

Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Introduction

In Luke 9:18, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” They had been following him, learning from him, acting like his bodyguards. Surely they did all of that because of a belief about who he was. But when Jesus questioned them about it directly, they acted like rabbits caught in headlights. Suddenly they seemed to have doubts, or perhaps they simply struggled to articulate what they believed or knew. Maybe they were not comfortable putting a label on his identity.

Identity can be incredibly difficult to articulate, especially when we live in a world where people-pleasing is rife. How do we learn to speak about our identities in the face of those who want to tell a different story? If Jesus’ question instead was, “Who do you say that you are?” I wonder how you might answer. Who would Jesus say that each one of us was? Do we need to challenge the ways in which we talk about ourselves and to ourselves?

As you contemplate our Gospel reading for the day, I encourage you to wonder about how Jesus felt when his identity was questioned. Can you empathise with him? Have you found yourself in a situation where you have pleaded with others to accept your identity, only to have it denied?

Text

John 10:22–30

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’ Jesus answered, ‘I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.’

Comment

In this text, Jesus is confronted by people who ask him about his identity, but do not accept his answer. As I meditated on the text, I reflected upon a recent experience of talking about my own identity and how uncomfortable that had made me. As I questioned why, it made me wonder if resting in God and hearing his affirmations could strengthen our sense of identity and our ability to speak of it when faced with conflicting voices.

Having been asked to speak on the theme of 'Lights and Bushels,' I tried to work out what more I could say about not hiding one's light under a bushel. Someone suggested that I should talk about myself. Despite my discomfort, I decided that I should not hide my light under a bushel, but I certainly did not want to show any kind of pride in my achievements, probably due to my upbringing as a Scottish Presbyterian. This talk was going to be boring at best, downright depressing at worst. Then a word of Scripture came to me. The Psalmist wrote, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). I realised that if I could accept that I am a precious child of God, then I could begin to celebrate my achievements and experiences by setting them within the context of who I really am. As I continued my preparation, my soul wanted to cry out to the world, "I am more than the names people call me. I am more than my job title. I am more than every single different 'hat' I put on. I am more." This process of preparing a talk was building up my confidence in talking proudly about my identity. "I am sensitive but it's one of my greatest strengths. I am strong. I am creative. I love to laugh, particularly at myself. I am intelligent. I am passionate about peace education. I am unapologetically myself, but first and foremost, I am a beloved child of God." As I contemplated my narrative, I realised that there was a deep conflict between who I am and the ways in which I feel the world wants to restrict me. There can be conflict between the narrative that others create about a person and their true narrative. There have been people across the years and places of my life, who have tried to tell me who I am or who I am not. The bullies and manipulators have tried to belittle and weaken me. I have heard the voices tell me I'm not enough, and I have heard those words in my own voice too. I have learned through experience that I cannot be who you want me to be, for "I am what I am" to quote the song. I can learn and develop, but I cannot change who I am at my core. My passions will always revolve around relationship and creativity. God made me this way and encourages me to embrace my identity. When confronted and frustrated by those who would like a different 'me,' perhaps I need to tune in to God's encouraging voice more often.

Whilst I have moments when I struggle to accept who I am, Jesus was certain of his identity. Even so, I wonder how difficult it was to live with the views of those who were expecting a different Messiah. In our reading, we join Jesus at a festival as he is questioned about his identity. I imagine the frustration he must have felt when this question was posed again. "What more can I do to prove myself to you?" I can hear Jesus say. "I have told you and you will not believe. I have shown it to you through my actions and you refute what you have seen. Others accept me for who I am and act accordingly, and even their example is denied." Did he feel like a punchbag? Was the attempt to manipulate him into believing that he was something 'less than' beginning to have an effect? Was he able to turn to the words of the Psalmist and claim them for himself, saying, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made"? When he was consistently questioned and accused of lying about his identity, I wonder whose voice he heard responding to the question, "Who do you say that I am?"

I believe he sought his Father's voice. We know that Jesus often took himself away from the crowds and the disciples to pray. He removed himself from the harmful words and dissenting voices, and took time to listen to God's voice reassuring him that he was exactly who he was meant to be. In those quiet places, he could focus on what he was rather than what he was not. He could revel in God's creation, his very self, without fear of rejection or hostility. In God's presence, with a chance to simply be, he was refreshed and this enabled him to return to the painful, passionate work to which he was called.

Unfortunately, he did not immediately have such an opportunity in the

continuation of John chapter 10. The Jews prepared to stone Jesus for committing the crime of blasphemy. They wanted him to say who he was so they could then condemn him for his words. It was a vicious type of abuse that afforded him no response that could satisfy them. However, he knew that he needed to get to a place of safety. When he managed to escape from them, he went to a place where John the Baptist had prepared the way and where many believed his identity. He retreated to people who could remind him of who he was and amongst whom he could be himself. Perhaps in the midst of our own conflicts about our identity, we should do likewise.

Whilst acknowledging that we live with the conflicts between our inner identities and the identities placed upon us, it is my prayer that none of us will ever feel the need to hide our light under a bushel, because we will accept that we are God's perfect creation. May you shine your light brightly regardless of those who would deny, restrict or belittle. Listen to the voice of God and the voices of your supporters calling you to be all that you can be. I long for the day to come when every single child of God can celebrate, enjoy and speak of their identity with pride. Until then, when we find ourselves questioning our identities because of the negative input of others, let's follow Christ's example and take time with God and time with those who know and appreciate the core of our being. When we are struggling, may we hear Lauren Daigle's words, "You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing. You say I am strong when I think I am weak. You say I am held when I am falling short, and when I don't belong...you say I am Yours, and I believe." (*You Say*, Lauren Daigle, 2018)

Response

Take the time and effort to make an insightful compliment to someone. Go beyond the normal niceties of the day and ask someone what they are passionate about. Truly listen to their answer. Be present, as you watch them shine.

Make time to engage in a life-giving activity today, which allows you to express your passion. Which part of your identity does this reveal?

Prayer

My God!
Tell me a love story today,
with a strong character
and a wild storyline
overflowing with passion.
May you be the abundant lover
and I the amazing hero
and the tale, our life journey together.
May I continually praise you, my God,
because I am fearfully
and wonderfully made.
Amen.