

Who Am I?

Discovering Our True Identity

Acts 17

Introduction

Good Morning! I'm so glad to see all of you here today. I've had many conversations as this day has approached and it has been very clear to me that this idea of Identity and answering the question "Who am I?" is very important to many of you. As 21st Century Women, we have many differing perspectives about what it means to be a woman and how that influences the ways we live, the relationships we are in, and even the ways we worship.

I've actually been thinking about identity since I was quite young. I vividly remember staring at my face in the mirror when I was younger and saying my name over and over again, Pam Barber, Pam Barber and asking What does that mean? Who is Pam Barber?

Yeah I know weird. Believe me that's not the worst of it. Imagine an awkward 12 year old, who liked to pretend that her Ronald McDonald watch was a walky-talky that could communicate with her best friend through walls and doors, trying to figure out who she was, why she existed, and what really mattered in life. Kinda scary.

But believe me I wasn't alone. I know for many of the high-schoolers here, you can probably relate. Okay maybe not the Ronald McDonald watch thing, but certainly to the idea of trying to figure out who you are and why it matters, right?

In fact, the issue of Identity is quite a hot topic right now. Gender and sexual identity are being discussed in every news cycle and new terms are being coined for how individuals are choosing to identify themselves in these areas: feminists, cisgender, transgender, gender fluid, non-binary, pansexual, skoliosexual. All these terms give us a glimpse at how individuals view themselves in the area of gender and sexuality, but there are myriad ways we could express to the world who we think we are at our core.

For many of us, our "racial" or ethnic background is the most important aspect of how we view ourselves or how we want to be known by others. For others, the very fact that we are female defines the primary way we view ourselves and our world.

Our stage in life can often dominate our identity and we can find ourselves defined as married or single or a widow or a high school or college student. Perhaps being a mom with young kids or a mom of teenagers or a mom of adult kids might be central to who you think you are. Maybe NOT being a mom defines you in some way.

Have you ever filled out a form asking for your hobbies and you can't remember one of them because you haven't had time for a hobby since the kids came along or since you took that new

job or since you began caring for your aging parents or since you lost your spouse? If so, there's a good chance you are finding part of your identity in that particular stage of life you are in.

Maybe your career defines you the most and you want to be seen and known as a successful woman in whatever field you are in. Sometimes our personality traits can be what we look to for our identity: the nice girl everyone wants to be friends with, the smartest woman in the room, the competitive woman who always wants to win, or the funny one who always has something to make you laugh.

Some of us find our identity in our psychiatric diagnosis or personal difficulties: I am one who struggles with depression, anxiety, bi-polar disorder. I am a cancer survivor or I am a divorced woman. I'm a parent of an autistic child or a child with ADHD.

Others of us find our sense of worth or personhood in the causes we support and the ideals we fight for.

Defining Identity

I could go on and on, because we can seek to find our identity in just about anything. So does that mean that Identity can be shaped and changed and chosen? Is our identity rooted in something permanent or is it pliable and moldable, changeable as our life experiences change?

The question "Who am I?" has been around since the beginning of time. Greek philosophers have addressed it. Modern psychologists have written volumes about Identity Formation. Even Instagram and our social media presence can be used to answer the question of "Who am I?" as we seek to curate a particular perspective of ourselves that we want others to see.

Many psychologists agree that identity can be defined as "the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks, expressions that make up a person."

James Weinrich, a prominent American psychologist specializing in sexuality, says, "A person's identity is the totality of one's self-construal in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future."

Erik Erikson, perhaps the earliest psychologist to study identity, separates identity into three parts: the ego identity, the personal identity and the social identity. The ego identity includes that continuity of self Weinrich mentions. Who I am today is shaped by who I was before today and who I will become. Our values given to us by our family of origin and the subculture we grew up in shape this part of our identity.

The personal identity is simply all the particular nuances and idiosyncrasies that separate you from another person. I'm Pam Larison: I like chicken salad and Billy Joel, I'm loud and obnoxious at parties, I can stick my entire fist in my mouth, and I will pick cat hair off my carpet with my fingers for 10 minutes because I sweat too much when I use the vacuum cleaner. That is my personal identity.

The social identity Erikson describes is the sum or culmination of all the social roles that a person might play: teacher, mother, daughter, aunt, police officer, wife, congresswoman, youth group leader, student, garden club president, hospitality coordinator for the Women's Seminar, athlete, dancer, actress, barista, church choir member.

So according to these perspectives, we are the sum of all the things we do and have done and want to do in the future. That's why Erikson and others encourage exploration to find out who one really is. We are to seek to understand all our personal potential and then, by trial and error and being exposed to various experiences, we are to choose our purpose in life and find opportunities to live that out fully.

In essence, individuals must figure out who they are by looking at themselves and their experiences and formulating a life's purpose from that information. As if we are each just blank slates ready to be filled up. What a daunting task!

With so many ideas and perspectives and desires and talents and roles each person has, how is anyone supposed to figure out just who they are supposed to be? And how do you know if you got it right? What if we miss out on what would truly ignite our passions and satisfy our inner longings?

If we are responsible to discover, develop and grow our identity, what a tremendous weight we bear. It's like a mystery that needs to be discovered but we don't really know how so we try experience after experience to find meaning and purpose in our lives and just hope we hit on something good. It's a crapshoot.

What if I'm physically or mentally unable to investigate the wide array of experiences that are out there. Am I limited in my ability to define my identity? Would identity just be a reflection of socioeconomic status because those who are wealthy and among the socially elite have more opportunities to discover their true selves? That doesn't seem quite right does it?

No it doesn't. In fact, if we are honest, there is something inside us that tells us that we are so much more than any of these defining characteristics can express.

Just look at the laundry list of things that we choose to identify by. Do any of these areas of life, ways of identifying ourselves, actually incorporate, include and describe all that we truly are? Aren't we much more complex and beautiful than simply our stage of life or our current job choice or a few of our personality traits?

The Biblical Perspective

The Bible would say "Yes"! We are so much more than a collection of ideas, social roles or sexual longings. In fact, God's Word gives us a unique and powerful perspective about our identity and our purpose in life that counters both Modern and Traditional perspectives on identity.

Tim Keller has a helpful series on Identity that lays out these two differing models for how Identity is formed and then compares and contrasts those paradigms with a Gospel Identity that is rooted in the Scriptures and in the Person of Jesus Christ.

He starts with a simple and accessible definition of identity by saying that “identity is a sense of self and a sense of worth that is rooted in whatever we trust most deeply and fundamentally and from which we find our value.”

We don’t have time to dig deeply into the Modern and Traditional models of Identity, but suffice it to say that the Traditional model focuses on duties and obligations that individuals must perform while the Modern paradigm looks inward and determines one’s identity based on how one feels or what one decides is personally best.

Traditionalists find their significance and worth outside themselves and look to society to validate who they are. They seek to please others and serve others in society. Identity is found in sacrificing one’s desires for the benefit of the community. Moderns on the other hand will seek to find their value internally by evaluating their own personal feelings and desires and then requiring society to embrace and accept those desires.

Both paradigms are rooted in the idea that Identity is something you can create, determine, achieve. Whether through hard work and sacrifice in serving the community and living up to the society’s perspective of right and wrong, or through self-investigation and personal experience requiring the approval of others, both perspectives require the individual to achieve their self-worth on their own. The individual herself is the source of her identity and she is responsible for finding purpose in life.

Over against these models we have God’s view of identity as expressed in the Bible. This perspective is unique in that a Gospel identity is not “achieved, but received,” as Keller would put it. Our identity is not found by looking inside ourselves nor by looking to our society and culture to define who we are. The Bible says that God is the giver of human identity and He has determined how we are to view ourselves.

Christianity asserts that we are not here by chance. We are not responsible to figure out our life’s purpose by looking into ourselves. We find out WHO we are when we realize WHOSE we are.

Psychology can’t speak authoritatively in my life. Society can’t tell me who I am. Even Christian tradition can’t define me. None of these were there when I was created. Only The Lord can define who I am and why I exist, because he is the one who designed me.

God’s Overarching Authority

The apostle Paul expresses God’s Overarching Authority clearly and helpfully in Acts 17 as he is addressing a group of philosophers and thinkers in the city of Athens. Let’s look at this passage together and see what it tells us about who we are and what we’ve been created for.

Read Act 17:22-29

Paul starts from the very beginning in Genesis and shows the continuity of the Gospel. He shows the Big Picture of Humanity's purpose and hope. Although he is speaking to an ancient group of pagans who worshipped idols they had made to look like themselves, his words ring true for the modern listener who seeks to find their identity by looking into themselves.

Without shame, Paul begins by saying that the God who made all things is Lord of heaven and earth. The word Lord here is the Greek word "kyrios". It refers to God as the Sovereign Ruler of all. It's important to note that this word "kyrios" is the same word that is used in the Septuagint for Yahweh, or the personal name of God. The Septuagint was the Greek Translation of the Old Testament and would be the only Scriptures that Greek speakers would be able to understand. The fact the Kyrios is used for Yahweh indicates that the Lord in this passage is the Great creator God, the source of all things. He is the great "I am" or self-existent one.

Kyrios does not need anyone or anything because he has all that he needs within Himself. Everything in our world has come from him. Everything we know has a beginning and an end but not Yahweh kyrios. He is the source of everyone's beginning and He will never end.

The True God stands out against the Greek gods that the people of Athens were worshipping. Unlike the lifeless stone images that were kept in temples and cared for by humans, the Lord God's temple is the universe, the heavens. He needs nothing from anyone because He owns it all. He doesn't need to be picked up and dusted off from time to time. He inhabits the heavens.

Without Yahweh, Mankind is doomed to destruction. Our very breath is from him. In Genesis it says that God breathed the breath of life into Adam and the man become a living creature. Everything of value and worth in our lives is gift from this Creator God. He is the source of everything humans need for life and happiness.

Colossians 1

We get an amazing and more specific picture of God's Authority as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe in Colossians 1. It says this,

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And He is before all things and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might have preeminence (have the supremacy). For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by his blood."

First we see that Jesus is God made visible. He is the full expression of God in human flesh. When you look at Jesus you see God in human form and He is the "firstborn" of all creation.

This identifies Jesus as the one who receives the inheritance and who has Authority over His Father's world.

Notice that Jesus is described as the one through whom God made the world and as the one to whom all creation must submit. He has authority over the spiritual forces of evil and every ruler or authority that has ever existed has received its authority from him. Jesus is the ultimate authority in our lives because He is the Creator God.

As architect and designer of the universe, Jesus owns all of creation and His purposes for His design are the only ones that matter because he is the only one who knows what those purposes are. And one of the purposes of God is that all of creation was made FOR Jesus.

In Matthew 28, Jesus says "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." Did you hear that? Jesus has ALL authority in all the world. Over the spiritual realm and the physical realm. In all ways and at all times, Jesus rules in love and mercy and kindness.

That's what we see back in Act 17 as well. Paul says that He made "from one Man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth having allotted the periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place."

The word translated "nation" here is the Greek word "ethnos". This verse is making the assertion that God did not just make human individuals but he also designed the ethnic groups in which we belong. And He has placed each of these ethnic groups just where he desired them to be on the earth and at what particular time in history he desired, so that all Mankind being One Human Race would all play a unique apart in the History of God's World.

As cheesy as this may sound, Paul is saying that all of History really is HIS Story. And Jesus is not just the King of the Jews or the God of America. He is God over every nation, tribe and tongue. He is God over all people and places and times. Jesus reigns and is ruler over every people group on the earth whether in South America, China, or Iran. Jesus has authority over All.

Authority

Regardless of what modern thought may say, we are not our own. We are God's. He has designed us purposefully and with great care. And since we have been created, our Creator is the one who gets to decide who we are and what we are here for.

He has the power and right to order His world in the way He desires. The Scriptures claim that Jesus is the ruler of all the world and as such He has Authority over all things that He has created...humans included. What He speaks is the last word because he is literally the only Word that matters.

Now for some of us this idea of authority ruffles your feathers and unsettles you. We live in a culture and society that worships freedom and often resents authority. We are very independent and don't want anyone telling us how to live our lives.

Some of us may struggle with the idea of authority because we have had people in our lives who have abused their authority and have hurt us immensely as a result.

But when we consider Christ's authority, we need to keep in mind that God's character shapes how he exercises His authority.

In Exodus 34, Moses asks to see God's glory because he wants just a glimpse of the One he's come to love and adore. And when God graciously reveals Himself to Moses, this is how He describes Himself.

"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty."

The authority that God has over His creation is rooted in His immense love, patience, grace, forgiveness and justice. God always does what is best and right in every situation, so His Authority can be trusted.

"Firstborn from the dead"

The culmination of Christ's authority is in the fact that he is not only the firstborn over all creation, he is also firstborn from the dead! He is the first to conquer death and therefore, Paul says in Colossians, He is preeminent.

This means that Jesus surpasses all others. As John Piper puts it, He is the Being of Ultimate Worth. He has paramount rank, dignity and importance because he is the one who has defeated death and opened the way for God and Man to be reconciled in peace. His brutal and unjust death on a Roman cross and subsequent resurrection from the dead are the means by which God can fully forgive the sin of mankind, because the necessary punishment for human sin has been paid.

God has made a spiritual transaction in the death of Christ in that He placed all His just anger on His Son as HE was dying so that sin would not be overlooked, but atoned for...cleansed. For all those who trust God and what He has done through Jesus, God has provided eternal life and peace.

Jesus is the Maker, Sustainer and Redeemer of all things. He is truly the Supreme Lord of all.

So What?

So what does that have to do with our identity and purpose in Life? Well whenever we try to define who we are or cultivate our own identity and purposes in life without reference to Christ, we are making ourselves and our views primary, preeminent. We miss the important truth that Jesus is our Maker individually and collectively and He has a plan and purpose for our lives. So ultimately we must find our Identity IN Christ Himself.

He has “knitted us together in our mother’s womb” as David says in Psalm 139. Carefully and intimately Jesus has designed who we are to be as humans and as individuals, so He gets to say where our value and worth come from, what our identity is and what our purpose in life must be.

And what is beautiful is that Jesus has not left us to ourselves to figure out our purpose and identity. He doesn’t want us to fumble around trying experience after experience and idea after idea to kinda guess who we truly are. No, he clearly tells us who we are and what we were made for right here in Acts 17 and all throughout the Bible.

Authority of the Bible

In fact, the Bible is God’s very Word to us. It’s called the Word of Truth because all God says is true and worthy of our hearing. In the Scriptures, God reveals Himself and all that He desires for Mankind. Psalm 138:2 proclaims that the Lord has exalted above ALL things His name (or Himself) and His Word. What He says has the same Authority as Who He is.

Hebrews 1:1 says, “Long ago at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son whom he appointed heir of all things.”

Both the words of the prophets that we have here recorded in Scripture and Jesus Himself bear the full weight of God’s Authority because Jesus is God and The Bible Is His word.

So what does Jesus and His Word have to say about our identity and purpose in life?

Seek, Feel, and Find

Notice verse 27. It is the apex of this passage. Paul is saying that all God has done in Creation and orchestrating the where and when of Mankind has been for one purpose, and that purpose is “so that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him or reach out for him and find him.”

Did you catch that? God’s purpose, His intent, the whole Big Idea in creating mankind was so that we might seek Him and find Him! The Being of Ultimate Worth and Beauty and Truth and Love and Peace wants to be found! He’s not hiding. In fact, it says that he is actually not far from each of us.

This means that God has determined that the highest goal of the human heart should be to seek after him. He wants to be known and loved. He wants to share all that he is as the source of all life, and peace, and joy and contentment and beauty and intelligence. The Lord of all want us to see that there is nothing in all the world, no matter where we’ve been placed in it, that could compare to Him. And that IN Him we have deep and lasting significance and our lives have an eternal purpose that will never change.

We will never be able to discover all the amazing realities of this infinite God. We will have to spend all of eternity seeking Him just to experience some of the goodness that He contains.

This is beautiful to consider. We will spend the bulk of our next session looking at all that it means to be made in God's image, but just note here that one of the ways God has designed us to be like Himself is in the fact that we are relational beings. We've been fashioned in such a way that we CAN and MUST be in relationship with others. And primarily we were made for relationship with the Creator Himself.

We are not the products of random chance or impersonal forces. We are not purposeless wanderers. Rather we are the creative handiwork of the Master Artist who wants to shower us with His love and beauty and goodness.

God has initiated a beautiful journey of discovery for each one of us. But it's not a journey of self-discovery. We are NOT on a path to find the best version of ourselves or to delve the limited depths of our own hearts.

Our life's journey is to seek, reach out and find the One True God who is kind and compassionate and abounding in steadfast love. He is nearer than we know. He is omnipresent, everywhere present. There is no place in which he cannot be found.

Again in Psalm 139 David says,

"Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol you are there? If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me."

We may not be overwhelmed by His presence at every moment like when He parted the Red Sea or when Jesus walked on water and calmed the raging sea with a word. But he is nonetheless near.

This isn't an ideology or philosophical musing. God wants friendship, an intimate connection with each one of us. He is a Father wanting to show love and kindness to His child. God is a personal God who is close to individual people.

In fact, all of human history has been God making Himself known, revealing His nature in creation, through His covenant commitment to the nation of Israel, and ultimately in His Son Jesus.

But it's interesting to note that Paul doesn't mention any of these things as the reasons the God is near to us. Paul says that God is near to each one of us because He is the very means of our daily survival.

"In Him we live and move and have our being."

Whether we acknowledge it or not, Jesus is sustaining us each moment we are alive. If He took his hand off us for a moment we'd be destroyed. He is sovereign over every day, breath and beat of our hearts. And every minute he gives, the number of which only He knows, is a merciful opportunity for us to seek, reach out and find Him.

Paul reminds us that because we are God's offspring, he continues to be near to us. He loves us like a Father loves his child, because we are his children. With tenderness and compassion and wisdom, God the Father is protecting us and guiding us and pointing us toward truth, toward Himself, toward Jesus.

And it's through reaching out to Jesus that we can sense God's nearness. He wants to be found!

And when we have sought the Lord and reached to find God, we will be astonished to find that He is life to us and our true identity is found in being His creation and his child.

This is what it means to find our identity in Christ or in God. And that is exactly what we will talk about in the next session. What does it mean to be God's creation and to find my entire worth and life's purpose in Him? How are we uniquely created by and for God? And what does it look like to be His child?

Not all of those God created has become His children. So how do we become His child and live out the true identity He has given us?

Great questions to consider during our break!