

Three weeks ago I began a preaching series entitled, *Reasons To Believe*. My intention has been to bring two very different worldviews—Secular and Christian—into conversation with one another.

I opened my first sermon with a quote from well-known atheist, Richard Dawkins. He writes, “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is the belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.”

If Richard were here this morning, for a debate, his statement on faith—which sounds quite devastating—would need to be pulled apart and examined. Is faith the absence of thinking? Is faith, as he suggests, a vague sentiment, a feeling, a wish, about the way we want things to be? Or is faith something more?

And what about evidence? What kind of evidence does he consider valid? And why? Does he elevate certain data because it fits with his conclusions, and ignore the data that undermines his own cause?

Christianity has always been understood to be a thinking person’s religion, which is to say, it can be examined; it does hold up to scrutiny. Now that’s not to say that Christians worldview explains everything in detail; we must freely admit that there are things that we do not know, and perhaps, may not ever know. But...there are reasons to believe, and there is evidence—upon which—we can stake our faith.

The questions I have been asking are these: *How does a secular age, understand the complexity of human need and longing? And, does a secular worldview offer a better explanation of these realities than a Christian one?*

Two weeks ago I talked about the human longing for meaning and satisfaction; last week I contrasted a secular understanding of freedom with a Christian one—this week I want to turn our attention to the issue of **Identity**. *Who am I? Who are you? And why does it matter so much to us?*

In a wonderful little book, entitled, *The Gift Of Being Yourself*, David Benner makes the following observation: “In all of creation, identity is a challenge only for humans. A tulip knows exactly what it is. It is never tempted by false ways of being. Nor does it face complicated decisions in the process of becoming. So what is with the dogs, rocks, trees, stars, amoebas, electrons and all other things...Humans, however, encounter a more challenging existence. We think. We consider options. We decide. We act. We doubt. Simple being is tremendously difficult to achieve...Body and soul contains thousands of possibilities out of which you can build many identities.”¹

Christian spirituality has at least one thing in common with modern Secularism—they both have a lot to say about identity. That being said, both the starting place and the final conclusions are radically different.

¹ David G. Benner, *The Gift Of Being Yourself*, 14.

Tim Keller suggests that there are essentially three different paths one can travel when it comes to understanding identity: we can travel *outward*, *inward*, or *upward*.² Most people tend to draw primarily from one of these paths, but they are not mutually exclusive. As I describe these paths, pay attention to which path has been primary for you—you may be surprised.

(1) Looking Outward is certainly prevalent among individuals who live in communal cultures. Who they are, in many respects, has been decided for them before they were even born.

Here, identity is connected in large part to family, to one's standing in the community, to duty, and role. Individuals tend to follow in the vocation of their parents, they marry people who have been known to their extended family for years; they live in the same home, or on the same street.

While my description of this *outward* path might seem to apply elsewhere, it is alive and well here in the West. Just ask the big, strong, guy, who's playing on the football team and he doesn't even like football. He's an intellectual who likes to work with ideas, or an artist who loves to draw and paint, but he's playing football because he's been told that's what big, strong, guys do. We see this *outward* path at play when a daughter *has to go to UBC* because that's where her mother or father went.

We see it at play in Prince Harry and Megan Markle. At birth, Harry was given an identity—His Royal Highness, the Duke of Sussex—and along with the title, there came a host of expectations and

responsibilities. When Megan married Harry, she became a part of this world. These days the Duke and Duchess are looking to extricate themselves from these identities, in favour of ones more to *their* choosing.

Some reject this *outward* path of identity because it feels suffocating. There's no room for uniqueness of personality, gifts, or desire, personal choice is held captive to the expectations of family or tribe.

(2) Looking Inward is altogether different; identity is primarily understood as something we create, not something we receive. Now this way of thinking didn't materialize out of thin air, so to speak, its foundation lies in prior intellectual commitments. It rejects the notion that identity is found primarily in relationship to other people; it also rejects the notion that identity is found in relation to God.

There is a philosophy at play in our culture at the moment, one in keeping with this *inward* approach to identity creation. *Essentialism* is the belief that all things—and by implication, all people—have a set of characteristics which make them what they are. The task, then—of the scientist, philosopher, and individual—is one of discovery and expression.

And so, the journey of self-discovery becomes a matter of highest importance. If no one can tell you who you are, then you've got to figure it out on your own, and fast, before you make a mess of things, or, dither your life away. There's a lot of pressure on this *inward* path.

² Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*, 133-134.

If I could summarize the anthem of **Essentialism** in one phrase, it would be this: *What I feel is what's real, about me, and, the world.* The implication of this philosophy is as follows: “We should be free to act in congruence with our own feelings. This is our right. In fact, it is morally wrong to act in opposition to what we feel—to do so is a denial of our true selves.”

What I feel is what's real about me, and, the world. This is the ultimate statement of autonomous self-creation. It's completely unworkable, of course; I'm not that powerful, and neither are you. As much as I might *feel*, and insist, that I'm a 6'8", African-American, NBA all-star, in reality, I'm a 5'9", white guy, who can't dunk. In this regard, what I *feel* is disconnected from what is *real*.

David Benner suggests that most people “try on identities like clothing, looking for a style of being that fits” who they are, or, who they want to be.³ When describing identity, one of the easiest places to begin is with what we like, or do. For example, I like to be outside—I always have—swimming, hiking, running. Whether I'm running on the roads, or traversing the trails, my running jacket keeps me dry. It's just a jacket, but it says something about who I am.

I've played the game of soccer since I was a young boy, but when my own son (Luke) began to play, I began to coach. Over the years I've coached hundreds of players: breaking down skills and positions, teaching game sense and strategy. And because our winters tend to be cold and wet, I've spent thousands of hours wearing this jacket. Not

only is this jacket warm and comfortable, it says something about who am I am—when I wear it, people call me Coach.

Now, this suit jacket isn't something I wear very often—only weddings and funerals—but in one respect, it represents the work I do as a pastor. Apart from the hours I spend sleeping, I spend more hours each week working, than I spend doing any other thing. My work doesn't define me—I'm not my job—but it both expresses my identity, and shapes it; the same is true for many of us.

So who am I? A runner, a Coach, a Pastor? Yes, of course, but can our identity be limited to our activities, roles, or job? If I were to suffer a stroke, or sustain a back injury that prevented me from running or coaching again, would I cease to be me? The day will come when I will retire and no one will call me Pastor anymore; when that day comes, will my identity diminish?

This is the problems with the first two paths for determining identity; they are both time-sensitive and fragile. Tim Keller writes, “The modern self is crushing. It must base itself on success or achievement or some human love relationship, and if any of these things is jeopardized or lost, you lose your very identity”.⁴

If we build our identity on achievement, we are crushed when someone achieves more. If we think of ourselves as a singer, artist, or athlete, but we don't get the call back, land the commission, or sign

³ Benner, 15.

⁴ Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*, 134.

professional contract, we experience identity confusion—*if I'm not this, I don't know who am I am.*

When our identity becomes dependant on certain human relationships, we find ourselves in the same danger. Keller rightly states that no one can affirm themselves; a word of blessing must come from the outside. But from whom? Our parents? What if they don't bless us? And even if they do, their blessing is time-sensitive; chance are, we will outlive them—what then? We can build an identity around a friend, but what if they move away? Around a spouse, but what if they walk out?

When we place our identity in the hands of something that can be lost—like our skill or reputation—or in a person we can lose—through death, divorce, or relocation—our sense of self will remain insecure. And so, our identity needs to be rooted in something or Someone that isn't subject to loss or change.

(3) Looking Upward: There is a third option to take when it comes to understanding identity. The primary gaze on this path is neither outward or inward, but *upward*. Only the God who created us can tell us who we are, and so, as we align our self to God, we discover our true identity.

But identity is both a gift—*something we receive*—and a process—*something that we grow into*. This is true of all human beings; it was even true of Jesus. Yes, Jesus was born with an identity and calling, but like the rest of us, He walked a path of growth and discovery. His path involved looking *outward*—to family, neighbours, and teachers; looking *inward*—to discover His unique gifts; and looking *upward* to His Father in heaven.

Let's take a closer look at Jesus, beginning with His parents. On the whole, we know very little about Mary and Joseph. What we do know is that when God approached Mary, and later Joseph, revealing His plan—Mary would become pregnant through divine means, and the child born to her would be the Son of God; Mary and Joseph responded in faith and surrender.

Every child learns by example. By watching His parents, Jesus learned that God is trustworthy; over time, Jesus learned to trust God Himself.

As Jesus got older, He would have heard the stories surrounding his birth: His mother's miraculous pregnancy, the angelic choir, the guiding star, and Wise Men bringing costly gifts. These stories were key to Jesus' developing sense of identity.

Luke 2:41-52, recounts Jesus' visit to Jerusalem, at age 12. Every year Jesus and His extended family of uncles, aunts, and cousins travelled from Nazareth to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Festival. Picking up the story in vs. 43,

“43 After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. 44 Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated

us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”

49 *“Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”* **50** *But they did not understand what he was saying to them.* **51** *Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.* **52** *And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.”*

It’s the conversation between Mary and preteen-Jesus that is striking me—it’s all about identity, freedom, and responsibility.

Jesus: *“Mom, why are you so stressed out?”*

Mary: *“Stressed out?! Of course I’m stressed out, I’m your mother, it’s my job to be stressed out—you had us worried sick. How would you react if your 12 year old went missing for three days?!”*

Jesus: *I’m sorry I scared you Mom, but I was at the Temple the entire time. I have so many questions about God and I need to spend time with people who know Him.”*

At 12 years old, Jesus was growing up; His understanding of who He was and how He fit into God’s purposes was growing. Jesus was letting go of the safety and security of His parents, so that He could venture out into God’s world and ultimately embrace His calling.

Luke tells us that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and others. We don’t often think of Jesus growing, but in His humanity, He did grow—physically, mentally, emotionally, and relationally. A growing sense of identity takes time; this was true of Jesus and it’s also true of us.

Jesus’s **baptism** was another important time in His identity development. In Luke 3:21-23, we are told that when Jesus was baptized, *“heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”*

I don’t know for certain, the Bible doesn’t say, but if Jesus were to pick one moment from His life, a favourite moment, one that He replayed in His mind whenever life was difficult, I suspect it was this moment. The voice Jesus heard came from heaven; God the Father spoke a word of identity and affirmation. **Never be in doubt about who you are: you are my Son. I love You. I am pleased with You.**

One author writes, “few moments are as important as when heaven speaks”.⁵ *Do you know who you are, or what God thinks of you?*

Ephesians 1:4-5 says, that God chose us—in Christ—before the world was even created, to be with Him, to be like Him, to adopt us as daughters and sons. One might ask, *“Why would God choose me?”* The answer Ephesians gives is simple—*You bring God pleasure.* There is a remarkable similarity between what God said to Jesus, and what He says to us in Ephesians 1.

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, 112.

The love of God was **the** foundation for Jesus' identity and calling and it's the only solid foundation for our own.

Benner writes, "Whether we realize it or not, our being is grounded in God's love. The generative love of God was our origin. The embracing love of God sustains our existence. The inextinguishable love of God is the only hope for our fulfillment. Love is our identity and our calling, for we are children of Love...Until we dare to believe that nothing can separate us from God's love—nothing that we could fail to do, nor anything that could be done by anyone else to us—we remain in the elementary grades of...Christian spiritual transformation...**An identity grounded in God would mean that when we think of who we are, the first thing that would come to mind is our status as someone who is deeply loved by God.**"⁶

Who am I? *I am loved by God.* Who am I? *I am loved by God.* Say it with me. Who are you? *I am loved by God.* It's not the power of positive thinking. It's the power of rehearsing the truth until it takes root in our minds, heart, and body. When it does, we can reject the lies that are directed at us—you're not smart enough, skilled enough, or beautiful enough; you'll never make it, you don't matter, no one cares. No, this is what is true—*I am loved by God.*

This is what Jesus did. After His baptism, He was led into the wilderness and for 40 days He was tested. Let me mention just the first test, where the devil encouraged Jesus to turn stones to bread. *40 days is a long time to be without food. If you were my son, I wouldn't let you suffer like this; maybe God has forgotten about you. Turn a*

few stones into bread, meet your own needs, and then you'll have fuel for your mission.

There's more going here than stones and bread; Jesus was tempted to embrace self-determination and self-reliance. By self-determination I mean the temptation to treat oneself as the centre of the universe—the place where my needs, wants, and preferences matter most. By self-reliance I mean the inclination to go it alone and cut God out. In that moment, did Jesus rehearse what the Father had spoke, just weeks before, at His baptism? *I am loved by God.* We're not told, what we do not is that Jesus chose to trust His Father—*God will provide, when it is time.*

Identity is both a gift and a process; it's something we receive and something we grow into. And along with a growing sense of identity comes a growing commitment to taking our place at God's side, participating in what He is doing. Our identity isn't something we polish or put behind glass—like silverware—it's something we use, something we put to work for God's sake, and others sake.

The theological word for this is vocation. Vocation is a theological word that means something like "a calling". As Benner suggests, all of us are **first** called to simply be who we are. Are you creative? Fantastic! Detailed? Brilliant! Are you an extrovert? Then enjoy the people around you. Are you an introvert? Then celebrate those times and places where you can enter into the warmth of silence, enjoying the company of your own thoughts.

⁶ Benner, 49

It doesn't have to be hard you know, being ourselves. The pressure we put on ourselves, to be this or that; the pressure we feel from others, to be something we aren't—this is what makes life hard. In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus invites us to come to Him with the burdens we carry—even our burdens of identity—and He will give us rest. He knows who we are; He won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on us.

We are first called to be human, that is, to be who we are, and **second**, we are called to be Christian—which is to say, we are called to follow Jesus. Though the modern, western, identity has been defined primarily in terms of what we do—our activity, our work, and the like—from Biblical perspective, we cannot know who we are apart from the One who created us and redeemed us. To know the love of Jesus, to live in His love, and walk in His way, is to be who you are meant to be.

And **third**, our unique calling in the world will be connected to the gifts and abilities we possess, to the desires of our heart, and, to the needs of the world around us.⁷ And this isn't something we need to worry about—as if we need more stress in our lives—this is something that God will work out. In Ephesians 2:10, the Apostle Paul writes, *“For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”* We can trust the Holy Spirit to show us the good we are meant to do today, tomorrow, and the next day.

You are more than your biology, ethnicity, and sexuality. You are more than the family you were born into, the education you received, and the places you have visited. You are more than your personality,

your emotions, and your thoughts. You are more than your friendships, your marital status, or followers on Instagram. You are much, much more.

Identity is complex and multi-faceted. Your friends and family cannot tell you who you are; though they may know you, they don't see all there is to see—they know only in part. You may be in a slightly better position than they are, but even your self-knowledge is incomplete.

When we place our identity in the hands of something that can be lost or in a person we can lose, our sense of self will remain insecure. And so, our identity needs to be rooted in Someone that isn't subject to loss or change.

God knows you. He made you. He loves you. You bring Him pleasure. As we come to know Him, we come to know ourselves—both who we are, and, what we are worth.

Pray

Worship

Invitation to Prayer Ministry

Benediction

⁷ Benner, 95-96.