

Title: “Who Are You?”

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John 1:19

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Service Readings: Is. 61:1–4, 8–11, 1 Th. 5:16–24, John 1:6-8, 19-28

John was asked who he was and he pointed to Jesus. This is where he found his identity, his purpose. He came to point others to the coming Messiah. What about us?

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Who are you? This is a question that permeates contemporary society, especially here in the United States. It is a question that, on the surface, invites you to into a conversation of self-exploration. A conversation that offers an opportunity for self-reflection, self-projection, and even self-definition. For what spawns from this question is an opportunity to internally gaze upon the reflection of your own self-identity and determine not just your strengths but also your weaknesses. Where do you fall short in the eyes of yourself and in the eyes of the one asking? And from *that* you begin to form an answer to the question being posed. Now, you can answer the question honestly, but who in their right mind would offer an answer that expose their most uncomfortable traits? Instead, you gaze upon the reflection of your naked identity. You search for areas where the flesh of your reality doesn't conform to the expectations of the world, or even of yourself. And you begin to dress your nakedness in the clothes of the world's expectations. The seamstress in you begins to cover the realities of your failures, weaknesses, and the like behind a dress of success, strength and all the rest. You create a projection of yourself that you present to the one who asks, and to the rest of the world. And you pray that the façade that you have created is believable. In other words, the answer of *who* you are becomes an answer to *who* you *want* to be. You *want* to be seen by the world in the clothing that you have created. You *want* to be identified with the definition of this creation, even if you know that you are not, and especially if you know that you could never be.

Who are you? You are who you want to be. You are who you pretend to be. You are who you have defined yourself to be.

This is how *you* answer the question. And this is how *I* answer the question. We are who we say we are. And if we say it enough even we believe it. And if we project it enough, the world believes it.

But this is not how John saw himself. For he was asked four times... *four* times who he was, and every response was one of nakedness. He didn't cloth himself in self-identity. He simply exposed to the world who he was. Listen again to our Gospel passage as he describes himself to those who ask.

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” ²¹ And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he

answered, “No.” ²² So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” ²³ He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵ They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” ²⁶ John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Who are you, they ask? And he answers in this way: he is not the Christ. He is not Elijah. He is not the Prophet. He is not even worthy to untie the sandal strap of the one who comes after. Who are you, they ask? And as he gazes into the mirror of self-reflection he does not cloth himself but instead exposes his nakedness. These are the things that he is not. His identity is not determined by self, but by some other. “Who is John,” they ask? His response anchors his identity in Jesus. He claims, very clearly, that he has no identity apart from Jesus. He is not the Prophet. He is not the Messiah. He is nothing... nothing except one who points to Jesus. *This* is his identity. He exists only to point to Jesus. There is nothing else that defines him. If not for Jesus, he would look in the mirror of self-reflection and find..... nothing... not even an image of self.

Think about that last statement, for it is so contrary to the world that we live in, especially here in our country. Our Declaration of Independence states that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” But this doesn’t reflect John’s belief of his identity. For he is very clear that he is created, endowed by his creator not to pursue happiness but to point to his savior. This is what he was created for. This is what he was made for. He was *made* to point the world to Jesus. I skipped these specific verses, but I would like to go back to them now.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

John. He was sent by God. And his purpose was not one of *self*-identity. It was one of *other*-identity. He was created, he *existed*, to bear witness to the light – to bear witness to Jesus. Pause for just a moment and consider this in the context of today’s society. What would the world’s reaction be if it were discovered that we were created, that we existed for nothing more than this? Thanks be to God that we were not..... Oh, wait!

It sure changes things when we view our very existence through this lens. If we exist to point to Christ, just like John did, then that reality should free us from the expectations of the world. If we were created to light the path for others, then shouldn’t the question of our identity not cause us stress and concern? Shouldn’t the question of our identity be something that we can ground our entire lives to? And when people ask who we are, shouldn’t that be an easy question to answer? We are messengers of Jesus! We are a creation that exists to point the world to the one who has redeemed the world. We exist for no other reason than to proclaim the reality that God took upon

himself the sins of all mankind so that, through our faith in the work of Christ, we are redeemed; That through the death and resurrection of our Lord, we are saved.

But, you might ask, doesn't even *that* seem to turn the attention away from Jesus and onto us? We become the focus, for we are the ones redeemed; for we are the ones who have been saved. Ah! It could be seen that way. But I proffer something completely different. For what this confession states is nothing less than this: that in our nakedness, we have nothing to offer. That there is nothing that we can contribute. But Jesus? Through *his blood, through his death and resurrection*, he weaves the clothing that covers our nakedness. That *his* sacrifice becomes *our* clothing that covers our sinful selves. And so, when we point to ourselves as those redeemed, we don't *really* point to ourselves. Instead, we point to *Jesus*, for it is *his* righteousness, it is *his* clothing that we point to. And, like John, we proclaim to the world that they should not look to *us*, but to Jesus. And we proclaim to the world that it is not our actions or our life that they should inquire about. Instead, it should be the actions of our Lord and our Savior – our God who our lives point to that they should ask about.

In our vocations as parents, as employees, as teachers.... as whatever, God provides us daily with opportunities to point people to Jesus. It is in our selfless giving of our time to our children; it is in our unwavering honesty and integrity in our actions at the office; it is in the energy we spend serving others even though it does not benefit us. And it is about proclaiming Jesus when people ask why we spend our time differently, why we think differently, why we act differently. This is how we point others to him.

This is what an identity in Jesus looks like; this is what it means to point others to Him. I opened with the question, "Who are you?" How will you answer it this morning?

Let us pray

Lord God, we are your creation. We are the work of your hand. You have molded us and breathed life into us so that we could point others to your son. Help us be like John and that everything we do points others to Jesus.