

November 5, 2017
John 8:31-36
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“Continuing the Work”

Good morning! If I were to ask you, “Who are you?” or, “Tell me about yourself,” what would you say? You are correct in assuming that is a rhetorical question -- I don’t expect you all to answer at once. If you’re smart, you might say That depends on who’s asking: and you’d be right. This doesn’t mean that we tell some people the truth about who we are, and other people untruths about who we are, but this is a question where context is pretty important:

If you’re interviewing for a job, you’re likely to describe yourself in terms of your education or work experience, or maybe your personality: “I’m very energetic and self-motivated.” If you’re struggling with relationships or emotional health and are meeting with a counselor, you might describe your family of origin, or talk about your marriage and how challenging that’s been. If you’re at Church of the Brethren Annual Conference and someone asks, “Who are you?” they are probably trying to figure out who you’re related to, and if they know members of your extended family. It’s good to be aware of the context you’re in, because although all these answers may be true, switching them up is not usually a good thing: if you go into a job interview and talk about how you and your husband fight all the time because your mother never understood you -- that’s probably not going to go well.

The gospels -- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John -- are the clearest look we get at the identity of Jesus. The writers come from different perspectives and are writing for different audiences: Matthew underscores Jesus’ identity as a Jewish rabbi, John is more of a mystic who writes about how Jesus’ identity will be revealed to those who believe. Mark does a clever thing in chapter 8 verses 27-33, when he has Jesus ask the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets--and Jesus asks more pointedly, “But who do you say that I am?” and Peter has the right answer, “You are the Messiah.” But in the very next verse, when Jesus begins to teach about his own suffering and death and Peter takes Jesus aside and says, “Hey, you might want to lighten up on the rejection and death stuff,” Jesus replies, “Get behind me, Satan!” Pretty strong stuff.

Our text from John, chapter 8 is part of the larger context of the people, the disciples and the Pharisees -- *especially* the Pharisees -- trying to figure out who Jesus is. The Pharisees aren’t merely curious, their authority is threatened by this man and his teaching. People in power who have their authority threatened can be really nasty, and the Pharisees are professional questioners: not lawyers in our Western sense of that word, but people who have been intensely trained in religious law to ask questions and pick out inconsistencies and weaknesses in the answers. They are trying to trap Jesus into an answer which is against the law, so they can bring him up before the authorities.

Inevitably, as the Pharisees and even the Jews who believe in Jesus are trying to figure out who he is, they ask questions which reveal things about who they are and what is important to them.

That’s the part of this text where we are in John 8:31, and the question I want us to consider this morning is not only “Who are we?” but specifically “Who are we in relation to Jesus?” I know that many of you identify yourselves as followers of Jesus: that doesn’t mean that’s your leading point in every “Tell me about yourself” moment. It might not come up in your job interview, unless you’re meeting with the search team to be the pastor of their church, and then it had better be part of the conversation. But I think it is well worth some effort to think about how being a follower of Jesus effects our identity in every part of our life. If you have parts of your life that don’t have anything to do with being a follower of Jesus Christ, that’s pretty important to consider, too. I remember a conversation I had with a work colleague years ago, who asked me, “Why can’t you just be like Jeff? He’s a Christian, but you’d never know it.” That comment wasn’t meant as a compliment to me, but I took it that way.

In John 8, Jesus is speaking to Jewish believers about how the truth will make them free. And they say, “we’re descendants of Abraham, we’ve never been slaves to anyone.” This is a very interesting statement, because of course, the Hebrew descendants of Abraham were enslaved by the Egyptians a thousand years before. The whole identity of the Jewish people is based on being chosen by God to be freed from slavery in Egypt and led into freedom in the promised land. Sometimes the things we assert with the most conviction: I can stop drinking any time I want; I don’t have an anger problem; we don’t have any secrets in our family say exactly the opposite about us. These Jews are so captivated by their special identity as descendants of Abraham, that it is keeping them from claiming their identity as children of God. They’re protecting their narrow identity as religious elite and have completely missed that they are children of the King, and that the Way to truth and freedom is right in front of them.

Here’s the recipe that Jesus gives for identity and life in John 8:31. “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” Now where have we heard about continuing the work of Jesus as it relates to our identity . . . [Slide 1] Maybe here, in this tagline from the Church of the Brethren: Continuing the work of Jesus: Peacefully, Simply, Together. Have any of you heard that before? You might even own a royal blue T-shirt –long sleeve, short sleeve, 50/50 or QuickDry that says Creekside on the front, and these words on the back.

This version is the work of calligrapher Timothy Botts from Whaton, IL. There are framed versions of this print in two places in our church. Can anybody tell me where they are? *The conference room and the Sr. High youth room* [Slide down] Of course, there’s more to being a disciple than what’s written on your T-shirt, or the artwork in your meeting room, but I hope these will serve as reminders for us. Our identity as disciples is not about our employment history, our family history, or our personality. Those things are part of who we are, but they don’t make us followers of Jesus. Our identity lies in how we continue the work of Jesus -- how our discipleship influences our employment, our families, and how we express discipleship with our own unique personalities and gifts. Each and every one of us has things that enslave us -- especially those who assert that they have it all figured out -- and each and every one of us can experience the

freedom and truth which come from Jesus Christ. Because we are all children of the King. When we know that we are loved by God and that our freedom is in Jesus Christ, then we can discover the work which we are being called to do.

You already heard this morning about the people at Creekside who have been called to continue the work of Jesus by teaching children, youth, or adults. You will have an opportunity immediately after this service to assemble in the Gathering Area and hear about other ministries of this congregation, and to ask leaders what they have done and what their vision is for the future. I think Congregational Business Meeting is kind of an unfortunate name -- first of all, because it's really long to say, but also because it reduces Continuing the work of Jesus to Doing Business. I know, there are things we need to do in regard to budgeting financial resources for the coming year, and people whom you will call into leadership and to represent our congregation at the district and national level. In my mind, these things are ministry, not business. Business is continuing our work; ministry is continuing the work of Jesus.

I hope you will join us for the conversation following worship. Members, not-yet members, friends, you are all welcome. We all serve the same God and follow the one Christ and enjoy the same fellowship of believers. And we all have work to do -- but it's work that is not for our sake alone, it is planning for the kingdom of God and how this congregation in this place is claiming a vision for proclaiming the truth and freedom of Jesus Christ. I hope we can continue the work of Jesus peacefully, simply, together. Amen!