provide for his family and that was a job he could get.

He was also a Sunday school teacher, simply because the church needed him to be one.

He also gave lots of his time to helping others, because there were lots of poor around him who had big needs.

I doubt Pup ever gave much consideration at all to what he *liked* to do, because he knew what he *had* to do for the good of those around him—and that's what shaped his identity.

In these past few decades, however, our culture has changed. These days, most people have turned *inside*—looking to their own dreams and feelings and desires and aspirations in determining their identity.

Who we'll be—what we'll do: the determination of our worth has become more about pleasing *ourselves* instead of the *group* of which we're a part.

Now, taken to excess, *both* of these approaches to identity determination can lead to problems.

People can be overly concerned about pleasing the *group*, which can lead to unreasonable, unfair and unhealthy sacrifice of self and the misuse of personal abilities and gifts.

Lewis, Lee: <https://christiancounseling.com/blog/counseling/implications-misplaced-identity>.

People can also be overly concerned with pleasing *self*, to the neglect and even the destruction of the group.

But Scripture says that there is another way.

Instead of allowing the preferences of those around us, or our own preferences within us, to determine our identity, the Bible teaches that we need to *receive* our identity from the One who made us in the first place.

In other words, it is God who determines who we are.

It doesn't matter so much what those around us think; it doesn't matter so much what even we think. Our identity comes to us from God.

And this is, finally, where Genesis comes in.

God, here in Genesis, tells us our identity, at the basic level. God tells us who we are.

You can read it through our text: Gen. 1:26 - 2:1.

First of all, we are made in God's image and likeness, and we have been given dominion over the creation (verse 26). That tells us something about our value in God's eyes, doesn't it? Regardless of our appearance or talents or age or color or anything else, we have intrinsic value, as human beings, to God.

And not only that, it tells us our God-given place in relation to the rest of creation. We are worth more than other elements of creation, simply because God says so. God sets the pecking order here, and humans are at the top of it.

Genesis also tells us that we were created male and female (verse 27), which means there are two distinct genders, in spite of what our contemporary world thinks.

Verse 28 there says that we were made to flourish: for relationship, for intimacy, for friendship and development and leadership.

Now, due to the brokenness of our world, some of these things aren't always possible. But God made us with these things in view.

Also, verse 28 there tells us that God blessed us – humans. And on down in verse 31, we're included in God's assessment that all that He'd made is good – and even "very good."

What does all that mean?

It means that we, as people, although we have certainly mistreated creation and each other from time to time, are not, as some would suggest today, "the scourge of our world." Quite the contrary, in fact. We humans are those who carry God's special blessing.

According to God here in Genesis, we – each of us humans – have these qualities:

- We are made by God in His image.
- We are of great value to Him.
- We are ranked above the rest of creation.
- We are male or female.
- We are intended to flourish, grow, relate with one another and lead, and,
- We are very good.

That's who God says we are, and that is the basis of our identity, according to God.

Now, isn't that news that our world needs to hear today?

It is! Because look where all this attempted self-determination of identity has taken us.

We live in a time of enormous increases in depression, feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness, suicide, drug addiction, confusion about our purpose and place, and just the overall cheapening of human life in every way.

Into this atmosphere of identity confusion, this is great news! Liberating! Affirming! Freeing!

- We are made in God's image.
- We are of great value.
- We are ranked above the rest of creation.
- We are either male or female.
- We are intended to flourish and grow, and,
- in His opinion, we are very good.

The one who made us is telling us all these good things about who we are, and our world would go so far in finding the healing it needs if we would only receive these words from Him.

If only we would believe God and embrace our identity as He's determined it.

As we so vainly try to steer our own course regarding identity, I think God looks upon us with great grief and sadness.

He sees the hurt we're heaping upon ourselves and each other, all the negative and destructive consequences, and He wonders, "Why don't you just accept who You really are? Why can't you trust me with who you are as people – my beloved creation? Your lives, your relationships, your world would be so much better if you would."

Now, of course I realize the Christian message goes beyond creation and Eden, and that we are also broken by sin. That's part of who we are too, and we'll talk about that next week.

The truth is, the sin part of human identity is actually why so much of the world is so resistant to hearing from God about human identity. Sin is why we want to determine identity for ourselves.

And so, we realize that much of the world will not want to hear, unfortunately, who God says we are.

But some will. Some have so hurt themselves and others by trying to determine their identity themselves, that they'll be ready for another option, and it's our responsibility, as Christ-followers to let them know.

Of course, in order to do that, we first have to understand and embrace who God says we are.

So, do we? Do you?

Have you let other people and their needs and opinions determine who you are and your sense of value and worth?

Have you tried to determine your own identity, based on only what *you* think and what *you* feel and what *you* want?

If so, would you, beginning today even, listen to who God says you are? Would you let Him determine

your identity? It's the first step to peace and contentment and to becoming who God made us all to be.

Closing Prayer:

Father, my prayer is just that. If there is even one here today who is struggling with identity, struggling with what they are worth, what their value is, with who they are, who they need to be, Lord, would you through Your Spirit speak powerfully to them, and would You let them know who they are in Your sight. Would You let them take these words of Genesis 1 deeply to heart, so that they might be able turn themselves fully over to You, so they might turn their identity over to you and be who You say that they are.

And Lord, help us all, help us all, as we struggle with this, as our society pushes against us here and there in these ways, Lord, help us, remind us of who You are,

who we are before you, and who You say we are in Your Word. Teach us more about this as we go through these Sundays to come. In Christ's name, amen.

Closing Song: *All Creatures of Our God and King*, vv. 1,4,5

Benediction: One more time here – would you believe God, your Creator, and what He says about you:
You are made in His image.
You are of great value.
You are ranked above the rest of creation.
You are either male or female.
You are intended to flourish and grow, and,
You are very good.

Would you let Him determine your identity – who you really are?