

John 1:6-8, 19-34

1. On what do you base your identity? What do you look to to answer the question – Who are you?

In our western secular individualism we often root our identity in our successes, our accomplishments, our job, our title, our possessions etc...

In more traditional cultures there are clear cultural expectations of what it means to be a man/woman, son/daughter, husband/wife, father/mother – in traditional cultures our sense of identity comes from those expectations and our adherence to them.

Some of us reject these cultural and societal expectations and instead seek to define ourselves – you do you – I do me – we define who we are and determine our own standards.

2. What is the impact on you and on others when you base your identity on those things?

Each of these ways of defining ourselves sets up an inevitable pendulum swing – when we are successful – when we meet the cultural expectations – when we are true to ourselves and meet our internal standards we are confident secure settled (and others often experience us as arrogant, judgmental, entitled) – but it only takes a moment – a failure – a word spoken – an internal shift and the pendulum swings the other way and there is fear, self-loathing, insecurity....

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3. What are the identities the religious leaders seek to assign to him? (see Malachi 4:1-6; Deuteronomy 18:15-18) What do we learn about John and his public perception from these possible identities?

The Messiah – the promised one of God – the one who would bring about a time of prosperity for Israel. There were lots of expectations surrounding this figure – military – political – spiritual...

The forerunner – Elijah returned to prepare the way before this Messiah.

THE prophet – the one who would be like Moses – do the things Moses did.

These are the highest titles that the religious leaders could conceive of – something about his message – his presence – his impact so blew them away that they had only these categories to explain it.

4. What do we learn about John in his denial of these identities?

An incredible humility. No sense of using what is going on around him for personal benefit or gain. He is not looking at himself to answer the question – who am I?

Read Isaiah 40:1-5, 42:1-4a, 53:4-7; Genesis 1:1-3

5. John looks to another to root his identity. What do we learn about this other from not only the words of John but also the words of Isaiah to which John is referring?

COMING KING: Make straight his paths – when a King came to town there was road work to be done – this King is no earthly king but a heavenly King.

RECREATING KING: The Spirit descended like a dove – this would point not only the onlookers but every subsequent reader to the opening verses of Genesis. The verb for the Spirit hovering is the same word for a bird fluttering – the targum or the Aramaic translation of the scriptures that everyone around John would have been familiar with added – the Spirit hovered like a dove. This image clearly communicates that God is about to bring about the recreation of the entire cosmos through this King. Isaiah 42:1 speaks of the Spirit descending to bring justice to the nations, that is the entire earth.

SUFFERING KING: Behold the Lamb of God – a reference to Isaiah 53:7 – where the coming King, God’s chosen one, would also be the suffering servant, who is pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, but by his wounds we are healed.

6. What impact does it have on John’s character and work to have rooted his identity in this coming, recreating, suffering King?

Incredible humility – in light of this one John says I am not worthy even to untie the thong of his sandal. In every culture and time there is a job so demeaning so low that only the lowest of the low would do it / could do it – and in this culture this was the job. John isn’t even worthy to do this in light of this one...

It was a humility then born not of self-loathing, not of failure – but a humility as C.S. Lewis defined it as not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less – as John is consumed with beholding this coming, recreating, and suffering King.

Boldness and Courage – this is not a quality we often see paired with humility – and not a quality we see in it's fullness here in John's gospel. You may have to either point to the other gospels (Luke 3:1-22) , or jog people's memory as he calls people to repentance, as he calls out King Herod on his taking his brother's wife as his own (Matthew 14:1-12). Here is incredible boldness.

His baptizing – he was doing so in a way that was utterly different from the normal ways you would baptise. Baptism wasn't for the Jew – it was for the outsider, the gentile – to signify the washing away of impurities – and it was something you did to yourself. There were deep divisions between Jew and Gentile kept alive by deep racial prejudice. To be baptized in this way was to say as a Jew – I am no different than a Gentile – I need forgiveness as much as anyone else and I can't change myself – I can't fix myself – I need help outside of myself – I need forgiving grace.

Read Matthew 11:7-11

7. John was wrong about himself. He was the promised forerunner Elijah. But Jesus adds that the least in his kingdom will be greater than John. Part of what he might mean in that is that the change wrought in John through rooting his identity in Jesus is nothing compared to the change wrought in us when we root our identity in him for we can behold Jesus in ways that John never could.

What are the ways we can behold Jesus and how can rooting our identity in the recreating, suffering, and now returning King change us and our interactions with those around us?

John baptized with water – Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit. In Christ the same Spirit that descended on Jesus to recreate the entire cosmos can enter us to recreate us in his likeness, in his image.

John in light of Jesus is unworthy to untie the strap of his sandal – and yet we behold that on the night before he died Jesus knelt down and untied the strap of every one of his disciple's sandals and washed their feet. In doing

so he points to something that he did for you. On the cross God in Jesus gets down on his knees and unstraps your sandals – exposing what you wouldn't want anyone else to see – what you wouldn't even want to acknowledge yourself – and washes you clean.

John pointed us in his baptism to a new way of being and relating – in our witness we can bear witness to an entirely new reality that upon his return Jesus will bring it to it's fulfillment – every wrong righted – every evil undone – every ill healed – every sorrow consoled.

In Christ I am a beloved and delighted in child of God.

In Christ I am an heir to a glorious future.

In Christ I am...