

“IDENTITY THEFT”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 4:1-11

(03-01-20) Lent 1

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. We begin a 40 day journey that will conclude with the events of Holy Week, the betrayal of Jesus, his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion and of course, at Easter, his resurrection. This year our theme for Lent is, **“When they see us, do they see Jesus?”**

If we are disciples of Jesus and want to follow him in the way we live, **does our living, does our speaking and acting, embody something of Jesus?** Will people see something of Jesus when they see us? In her book, *Home by Another Way*, Barbara Brown Taylor says that the church has come to understand Lent as a “springtime of the soul,” a time of spiritual spring cleaning and to cleanse the system and open our eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone.¹ And it’s a time for reflection and contemplation about **who** we are and **whose** we are, a time to give some serious time to the issue of our identity.

One of the most serious issues of our digital age is that of identity theft. Some of you have gotten emails recently from an email address that looks like mine, even with a picture of me, but it’s from me. Young Tae, our Assistant Minister called me early one morning this past week. “Hello,” I answered. “Hi, this is Young Tae.” “Yes,” I replied, “what can I do for you?” “You wanted me to call you,” said Young Tae.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*

I said I didn't know what he was talking about. He had received an email from what he thought was me and he was calling to respond. Someone was using my email address to send emails to people asking them to reply.

It's fortunate that nothing too serious has happened, but it can and does. Another member of our congregation recently had her Facebook account hacked. Someone got hold of her credit card details that were linked to her Facebook account and charged an advertisement he was running to her account. Because Facebook charges based on the number of people that see your advertisement and because his ad was getting a lot of views, the charges were running up quickly on the credit card, almost to the tune of a thousand dollars. Fortunately, she's pretty savvy about social media and was able to catch on quickly and after talking with some people she was able to stop the identity theft.

A strong sense of identity and clarity about who we are is crucial to our wellbeing.

A weak identity leaves us vulnerable to many things and temptations of every kind. Think about how the advertising and marketing industry works in our society.

So much of what is portrayed in advertising is marketed at the allure of being someone or something other than whom or what we are. Just imagine, goes the lottery jingle. Just imagine **what you could be** with 5 or 50 million dollars. Just imagine **who you could be**. These lotteries are so successful because they are so good at posing alternatives that make our present realities seem pale in comparison, that call into question the desirability of the way it is for us now, who we are right now.

There's so much in our culture that tempts us to be something other than what we are, that preys on our insecurity about our present identity, running the gamut from cosmetics that promise a more beautiful you to little blue pills for men that don't even need explanation, all the way to surgery that changes the way we look and age. Whether it's the promise of richer, thinner, taller, more youthful, more powerful, more famous, it's all predicated on the assumption that we are just not that confident of our identity and can easily be manipulated into being tempted to be someone else.

In the text this morning from Matthew's gospel, Jesus is taken into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for 40 days and nights, Jesus was famished. It is then that the tempter appears and says to Jesus, ***if you are the Son of God***; command these stones to become loaves of bread. You're hungry, why suffer? If you are the Son of God, then just turn these stones into scones and be done with it. This is followed with a second temptation to jump from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, knowing that if Jesus was truly the Son of God; the angels would hold him up and prevent him from falling. Then finally comes the third temptation, to bow down and worship the devil in return for all the kingdoms of the world.

These temptations have been variously interpreted over many centuries, **but I think that the core temptation for Jesus is one of identity.** The text that immediately precedes the temptation in the wilderness is the account of Jesus' baptism. At the end of that account are the words spoken by the voice from heaven declaring, ***"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."***

At baptism, Jesus' identity is confirmed.

This is my Son, says the voice, this is the Beloved One. So immediately after having his identity confirmed, Jesus is taken into the wilderness where he fasts for 40 days and nights. At the end of those days he is faithful, but he is tired and weak and it is in that state of faithful vulnerability, disconnected, disoriented and in discomfort, that the tempter first comes to him. **And the first thing the devil questions is his identity. If you are the Son of God,** then why don't you just do this? You're famished, just a little trick and you'll be fine.

But the truly devious part of the temptation of Jesus is that the devil knows that Jesus can surely and easily do what the devil is suggesting. Even the tempter knows that Jesus is who he is, that he is the Son of God. That's not in question, not even for the devil. **What is in question, in this moment of vulnerability, is whether Jesus will respond to the temptation in a way that would be unfaithful to his true identity.**

It's not that Jesus couldn't turn stone into bread, he could have turned it into prime rib for all that matters, **it's whether he will or whether he knows that in his identity as the Beloved Son, he knows to trust in the God whose word is more substantive than any meal.** It's not whether he could jump off the highest point of the city and be unharmed, of course he could, but it's a matter of, **will Jesus trust God and know that God will provide for his care, without putting God to the test?** In asking whether Jesus was truly the Son of God and in wanting to see evidence of it, the devil would have Jesus deny his identity by the very act of affirming it. Only the Son of God could turn stone into bread, only the Son of God could jump off the top of

the temple and not be harmed, **but the problem is that the Son of God would never do these things.**

Rather, Jesus responds to each temptation with words from scripture. ***“It is written, one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” “It is written, do not put the Lord your God to the test.”***

And in response to the third temptation to bow down before the devil in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus responds, ***“It is written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only.”*** The temptation is idolatry, to ascribe absolute value to things of relative worth.² And because Jesus is grounded in the truths of his tradition, because he knows who he is and is able to differentiate between the absolute and the relative, he is able to resist the temptations. He will not worship the devil, even in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world because he knows that the devil has no power to give that authority to him. He will not turn stone into bread or jump from the temple top because to do so wouldn’t confirm his identity as God’s beloved, as God’s Son, but would jeopardize that identity because in giving in to those temptations, Jesus would only confirm that he is just like the rest of us, the rest of us who would trade hunger for a full stomach, who would trade vulnerability for security, who in our too often myopic vision would gladly trade in eternal things for temporary power and vanity.

But just as Jesus’ identity was confirmed at his baptism, **so ours is in our baptisms as well.** We are claimed as God’s own, as children of God, holy and dearly loved.

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*

And in that identity we are called to be followers of the one who would not give in to temptation, no matter how attractive. But the temptation to forget our identity, or to forge one made in our image, is one which is always with us. I think it's easy when we face hardship, when our lives aren't unfolding as we might have hoped, to question our identity. Are we truly loved, are we really God's beloved creation, does God really care, does God really love us?

It's tempting to conclude that we don't matter, that God doesn't matter, that this is just how it all unfolds, we get sick, we get ill, we get old, and there's nothing that can be done about it. I watched a program on TV recently that said that science tells us that our universe is slowly dying, that our sun and every star in the universe will one day burn out and all life will come to a stop, that we are destined for a cold, lifeless end. I thought, wow, I guess I can understand the science, but without faith, it seems too random and hopeless. In a universe without God, what is our identity? We're just accidents of nature waiting to die a cold, meaningless death.

But we know that Lent tells us that's not the ending that's in store for us. We know that Jesus never loses sight of his identity, his mission, his ministry and because of his love and faithfulness, we never have to lose our confidence of who we are, that we are the beloved children of God, even in our hardship, even in our suffering, even when life doesn't go the way we planned. **Our identity isn't in what we can do or how much we have; it's in whom loves us and our relationship to the God who gives us life. We are God's children, God's beloved, the ones Jesus died to redeem, the ones who in him are promised eternal life, everlasting life.**

Let's face it, we're going to get tempted, none of us are exempt. **We're going to be tempted because the evil one knows that if he can't turn Jesus, then the next best thing would be to turn the ones he loves, us.** The temptations will be endless, but in the end they will all seek to do the same thing, to turn us away from the identity we have been given as children of God to a people who think that it all depends on us, that this life is all that matters. **The temptation is to confuse the absolute with the relative, to trade our eternal identities for temporary fulfillment.**

It's a time for a spring clean, to clean up the clutter, a time to sweep away all that which isn't needed, a time to be clear about our identity, about who we are and whose we are. It's a time to be renewed and reminded that God calls us God's children, that God imagines and intends far more for us than we dare to imagine, to be confident in our identity and generous in our living. **In a world that tells us relentlessly that somehow we are not enough, the promise of our faithful Saviour is that in him, we are more than enough.**

To nourish us on our journey because the temptations are strong and we will need strength, Jesus invites us to begin at his Table, with the bread and the cup, with the gifts of God for the people of God, which is who we are, which is our identity. We come to this table so that Jesus can remind us of that identity, that it is for us that his body was broken, that his blood was shed, that he did what he did because he never lost sight of his identity **and wants us to remember ours as well.** As we remember who we are and whose we are, may we continue to live lives that point to Jesus so that when they see us, they will see Jesus?

Thanks be to God, Amen.

***Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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