

An Always-Becoming Identity
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Psalm 16 and 1 John 3:1-3

Next weekend I will attend the 25th reunion of my college class.

You know how it is with reunions. It may be for a school or some other association, but I imagine that the experience is often the same. We gather with much anticipation, excited to see old friends, recall old times and catch up on our lives.

For me, though, the outcome is often one of mixed feelings. It ends up being a weekend of too many 10-minute conversations, each with the same pattern – an exchange of basic biographical information ... perhaps a quick round of “do you know so-and-so who lives in your city” ... and then a pause that usually signals the end of any meaningful interaction. We turn back to the buffet or we look around for the next person with whom we will do the same ten-minute two-step.

It’s bittersweet, for me anyway, because I want to go further. I want to know how my friends went from the years we shared through all of life’s twists and turns to the present moment.

What have they experienced? What have they learned? What do they believe? What do their lives stand for? Who have they become?

It all comes down to identity. Who are you? Who am I?

So much of life is like walking through a hall of mirrors. In each one we see ourselves in a different role, wearing a different hat. Parent. Grandparent. Child. Grandchild. Brother. Sister. Cousin, aunt or uncle. Friend. Co-worker. Neighbor. Leader. Follower. Church member. Civic club member. Book club member. And on and on and on.

Is our identity one of these? Is it all of them together? How much of our identity is fixed and certain? How much of it is subject to change?

It’s not just people. Cities, for example, have identities. Ours is changing amid the swirl of the recession and other trends such as immigration. Just this week, news stories reported that the face of our community is shifting in important ways.

One story reported that we lost almost 3,000 banking jobs in only one month's time. Will Charlotte continue to be Banktown, USA? Or is it time to find strength and identity in other industries?

Another story reported that 13% of our county's population was born outside the U.S., indicating that we are becoming more international all the time.

And what about the religious identity of our nation?

I bet you heard or read something about the latest American Religious Identification Survey. It found that the only category that has shown continued growth across the nation is made up of Americans who identify themselves as unaffiliated with any religion and/or are non-believers.

According to the study, this group doubled to 15% of all Americans in the last 18 years. They call this growing segment the "nones" ... that's N-O-N-E, as in no religious affiliation.

To those of us who affiliate with the so-called mainline Protestant denominations, the study is one more reminder that the next few decades may very well be pivotal for our future.

Sure, we can study the data, extrapolate the trends and project our end, if we insist on seeing only through our limited eyes and minds. Or, we can "trust in the Lord," as our choir will sing today.

* * *

That choice – that dualistic way of seeing things as being of the world or of God – was exactly the choice facing those for whom the book of 1 John was written.

1 John is one of what have been called the "little letters" that appear at the back of the New Testament, the ones that we rarely get to after we have walked the paths of the four gospels and acts and, then, navigated the debates and digressions of the more major epistles.

Scholars connect 1 John to a community of believers who were defined and inspired by the gospel of John. John, of course, opens with the bold declaration that Jesus Christ was the Word of God made flesh, come into the world as our creator's clearest self-communication.

But within 60 years or so of Christ's death and resurrection, some believers were putting more stock in the idea of the Holy Spirit and they were twisting its meaning around. They were claiming that maybe Jesus never was really of the flesh, that Jesus was never truly human, that Jesus never went as far as to experience earthly joys and sorrows and suffering. And, if Jesus never was of this world, then he never really overcame it to point all those who believe to another, transcendent life with God.

In the most fundamental sense, the questions before the first readers of this letter are the same ones we hear around us today: How do we faithfully walk with God in this life when the world around us demands that this is all there is? Do we put our faith in the world or in God? If we are not to know God fully until the future, how do we live faithful lives in the present?

That's the tension we find in these three short verses in 1 John, written around 100 A.D. For many, it's the same tension we feel in our lives today ... one we may feel especially in these weeks that follow our highest, holiest season of all.

It's kind of curious. As a church – and by that I mean the broad Christian tradition – we put so much emphasis on the forty days of the season of Lent, the period in advance of Easter.

In other times in our history, though, the period after Easter has been every bit as important. It's intended to be a season of 50 days of sustained celebration of our Lord's victory over death, a time when we remember how the resurrected Christ walked the earth until his ascension to heaven.

Traditionally, the church has called this season Eastertide. But it can be a time when we feel like the tide of our Easter joy goes back out to sea well before these 50 days are over. The world barges back in with all its distractions. Household budgets to be managed. Bills to be paid. Jobs to be held on to. Carpools to be run. Committee meetings to attend.

Like the community that first read 1 John, we are suddenly caught again in that same old tension between the temporary reality of the world and the eternal promise of the love of God. The temptations and discouragements of this world call our name. Like the “nones” in the religious identity survey, we seek refuge in the things of this world, which, after all, are here and now, not like that God of some distant future.

In the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus says “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” Let's be honest. Sometimes, maybe much of the time, we hear

that and we feel that tension, that gut feeling that we know what Jesus meant but the freedom that Jesus is talking about seems a long way off.

The great southern writer Flannery O'Connor spent time in New York City, where she wine and dined with the big-city elite and was exposed to their many secular notions and beliefs about how to be happy.

For O'Connor, it brought her identity as a Christian into sharp relief. Reflecting on her experience, she paraphrased Christ when she wrote: "You will know the truth and the truth will make you odd."

The author of 1 John was saying the same thing. He started chapter three with a strong reassurance:

"See what love God has given us, that we should be called children of God and that is what we are."

A former pastor of mine and Kelly's always quoted that verse when he baptized babies. In fact, he said it when he baptized both of our babies.

But we grow up and before long we know what it means to be "odd for God," to claim our identity as Christians and then we stand from the world. Knowing this, the author of 1 John followed his consoling statement about the gift of God's love with his own reality check.

"The reason the world does not know us," he writes, "is that it did not know Christ."

He continues:

"Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed."

Again, we hear the rather odd promise of the Christian life, the promise of a life we are called to live between the "already" of Christ's victory over death and the "not yet" of the full appearance of the kingdom of God.

But pay attention, friends, to the immediacy of the first part of that statement. "Beloved, we are God's children *now*."

That much, we already know, the author of 1 John is saying. We belong to our creator, adopted through grace.

If we really take that in, if we really accept that and believe it, the open-ended promise that follows takes on entirely new possibilities. “What we will be has not yet been revealed.”

Those words should give us no reason to fear. To the contrary, we can let our hearts and minds open up to all the possibilities of what God will do with us and for us.

That is why, as Christians, we are always becoming. That is our unique identity, one that equips and sustains us in the present and, yet, draws us forward to our future. We are, indeed, God’s children now. But we are also called to live into the promise of God’s never-ending love.

The great 20th-century theologian Karl Barth saw it this way:

“The Christian church is agreed on one-thing: that it consists purely of beginners – and that this is truly a good thing: to become small again, to begin from the beginning, and thus at no point to stand still.”¹

It truly is a good thing to become small again, even when the world says supersize me.

It truly is a good thing to begin from the beginning, even when the world says that we should never stop running its mad race, much less start over.

God’s grace gives us sanctuary to be beginners, again and again, to claim every day our identity as those who are always becoming, to greet our God with the words of the psalmist from our call to worship today: “Satisfy us with your love in the morning, and we will live this day in joy and praise.” (Psalm 90)

Brothers and sisters, we are already children of God, and it’s only the beginning. If this is our beginning, who knows how we will end up?

That is a question for which the world has no answer.

Amen.

¹ Insights, p. 66. Karl Barth