

“Who am I?”

Luke 7:36-50

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

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If we had to reduce the essence of what it means to be human down to one basic question, this would be it: “Who am I?” Our understanding of who we are as individuals underlies every facet of our lives.

Who you are, no matter who you are, is layered and complex. You can be known, but never fully known, at least not to other people. Your identity is well-established over the course of your entire life, and yet never beyond the point of further development.

With the right approach, the concept of identity something that is filled with hope. A healthy understanding of self promises the possibility of real, authentic connections with other people: it says to others “Here is who I am.” An honest understanding of self offers the opportunity to grow and be made better, in a way that says “Here is who I am becoming.” A spiritual understanding of self grants a glimpse into the wonder and beauty of the God we were fashioned after, declaring, “Here is who I was created to be.”

It is this sense of hope that draws me, that calls me, into my ministry with middle and high-schoolers at Christ the King. This issue of identity—of knowing who I am—is one of the most central theme of adolescence. Youth ministry theologian Kenda Creasy-Dean says that “the primary and most basic goal of adolescence is known as individualization...becoming one’s own person.” In adulthood, we more or less know who we are, but in adolescence, it’s less about who we are and more about who we are becoming. Within that—I believe—there is the bright possibility of self-discovery and development, and I am genuinely honored to encounter these young people at this time in their lives.

Determining who we are is a process, and often the first step in the process is comparison. As we grow up, we learn first that we are one thing because we are not the other another. The very beginnings of this idea are healthy, and even essential. Drawing comparisons between ourselves and others is a natural way for us to observe traits and learn behaviors that we might eventually incorporate into our own idea of self.

It is one reason that we, as Christians, turn to scripture. You’ll notice that readings from the Bible (especially the Gospels) are more often stories about people, rather abstract ideas. No matter our stage in life, we acknowledge that these stories provoke comparison and inspire growth; that these people are meant to teach us something about who we are now and who we are called to be going forward. Whenever we encounter scripture we are asked to listen, to reflect, and to be changed.

In our Gospel lesson today from Luke, Jesus offers an opportunity for Simon the Pharisee to be transformed by a comparison he draws to the woman. Near the end of our excerpt, Jesus lists the ways in which the Pharisee does not fulfill his duties as a host and

compares that to the woman's actions: he does not offer water, yet she washes Jesus' feet with her tears; he does not greet Jesus with a kiss, yet she continually kisses Jesus' feet; he does not anoint Jesus' head with oil, yet she anoints his feet with costly ointment.

But there is more for us to learn from this text than simply "be hospitable," or even "show great love." Now, the differences between the woman and the Pharisee extend beyond what one does and the other doesn't do. For one thing, there is the issue of scale. The woman's actions are not an equal substitution for the Pharisee's failures at hospitality. When Jesus describes the expected responsibilities as a host, it's clear that this woman's actions are, by comparison...well, she goes overboard. Yes, she demonstrates great love for Jesus, but to anyone observing this scene, what she does is spectacularly awkward.

And then there's the issue of status and identity. See, even in how these two characters are named within the text gives us enormous insight into who these people are to the rest of the community. The narrating voice Luke only refers to the man hosting Jesus as "the Pharisee." From this, we know that—to the community—that he is a person of power and prestige. Throughout Luke, Pharisees—as experts in religious Law—are typically shown in opposition to Jesus' message of forgiveness. The woman is not given a name in the text, but is simply known as "a sinner." To the community, sin is more than just a piece of this woman's identity, it *is* her identity. At this point, it's not that she's guilty of some action, it's that she's disgraceful as a person. Although her sin is unspecified, it is clear that she has fallen beyond doing a bad thing...she now *is* a bad thing.

And aside from being a sinner, she hasn't even been invited to the meal, especially not at the house of a Pharisee, whose identity by the way, revolves around the idea of ritual cleanliness. So no matter how we look at it, the popular attitude is that this woman does not belong. She has no business approaching the Pharisee's honored guest, let alone touching him, let alone the feet-kissing, the hair-touching, or the weeping of bodily fluids onto him.

Remember when this was spectacularly awkward before? Yeah...

For me, the two most revealing moment in this text is how Jesus first addresses each of these two people. I think it's significant, that Jesus calls the previously unnamed Pharisee "Simon." In this moment, I believe Jesus intends to shake Simon loose from the sense of personal and community identity that is so rigidly tied to his title. In Jesus' eyes, the power and prestige that so often distances this man from others is disregarded. The ongoing political feud waged against Jesus' teachings is no longer seen as an obstacle. The status he holds as an expert in the law is set aside, so that he might inversely be a student to Jesus' gospel teachings.

When Jesus speaks directly to the sinful woman, the very first words he says are, "Your sins are forgiven." To this woman, Jesus' statement is more than an absolution of wrongdoing, it is a clear rejection of her toxic sense of self. By his forgiveness, Jesus

offers an opportunity for others, include you and me, to see who this woman is beyond her imperfections. We no longer see her as an intruder, but as a person who bravely ventures where she is sure to be rejected. We see her not as a defiler, but as a person who is vulnerable and sincere in her worship. We see that her outpouring is not spectacularly awkward. It is deeply personal. It is radically authentic. It is uncomfortably real.

Today we commission 21 youths and 12 adult leaders for their upcoming mission trip to Barbourville, Kentucky through Appalachia Service Project (or ASP). The program ASP deals with the issue of insufficient housing across Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia; an area whose coal-based economy has struggled to keep up with the rapidly changing energy industry. With the help of youth and adult volunteers, ASP has been committed to helping Appalachian families by making homes warmer, safer, and drier for nearly 50 years. What that looks like, for Christ the King, is sending several work crews of about 7 people each to do basic repairs on existing homes, typically trailer homes. While we are there, we also have a strong focus on building personal relationships with the homeowners that host us.

It's an outstanding organization that addresses a real need in the world.

But honestly, the ASP model doesn't make a lot of strategic sense. If you were to imagine a solution, from scratch, to alleviate systemic poverty and a widespread housing crisis in an area, chances are you would envision something fundamentally different than ASP.

You might expect a perfectly strategic plan to include input from economists, researchers, or government officials for the problem at-large. For homes already in disrepair, you might expect the most quality work to come from professional contractors, handymen, carpenters, and plumbers. Regarding the emotional turmoil of poverty, we might expect pastors, social workers, or professional counselors to be the most qualified to help. At the very least, you might expect that the most efficient strategists probably wouldn't demand youth workers, or the help of non-experts from halfway across the country.

This will be my seventh ASP trip, and I don't mind telling you that I am not qualified to do this work; I have no business being involved in this kind of ministry. On paper, this is not a place that I belong. The idea that these families in Kentucky would depend on me—on my “novice-at-best” skills in home repair—to rebuild their collapsing roof, or to level their slanted subfloor—is still a little absurd to me sometimes. Even when it comes to forming connections with the host families, I am often painfully, unshakably introverted when it comes to meeting new people in an unfamiliar setting. For me, the entire concept of this trip enough to inspire Moses-level questions around identity—“who am I that you would send me? Isn't it obvious that I'm not the person you want?”

From a strategic point of view, ASP and its many volunteers defy expectation, but in a way that boldly and lovingly resemble the woman from our Gospel text today.

We tread confidently into problems that we are not typically invited to solve—whether it's poverty, or loneliness, or a rotted floor joist. We work not because it is our profession, or our hobby, but because we're challenged by the tasks, and it is through adversity that our labor becomes a labor of love. We report to an ASP staff made up of just a few college kids, who struggle just as much as we do to get it right, which helps remind us that having the passion to find a solution can sometimes be more important than having an easy answer. We travel hundreds of miles to meet these families, so that we might say to them "you are worthy of a love that would travel hundreds of miles."

And as to why we involve our youth: I know firsthand from my time on ASP that really great craftsmanship, or leadership, has nothing to do with your age. I've seen these young people preach better sermons I ever could on the subject of being courageously vulnerable, or relentlessly compassionate, or radically authentic. And they've done so in far fewer words.

Although the details of ASP's ministry are unexpected, its core motto beautifully reflects the message that we find in our Gospel today: it says "We accept people right where they are, just the way they are." We've been talking a little bit recently about our identity as a congregation, and it is this same idea that I've heard from many of you. We want Christ the King to be known—even more than it is already—to be unquestioning in our acceptance of others. We want it to be known to you, as soon as you walk through these doors, that you already belong. That you are more—much more—than whatever people might expect. That from the very first words out of Jesus' mouth, you are named and claimed as a child of God: completely forgiven, fully known and accepted, and enormously loved.

And that it's not who you are, but **whose** you are that truly matters.