

As you're probably aware, the topic of "identity" has been a hot topic for a number of years – from identity theft to gender identity. Maybe you remember the series of television commercials that Citi Bank developed over 10 years ago around this whole identity theft theme? They were pretty creative. See if this one is familiar, for example:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iy5jiYWuNKo>

Pretty creative, huh? And while the problem of identity theft is serious, the question of our true identity is much deeper. In fact, it is a pretty significant question that we all wrestle with in life. We may not always phrase it with that exact language...we may not even ask it so explicitly. But in some way, we all seek to understand who we are and what our place is in the world. The Christian faith affirms that we find our identity in our relationship with our Creator. It could be put something like this: **"I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God."** Our relationship with God is what gives us our identity.

Many people, however, find their identity elsewhere – both Christians and non-Christians. A common one is to find it in what we do. This is especially true for people who work outside the home. When you meet someone for the first time, a common question to ask early on in the conversation is, "What do you do?" or "Where do you work?" or "Where do you go to school?" We might also ask someone about their hobbies or recreational interests or whether or not they're married, or where they grew up.

Additionally, the people around us often give us an identity that we might internalize. Kids who are teased at a young age because of their body shape or their academic achievement might have an identity of "overweight," or "short," or "stupid," or "nerd." So often we end up getting consumed by those labels and allowing them to be how we define ourselves. They become our identity, for better or for worse.

**This whole identity thing starts from a very young age.** The day you were

born your parents identified you. For instance, they gave you a name. Actually, in the case of one of *our* kids – and I’ll allow this child to remain anonymous this morning – the name wasn’t given until about three days after birth. We had a child without an identity other than “the baby!” But your name is a piece of your identity. And it grows from there: the family relationships, your personality, the things you do, the gifts and skills you develop over time, the friends you have, the interests you have...all of these things over time give you a sense of identity. They help you figure out your place in the world, beginning right there in your family.

But like the identity theft commercial: **A lot of what we define ourselves by, a lot of what we cling to as our identity, can be taken away from us.** Or even if it’s not taken away, it still isn’t lasting, and when something happens and a piece of our identity is compromised or taken away from us, it can have huge ramifications. A lot of missionaries and pastors and other church workers struggle with this. All people have a tendency to build our identity around what we do, as I just mentioned. But when what you do for a living is also intertwined with your *faith*, and when our faith gives us a deeper identity as we read about this morning – an identity as a child of God – when that all gets mixed together, a lot of pastors and missionaries or others whose livelihood is completely embedded in their faith...a lot of them REALLY struggle with their sense of identity when it’s no longer viable for them to do that any more. They’ve identified their status as a child of God so strongly with “pastor” or “missionary” or whatever the role was, that it has become their identity.

But many people struggle with this, and get their identity from something other than their relationship with God. They never realize that they are created in God’s image, that they have a Heavenly Father who loves them, and they are in fact identified by God as His child. We see this expressed throughout the Bible.

**First, we see God covenanting with his people to be with them, and provide for them.** Parents don’t really make a covenant with their kids about raising them. At least, there isn’t some formal covenant written out. And sometimes parents do a very poor job of raising their kids. If you had parents

who were abusive, or absent, or didn't care about you, then your experience of being a part of a family is not what it should have been, and your parents did not keep up their side of the covenant, and I would sincerely pray for healing for you. But even parents who do a good job of raising their kids don't usually write out what they promise to provide for their kids. However, there are general expectations of providing them food, housing, love, appropriate discipline, and generally teaching them about what it means to be in relationship with other people. Most parents want their kids to grow up and be good citizens, loving and kind to other people, and cheering for the Seahawks. And along with that usually comes opportunities to discover and develop skills in sports or music and the arts, socialization with other kids their age, give them different kinds of experiences, and so forth. That's like an unwritten covenant from a parent to a child, and all of it helps kids understand their place in the world...to gain a sense of their identity.

Well, God makes a covenant as well. God covenants with Abraham in Genesis 17. (One of several covenants God makes in the OT...all are related and similar...not wholesale changes!) It's a promise that God will be Abraham's God, and the God of His descendents. That, like a parent, God will bless Abraham and provide for him and make him fruitful, as well as the nation that would come forth through him. **And so Abraham and his wife Sarah find their identity in this covenant, in this relationship with God.** This is where they begin to find their identity. It's what sets them apart from other people. It's what sustains them and strengthens them. It's how they understand who they are and whose they are.

This is the foundational identity that God wants us to have. Not to find our identity in what others think of us. Not to find our identity in what we do. Not to find our identity in our hobbies. All those kinds of things change with time. This is not to say we can't enjoy these things, but they don't define who we are. God defines who we are.

We see this clearly in today's passage from Romans and others like it that declare that in the New Covenant that God makes through Jesus Christ, we are His children. *That* is our foundational identity. It's an identity that won't change with the seasons or with the ups and downs of life. Is your marriage

on the rocks? You're still a child of God loved by your Creator! Are potential employers not impressed with your resume? You're still a child of God loved by your Creator! Is your health a shadow of what it once was? You're still a child of God loved by your Creator! We don't get our sense of value and worth from the opinions of other people, but from the one who created us and loves us and with whom we have a relationship.

Jesus hinted at this himself when we read this in the Gospel of Matthew: **At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children (as opposed to "grown up children" – teenagers? – who think they know better than their parents), you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:1-3).** So Jesus reinforces this relationship where we're the children and God is our heavenly Father. That's where we find our identity, in relationship with Him, trusting Him, just as a child first and foremost finds their identity in the context of their relationship with their parents.

And then a little later in the New Testament we come across this verse: **"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1).** We see this message reinforced elsewhere. And this gets to the foundational nature and importance of finding our identity in our relationship with God.

**Jesus tells a parable that really gets to the heart of this. It's usually called the Parable of the Prodigal Son.** I want to read to you a modern rendition of the Scripture passage of that parable. It's not a version you'll find in any Bible. Someone passed it along to me a number of years ago, and I don't know where it comes from. I'm pretty sure I've never shared it with you all before, and I hope it helps you to find your identity in Jesus.

A young girl grows up in Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. "I hate you!" she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an

argument. And that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed hundreds of times. She runs away.

She got a ride to Detroit. Her second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, and arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: Her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car—she calls him "Boss"--teaches her a few things that men like and convinces her that she can make good money selling herself. For a while she lives well. She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline, "Have you seen this child?" But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup and body-piercing jewelry she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child.

When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. "Sleeping" is really the wrong word—a teenage girl at night in downtown Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her health worsens.

One night, as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She has a memory of the month of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once. She thinks to herself, "My dog back home eats better than I do now." She's sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, "Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City, and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? Even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here." Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a small mirror, smoothes her hair, and licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips and wonders if her parents will notice – If they're even there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect, and not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of 40 family members—brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot. They are all wearing ridiculous-looking party hats and blowing noisemakers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a banner that reads "Welcome home!"

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She looks through tears and begins her memorized speech, "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I've..." But he interrupts her. "Hush, my daughter. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."

This is how God sees you. **Your identity is found in your relationship with your heavenly father who loves you beyond what you could possibly imagine. And He calls you His son, or His daughter.** And nothing can change that, no matter how far off-course you may wander. Your status as a child of God isn't true because of anything you or I do or say. It's not true because we declare it to be true. It's true because that's how God sees you.

**Where does your identity lay?** (From your perspective, that is.) Is it found

in what other people tell you who you are? Is it found in something that can be taken away or changed, leaving you on uncertain ground? Or is your identity found in Jesus Christ, who lived and died to give you a new identity in Him, as a child of your heavenly Father? Jesus Christ is calling you to identify with him. He's inviting you to see yourself as He does, and center your identity in Him. To affirm that identity, I invite you to close the message this morning with me, by joining our voices together with this statement about our identity: **"I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God."** Let's pray...Amen.