

"WHO AM I?" – IDENTITY

Matthew 7:24-27 | Kirsten Anonby

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"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."
Matthew 7:24-27

Hello, it's good to be with you today. Did you know that each time I prepare a talk for our community, I start with pretty much the same sentence, and it goes like this: "Hi, my name is Kirsten, if we haven't met, and I'm one of the pastors here at LWC."

Most of you have been around enough to know a bit about who I am, so I stick to a one-line intro -- but if I was speaking to a community that didn't know me, I'd say a bit more -- perhaps that my husband David, our three kids, and myself all love books, and I'm especially in love with the Lord of the Rings. I might say that I grew up in the United States (it's true), or that I paint when I can. I might say that I always finish my puzzles.

I introduce myself because if I'm going to connect with you I need to tell you a bit of who I am. I need to give you a glimpse into my identity. None of us are comfortable listening to a talking head we know nothing about. I'm certainly not -- I'll listen to someone for a few minutes on YouTube, and then I'll ask "who is this guy?"

Every person speaks out of their own identity. Who I am matters.

We are starting a new sermon series today called "Who Am I?" Somehow, each of us in our life has come up with some sort of answer to the question of who we are. And the answer that we have come up with matters.

Each of us lives out of our sense of who we are every day. Our identity shapes how we read people, it shapes our perspectives and our ideas, and it shapes what we do, and what and who we allow into our lives: what we say "yes" to, and what we say "no" to.

Our family sees ourselves as campers, so we camp every summer. Part of my sense of self as a woman involves cooking -- so I often make dinner. Another part of my self-understanding is that I am a sloppy dishwasher . . . so David washes the dishes. We see ourselves as readers, so we buy books. We see ourselves as being bad at house projects -- and so we avoid them unless absolutely necessary.

But tell me this -- how did you develop your understanding of who you are? How did your past shape your sense of self? Out of all the things that shaped you -- your race, your sex, your socioeconomic status, your family, your gifts and skills, your work, your loves, your relationships, your pain, your faith. . . how did the identity you live with -- that shapes your life--come to be?

This can be a very difficult question to answer.

Identity formation is something that happens to us, not something we consciously do. Tim Keller says that we are no more aware of how our identity is shaped than a fish is aware of the water it's breathing and swimming in. Like a fish, we swim in our contemporary culture, and subconsciously adopt its assumptions about how we interpret our lived experience and build our sense of self-understanding.

This series is an attempt to look at the water we're swimming in with a critical eye, and hopefully an eye shaped by our life of faith with Jesus.

When I think of identity formation, I think of Matthew 7:24-27. This story, of the wise and foolish builders, is the very end of what is arguably Jesus' most famous sermon – often called the Sermon on the Mount (because it was given on a mountain, go figure!). The story describes two builders – and the difference between the two is what they build on. The foolish builder builds their house on something unstable – like sand, but the wise builder builds their house on a rock. And when the winds, and floods, and storms come – only the wise builder's house remains standing.

This is not a story about building houses (although any builder will probably tell you that there are some sound principles here). It's a story about how we build our lives. And it has everything we do with the formation of our identities.

I think that this story shows us both what we fear and what we want. We fear discovering that our life has no foundation -- that when the winds and rain come it will wash away. But we want a life that is resilient and stable, a life that can withstand the storms of life.

Our culture has a particular way of developing a sense of self, but it is not stable. It isn't stable because it doesn't take our brokenness into account, and it is not consistent with the way we were designed as human beings.

It isn't stable because it isn't built on the rock.

A resilient and stable life comes from a resilient and stable identity. And that's the kind of identity that Jesus wants for us. We may think identity is too post-modern, too contemporary of a concept for Jesus. As you read the Bible, though, you find that Jesus is all about identity – He didn't just come to save us from our sins – He came to transform our understanding of who we are.

Identity formation is a subject for the philosophers, and I am not a philosopher. But I want to give you some food for thought about how identity formation happens in our contemporary culture. And then I want us to look at it from a biblical perspective, to consider what parts of it may indeed lead to house that is built on something as unstable as sand.

Let's start with a brief description of identity.

When we're talking about a person's identity, we're talking about the unique set of characteristics that can be used to identify a person as themselves and no one else.

It's what validates a person and gives them their sense of worth.

Our identity is shaped by a wide range of characteristics, and some examples would be:

- **Physical characteristics:** Our race, sex, hair colour, eye colour, body type,
- **Social context:** Family (oldest or youngest?), friendships, community, culture, faith, economic status
- **Personality:** extrovert/introvert, interests, skills & abilities

- Our identity has to do with how we see ourselves as different from others.
- We grow in our understanding of our identity as we begin to see how we are the same person in different situations.
- And we grow in our self-understanding when we see the ways in which we are the same over time.

- I think it's safe to say that, for all of us, our sense of identity is deeply personal.
 - o When something that is central to our self-understanding feels like it's being threatened, it touches a nerve in us, and our reaction can be strong.
 - o That's why going through mental or physical illness is both difficult emotionally and physically – our bodies or our minds aren't working the way they used to – and it threatens our sense of self. "I feel like I don't know who I am anymore" is a common feeling when our bodies don't work the way they used to anymore.

- A person's first experience of disappointment with God can shake a person's identity, or a person's struggle with temptation and sin.
- Identity is deeply personal.

The way we form our identities is shaped by culture

- People have not always shaped their self-understanding the way that we do, which I find fascinating.
- I want to give credit to Tim Keller, because I'll be pulling a lot from his great discussions of identity formation (and he credits the work Christian philosopher Charles Taylor as well.)
- I'm so grateful for the good work of incredibly bright people that we get to benefit from!

Traditional Identity Formation

- Keller describes the way identity formation happened in traditional cultures:
- If you go back and look at traditional cultures, you find that people lived for honour. They developed their sense of self through fulfilling the roles established by them in society. For women this was often having a lot of children. For men it was to win in battles.
- In most cultures there was a sense of an absolute moral order, and the honorable thing was for you to deny your selfish desires to follow that moral order.
- If you fulfilled your societal role and followed the prescribed moral order, you received validation from your family your community. And this is how you got your sense of self.
- The validation of your identity came from outside yourself – from your family and community, from fulfillment of ones' duty.
- You can see many examples of this if you look at historic cultures. We're probably most familiar with biblical examples.
 - The stories of Rachel and Hannah are both stories of women experiencing social shame that is removed when they are finally able to birth a child.
 - David first wins the respect of the Israelites through his successes in battle.
- There are still cultures in our world today that function in this way (generally in more remote, non-western contexts).
- And sometimes we still get our sense of worth from traditional identity formation.

Over the last 500 years, though, western culture has slowly shifted away from this traditional identity formation, and a new way has emerged.

Post Modern Identity Formation

- The goal of our post-modern era has been to free the individual from an imposed identity. Think about what I just described in traditional identity formation. There is little or no space for individuality. Doing the honourable thing – what is best for your community – what is expected of you – is what gives you value and worth. That is an imposed identity.
- Post-modern identity formation is the attempt to live in a way that reflects not the outward expectations from society and culture, but the individuality of the person.
- And Dallas Willard affirms that this concern for the individuality of the person is legitimate: *"because God made us to be unique. There are no carbon copies for saints. Sinners – they're all the same, that's why you look at one dictator you've seen them all. Saints are utterly unique."*
- The concern for our post-modern society is for an identity that comes from the uniqueness of the person – not from their role and position in society, but from the essential person. It's the hunt for an **authentic** identity, an honest identity.
- And this hunt for an authentic identity has led us to approach identity formation in the following way:
- We find this authentic self by looking inward, by looking at our thoughts and, even more, at our emotions and desires. In fact, since there is no sacred order that defines goodness for us societally, our culture would say that goodness is found in our own desires, not in anything outside of ourselves.
 - The path forward towards fully living out our authentic identity therefore becomes the affirmation of our desires.
- Since our sense of self is bound up in our deepest desires, our self worth is dependent on giving dignity to and asserting those desires in spite of those around us.
 - We hold out our sense of self and say "hey, this is who I am, you need to respect who I am."

- So our role in identity formation is to look at our deepest desires to decide who we are, and to determine what is right and wrong. And then we move out of ourselves and call the culture to honour us, because that's who we are.
 - o Have you heard people talk about "my truth?" I think when people say that they're talking about their internally crafted sense of self.
- The narrative of culture is that:
 - o If we suppress our desires we will not be ourselves and will therefore not be happy or healthy
 - o But if we are true to those emotions and desires, we will be happy & healthy

One of the ways you can see this in our society is in the stories we tell. Look at the heroes in our movies. Most of the stories we tell are about people being heroic through discovering who they are and being who they are in spite of a lack of acceptance from their world.

A classic example is Elsa from Frozen (and yes, she is currently on the cover of my daughter's lunch box). When Elsa sings Let it Go! – Elsa escapes to the mountains, builds an ice palace, and sings about how she can't hold back her powers anymore. And why in this scene is she a hero? Why are we happy for her? She has abandoned her role as the leader of her people, and has blasted the country that she loves with eternal winter. But she's a hero, because she's made a first step towards embracing and accepting who she is. She is following our culture's process for learning who we are – we listen on the inside to our passions, our drives, our desires – and follow where they lead.

I'm not sure how much you can identify your own thinking in the process of identity formation I've described. But this kind of thinking shapes us, through the stories we watch, the social media we absorb, the culture we live in. If you begin to look for this internal creation of the self, you'll find it's everywhere.

Challenges with Post-Modern Identity Formation:

So what is it like to live with a post-modern identity? Well, it can be difficult:

Inconsistent

A Post modern identity is inconsistent. If an authentic identity and understanding of right and wrong is entirely based on your desires and feelings, then your identity is as inconsistent as those emotions. And our feelings can contradict with each other. Feelings I have today are certain to conflict with feelings I had five years ago, because I have changed. Five years ago I was convinced I'd homeschool my kids till my youngest was 18 – she's currently 7 and I now happily drive her to school each morning.

- We need something more stable than our own emotions to give us a sense of self.

Fragility

A post modern identity is fragile. The modern self is incredibly fragile, because only you get to decide if you're a good person or not. We are not meant to develop our sense of self in isolation, but in community. We need someone outside from ourselves to tell us that we are ok, because that's how God made us. And if we try to live without that word from the outside we end up with fragile identities. Charles Taylor talks about how this is why people in our society have a constant need for affirmation, why they are unable to cope with any level of disagreement, why any degree of disagreement is seen as an attack.

- Even when we try to develop an authentic identity that comes entirely from ourselves, we are constantly looking for someone beyond ourselves to tell us that we're ok – because that's how we were made.

Overwhelming

A post-modern identity is overwhelming. Traditional identity is all about fitting in and conforming to one's community. Our contemporary identities are all about standing out & being special—doing great things. All you have to do is to scroll through social media to see it. We live in a world where people feel a relentless compulsion to prove that they are unique – that they are special.

- Think about the phrase "I want to be someone." When someone says that, what they're really saying is that they want to stand out. It might be helpful to ask why we are only "someone" when we stand out? Didn't each of us become someone when we were conceived in our mother's womb?
- This drive to stand out and be special was the central focus of the fine arts department when I was working on my art minor in university. The pressure to always do something original, new, or unique was

relentless. In my early 20's I found it impossible navigate these expectations in the art community while still following Jesus. It's exhausting to constantly be unique.

Impossible

A post-modern identity ultimately isn't possible: Because it's impossible for us to create an entirely internal identity. Ultimately, every person is choosing from different possible identities based off the grid of acceptable options that they have received from their culture. Even if we do listen to our emotions – it's impossible to keep from being shaped by the world around us.

There are two reasons why a post-modern identity doesn't work:

1.) It doesn't take into account our human brokenness.

- No part of us is not affected by sin
- Our thoughts, emotions & desires, our bodies,
- If an entirely internal identity was to work, we would need to be able to trust that our emotions and desires were not broken How else can they be a guide for us to follow? Healthy respect for our emotions is so important, of course – our emotions are a gift that tells us how we're doing. We need to listen to them. But that does not make them a guide.
- And our capacity to understand our identity would require us to have a mind that isn't broken. And our minds are broken – easily deceived and confused – unable to see the whole picture.
- It is impossible for us to create an entirely internal sense of self if we are broken, sinful people.

- What I find so interesting is that our culture knows that we're sinful.

- As the great, contemporary philosopher, Taylor Swift says
- "it's me. Hi. I'm the problem, it's me." -Antihero
 - o This is the chorus on the top song of the top album of 2022 – there must be something here speaks to what people experience day in and day out.
 - o The song is a sustained reflection on how the problem she's fighting is her own self.
 - o It's almost like she's been reading Romans 7

2.) Doesn't take into account our design

- And I'm just going to touch on this, because Luke and Dave are going to be talking about this in the next two weeks:
- Our culture's system of looking inward for a sense of self cuts people off from what actually gives them a sense of identity – validation from God and from community.
- We were never designed to create our understanding of the world and our understanding of ourselves in isolation. We were meant to receive validation and worth from our creator. We were meant to receive affirmation from one another.

Today we've been focused on what doesn't work, which I can understand can be a bit discouraging. The hope in this is that as we recognize the ways we've been following the world's systems for identity formation, we can allow Jesus to show us a better way – a way that leads to a foundation for our lives that is strong and secure. And that's what we're going to talk about in the coming weeks.

Jesus wants our relationship with Him to shape every aspect of our self-understanding. He wants us to have a fully redeemed identity.

At the end of time, when we meet Jesus, we will be fully human, and we will be fully ourselves. It will no longer be a struggle to do what is right, because our understanding of who we are will be fully redeemed. Think of what it will be like to fully trust Jesus and the people we love – to never doubt that we are loveable and loved, Imagine what it will be look like to delight in doing what's right -- loving and serving others, what will it be like to be fully at peace with who we are. Think of what it will be like to be more fully your unique self than you have ever been.

Jesus wants to begin to give us this kind of redeemed identity now – it will never be complete until we see him face to face. But wow – I want as much of that kind of identity as I can right now. It's so much better than what I can build on my own.

DISCUSSION NOTES:

- What are some words you would use to describe who you are? Do you see them as positive, negative? If you see them as negative, would you like them to change?
- How do you see people shaping their identities in our culture?
- Most stories show the development of a person's sense of self. What stories (movies, books, tv, etc.) can you think of that reflect a traditional form of identity formation? What stories can you think of that reflect a post-modern form of identity formation?
- Think about Matthew 7:24-27. What do you think it means for you to build your identity on the rock, rather than on sand?
- What voices do you want to listen to, as you grow in your understanding of your identity?
- What questions do you have after this talk?

RESOURCES:

There are so many resources on the topic of identity formation? Here are two talks that I have found helpful:

Dallas Willard: Modern vs. Postmodern Holiness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzSeHsVmulc&t=2775s>

Tim Keller: Two Different Talks on Identity Formation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ehw87PqTwKw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GJTklg4cZs>