

IDENTITY: CRISIS OR CONFIRMATION?

ISAIAH 6:1-8 (9-13); LUKE 5:1-11

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THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I remember the men's room graffiti I saw visiting Yale Divinity School for the first time:

“to be is to do,” – Shakespeare

“to do is to be,” – Sartre

“do be, do be, do,” – Sinatra

Is our being wholly defined by our doing? This is a problem in our society. Mostly for men. We tend to define ourselves by what we do. Sometimes my wife helps me focus on this. She says ‘wouldn't you rather be a human being than a human doing’?

Today's stories from Isaiah and Luke deal with identity. The prophet Isaiah encountering the Lord in a holy vision is overwhelmed with God's power and majesty. ‘Woe is me, I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips,’ says Isaiah. This is a story of transformation.

Sometimes it takes encountering someone or someplace radically different from ourselves to get some insight into who we really are. I'll never forget attending an African American worship service in a small, jam-packed rural church in southern Georgia. My friend and I were the only white people in the room. I was suddenly conscious of my skin color and cultural identity in a new way.

Isaiah in God's presence, in the midst of holy power and goodness, is suddenly aware of his mortality and limitations in a new way. One of the seraphs flies to Isaiah and touches his lips with a burning coal. Isaiah is cleansed, not just cleansed but transformed. The act of cleansing not only makes Isaiah whole it releases in Isaiah a new power. Power to hear God's speech. Power to speak for God to the people. Isaiah becomes a new person after encountering God.

I want to talk today about identity. Who are you? Who am I? Who are we as a community of faith? Based on this story from Isaiah we can conclude that who we are has everything to do with our relationship to God.

One of the Big Hairy Audacious Goals submitted last week on the blank page in the bulletin got right to this point. What it said was, ‘I am not opposed to finding a special project in our community. But before we define ourselves by what we do don't you think we need to know who we are in our hearts?’

I think this person was getting at something like Isaiah experienced in today's story. Not just who we are in the sense of age, address and employment. Not just who we are in terms of our activity. But who are we at our core? What is the condition of our souls? Have we faced ourselves as deeply as Isaiah faced himself? If we are not really in touch with the condition of our souls and the state of our being then we will be hard pressed to figure out who we need to be and what we need to do for our community.

We touched on this at the men's retreat the past two days at Chautauqua. We said the first step, or a first step, in building a stronger prayer life, is vulnerability.

We talked about the armor we wear – especially as men. The defense mechanisms we use to keep the world from knowing who we really are. To keep our deepest, most personal feelings from showing, from revealing any weakness.

How can a person with a lot of emotional or intellectual armor pray to God? We have to peel away those layers of defense and protection that keep others and ourselves from seeing us as we really are. God already knows who we are. The 139th Psalm is a wonderful statement about how God knows every part of us. Has the hairs on our heads numbered. Knows us better than we know ourselves. But sometimes we are in the dark about the condition of our own souls or the state of our own being.

Back in the 18th century the philosopher Rene Descartes used the tools of reason to figure everything out including personal identity. He said our approach to life must begin in doubt. We must first doubt that a thing exists and then prove its existence by reason.

Trying to establish his own existence, Descartes asked, “how do I know that I exist?” Here's how, “I think, therefore, I am.” *Cognito ergo sum* – were the famous words in Latin. In other words, it was the act of thinking that established basic human identity according to Descartes. At one level maybe he was right.

But in another sense, I believe that Descartes was only scratching the surface of human existence when he said, “I think, therefore, I am.” The wonder and mystery of a human being goes far beyond mere reason.

The story from Luke today suggests there is more to life. Peter after meeting Jesus and Isaiah after seeing the Lord on his throne have something in common. They are suddenly aware of their own failings and flaws as a human being.

Peter, sees in Jesus' guidance about where to catch the fish a more than human power at work. His confession to Jesus sounds like Isaiah's confession to God, “Go away from me for I am a sinful man.” But Jesus says, “do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people.”

Just as God gave Isaiah a new identity after Isaiah's deep self-awareness, Jesus gives Peter a new identity. He was a fisherman. Now he becomes a fisher of men and women. He was self-employed. Now God employs Peter to accomplish something bigger than he had ever dreamed possible.

I said earlier that our identity has everything to do with our relationship to God. That is the message of both of these stories. It is a message that speaks to the very core of what many of us are searching for and what we want in life.

There is a wonderful little book entitled, *Shouting At The Sky*. It was written a few years ago by an award winning nature writer who spent three months in Utah with a wilderness school for teenagers.

The author said many of these teenagers come to the school not really having a clue about who they are. They have lied and been lied to. They have manipulated the system and the system has manipulated them. The legal system, the school system, the social systems of their lives.

So when they get out here under the great arching sky or in the midst of a hot desert there is nothing but total honesty. Everything is very clear. When it rains it rains whether or not you had enough patience and discipline to prepare your tent or not.

The boundaries are visible and clear. There is no deception in Mother Nature. What you see is what you get. These kids learn to respect that, says Gary Ferguson. They take stock of themselves in new ways. Discover who they are. When they deal honestly with the world around them they discover resources they'd forgotten they had. They discover parts of themselves they didn't even know existed.

The world is often not so honest. We live in a consumer culture that operates often by profit motives and deception. Buy this product and your life will be transformed. We wish that it were true. We know it is not true. Nevertheless, broken and lonely, sinful that we are – Isaiah and Peter would say – we buy products we don't need and hope our lives will get better.

So what have we been saying this morning? First, that our relationship to God is the defining factor in our lives. The more alive and intimate this relationship, the more God defines who we are. Both Scripture readings today say discovering God's identity and purpose for us begins when a person or a community encounters God.

Secondly, we are saying that the mystery and wonder of a human personality goes far beyond reason, goes far beyond the external definitions of our lives. It has to do with the condition of our souls. And God is the one who cures and heals and cleanses souls. Deep peace and meaning in life comes from the transformation of our souls, like it did for Isaiah and Peter.

Thirdly, we are saying that when you discover who you are as a child of God, when your soul has been healed, transformed then you are equipped to go into the world to be God's representative. Like Isaiah you are suddenly alert to God's voice leading you. Like Peter God reveals work for you to accomplish that is bigger than anything you ever imagined.

All of this is possible because God is unchanging though we live in a world that is forever changing. God is true and honest and trustworthy even though we live in a world that deceives and distracts us.

Many years ago a friend of our family invited me and our sons to go fly-fishing in the Pocono Mountains. I had been fishing at this beautiful location several times before but never with our boys. Fishing can be a challenging experience. Fly-fishing – for a ten year old – can be down right frustrating.

So our friend suggested I take our youngest, he would take the oldest of our sons. He suggested we go to one of the best spots on the stream. I took up my position, Douglas took up his thirty yards away. About twenty minutes later I noticed Doug was getting a little impatient. No luck. Not even a bite. I knew what the problem was. He hadn't cast his line out far enough into the riffle that fed the pool – where the trout lay waiting for easy pickings on the surface of the water. So I told him to take five steps forward – with his waders on – into the stream, then cast.

Which he did. It was a good cast. The fly hit the water. As he stripped it back “whamo!” His first fish on a fly...a nice big brook trout.

Douglas was so surprised I think he had convinced himself there were no fish in that pool. It is a moment I will never forget. Watching him pull that fish in then land it. Then stand proudly before my camera for a photo with his catch.

I think that is what happened to Peter that day he was out fishing. When Jesus told him to try the other side of the boat and he hit a school of fish I would have given anything to see the expression on his face. The joy. The laughter. The gratitude.

But deeper than all that, like Isaiah before the throne of God, Peter felt himself in the presence of the Holy One of Israel. I picture him raising his eyes. Looking to Jesus who was smiling with pleasure and delight from the other end of the boat as it bobbed in the water.

And deep in Peter’s heart he knew his destiny was with this man. He knew this was the beginning of a relationship that would change the course of his life. A relationship that would bestow deep healing and joy and peace.

If we listen to the world to see who we are or who we should be we will get confusing and deceptive signals.

If we listen to Jesus – especially at those frustrating, disappointing painful times in our lives – we will get straight answers, solid guidance, and then find our destiny and purpose in life.

We will find ourselves enlisted in God’s larger mission for the planet: to bring others to him so that their souls may be made whole and well. So that they too can join in the search for all who are lost but long to be found. Amen.