

In graduate school and PhD programs there is a relatively new commitment to naming your perspectives as you begin a project. So, if I were writing for an academic journal, in my first couple of paragraphs I would say something like 'Writing from my perspective as a light brown woman raised by a white single mother with limited financial resources and a Caribbean father steeped in colonialism, I must remain mindful of the privilege of my educational achievements, social status of clergy and perspective as a mother.'

It took me longer than I like to admit to become accustomed to these long descriptors as the starting point of every paper, article or book. Just say what you have to say, I thought. But I was very, very wrong. There is no such thing as being objective. And if we cannot be clear about where we come from, the roles and history that define us, what right do we have to speak about anyone or much of anything? There is no one – absolutely no one – who speaks without blinders, biases, history, and with an unobstructed view of humanity and from within each and every perspective.

There are the identities of our birth, the ones of our experience, the ones that we have thrust upon us, and the ones we choose. I'm born a girl. I've experienced what comes with being brown. For a while at least, I had the word 'prophet' stuck to me in uncomfortable and frightening ways. The identities I choose are mother, pastor, and maybe occasionally – occasionally – firebrand.

Figuring out those identities – the ones I liked, the ones I didn't, the ones I hadn't put much thought into and the ones that I had carefully explored, all of it was, and is, hard work. It was also freeing, fascinating, healing...it connected me to people I hold dear, committed me to causes that are the engine of my life, and compel me to creative and loving exploration and growth. Jesus is calling us to rethink who we are and what we care about in life, and beyond.

It might be that there is no better time to really reflect upon who we are than in this moment between Advent and Lent. The time when, for us in this part of the world, all is quiet, and cold, and stark. It takes time set aside to really unravel where our sense of who we are comes from. Not only that, but it changes with age, association, occasionally with a particular epiphany. And it is happening all the time.

Just look at all of the identity shuffling in this passage alone! Jesus is named 'lamb of God.' John refuses, again, to take on the mantle of messiah, and says he is still trying to understand. The disciples become disciples (or at least decide to be Jesus', not John's). Jesus is named 'Rabbi or Teacher' capital, not lower case. And then Anointed, also capitalized. Simon becomes Cephas/Peter, which means 'the rock.' That is a lot of identity shifting.

And these aren't the slow coming of age, over time kind of changes. These are spit second, news cycle choices about who you will be and why. To be fair, the need to make them isn't quick. There is a lot that came before, but then all at once it becomes decision time.

We've all been there. The slow build to the explosive moment. The family member with whom you have been patient for years, and then one day she goes too far and you know that no matter the bonds of blood, you are never going there again. The long job search that ends in two offers and 24 hours to decide. The day as a sophomore that you accept it – you can never, ever be happy as an accountant, and immediately – finally – switch your major to hydroponic development.

These seem like decisions about what you do. They seem like they are 'how' choices. But I don't think so. These are 'who choices.' We choose who to be by deciding how we will be so much of the time. But we don't always see it that way. And there are consequences for our inconsistency.

We've watched it play out in the church, right? We have lived with the slogan 'Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.' That was our 'thing,' for years. And yet. We thought we could say that was who we were, even though, as a denomination it was not – is not true. How we are says everything about who we are. And who we are says much about who's we are. We do not get to be double hypocrites: say we are one thing, act like another, and then claim that God has made both things one and the same. For instance: we cannot say we are Christians, deny some a place at Christ's table, and then say Christians are like us, never mind the evidence otherwise. And yet, we are so accustomed to watching this happen and doing it ourselves we don't even notice any more.

Into this space comes John and all of these deliberate identities. We read this now and think 'isn't that wonderful.' But Jesus is named a blood sacrifice. John, moving from ignorance to understanding must realize that he has given voice to the need for a blood sacrifice. The disciples choose – choose – to follow the most seditious person in Judea, naming him Rabbi. Jesus chooses to accept the heavy weight of these new titles. And Simon Peter agrees to be named by his greatest strength and his greatest fault. He is often as unmovable as a rock, and often has wits as thick as one.

All of these identities are thrust upon people. They didn't choose them, exactly. A long and relentless stream of life builds to a crescendo that makes it impossible to deny that they must dig deep within themselves, to find the strength, the vision, the Spirit to see in themselves what others see, to determine for themselves who they must be, and to trust what God shows them and act accordingly.

As individuals, as a congregation, a denomination and a nation, we are about to enter a season of identity formation. In all of these spaces, we will be enticed to forget about the who and focus on the how. We will be encouraged to set aside our kin-dom visions, our faith in Jesus and told about what is

expedient. We just covered the Beatitudes in our Matthew study, and I can assure you anew, there is not one that says 'blessed are the expedient, for they shall get what they desire.'

What are your identities? How have they formed? What might cause you to question them? Which ones are forced upon you, and hold sway upon you only because you have come to believe they 'should?' What identities are you afraid of? And why?

I had no interest in being identified as a Christian. I wanted to follow Jesus, and I kinda wanted to keep my options open. But the longer I listened to the people who were/are loudly identifying themselves as Christian, the more I shook my head, the more I knew that I could not push away my identity as a Christian. I adored calling myself an actor. I loved everything about it. And yet, I had to be willing to let that go to pick up a deeper calling.

In my identity as pastor, it is not my job to tell you who you are. It is not my job to tell you what to believe. It is not my job, mostly, to tell you what is or is not right belief. It is my job to help you discover these things for yourself. To give you the tools to hear in new ways, put you in conversation with the Bible on a deeper level. Sometimes what I say will prompt 'yes!!!! That!!!' and others it may be 'wait...that can't be right.' Both of these are fine, and good. As long as you can say why that is, and know the parts of yourself that determine that truth for you. The important thing is that when the moment of decision comes, seemingly out of nowhere, you are not standing there with no idea what to do, how to think, and most of all, who to be.

At school the kids learn about being upstanders rather than bystanders. In social justice work we say there is a time to call someone out on an error and a time to call in – welcome someone to think in a new way. These are some of the moments when having a clear sense of who you are will determine how you react in the moment. Sometimes the moments are semantic. And others have powerful consequences.

What would you do if Jesus walked up to you and extended his hand to follow? The more you know about who you are, the more you will know what to do. Because, beloved, the time is now. The hand is extended, and the kin-dom of God awaits.

Amen.