

# ***“IDENTITY THEFT”***

*Scripture lesson: 1 Peter 2:2-10*

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**D**r. John Killinger, one of my seminary professors, shares the story of one of his parishioners whose son was taken to summer camp. The little boy was not at all sure that he wanted to go and be away from home for a whole week. But his parents and friends assured him that he would have a good time. So he went.

When his parents returned at the end of the week, much to their surprise, they found their son wearing exactly what he had on when they left him – he was in the same clothes.

“Son, there were plenty of clothes in your bag,” his mother said. “Why didn’t you change?”

“I wanted to be sure that you recognized me and wouldn’t miss me,” he said.

None of us want to be missed or overlooked, do we? Recognition is a basic human need. We need to know who we are, where we fit in and how. All of us need to answer the question of our identity.

There is a story about the 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. One day he stood in a public garden watching a flower for a very long time. A police officer became suspicious and approached him to demand. “Who are you?”

Schopenhauer looked the man in the eye, scratched his chin, and contemplated his words before he slowly answered, “If you could only answer that question for me, I would be eternally grateful.”

Several weeks ago, I got a call from my credit card company. They asked me about some of the charges on my card – wanted to know if they were mine. I said they were. They then explained that there had been a breach of security and I was in danger of having my identity stolen. They were cancelling my card and sending me a new one.

Anyone who has their identity stolen like that can tell you what a nightmare it is. It can take weeks and months to get your identity back.

But it has to do not only with credit cards there are other ways to have our identity stolen. The question of identity is so critical that we will do most anything to answer it.

One way we sometimes attempt to answer the question of identity is by what we do. Ask someone who they are and they are likely to tell you, “I am a lawyer, or I am a doctor, a teacher, a fireman.” A large part of our identity is tied to our professions, our jobs. We tend to submerge and merge ourselves into what we do for a living. We make sure that the right title is on our door, the diplomas are on the wall.

But as many people have found out in recent months, what happens when the job plays out, we get laid off. Jim was a 56-year-old executive who was in the top level of management in his company. He had been heavily recruited and he moved south with this company. But then the company changed hands, the man who had recruited Jim was gone. He returned to his office from a

business trip one Monday morning, was called into his boss' office and told that they no longer had need of his services. He was given an hour to clean out his desk, turn in his key, and be escorted to the front door.

As he told me his story, there was pain in his eyes. It was clear that more than his livelihood had been taken away. It was his identity – the sense of who he was. It's what happens when our identity is solely wrapped up in what we do.

Another way we try to answer the question of who we are is by where we live, our address. Our identity is a function of geography. Where are you from? is a question we are fond of asking. "I am an American. I am a Southerner."

People from Texas are notorious for their pride of place. A Texan told his son one day, "Son, don't ask a man where he's from. If he's from Texas, he'll tell you. If he's not, there ain't no need to embarrass him."

There is nothing wrong with pride of place, unless we confuse WHO with WHERE. In some places in our world today, when someone asks you where you are from, it's a way of deciding if you are friend or foe. It can be a life or death question. When who we are gets too closely connected with where we're from, what results is a kind of tribalism which divides the world into warring camps. Identity is bought with the blood of our foes.

Another way we try to answer the who question is with HOW MUCH. Who we are depends upon how much we have.

There is a story about a man who owned an old country store and who had a scripture quote for every situation. One day a city slicker came into the store and asked to purchase a horse blanket. The store owner went to the back and brought out a wool blanket and said, "That will be \$20."

"You don't understand," the man said. "This is a really fine horse, and I want something extra special for him." So the owner went into the back, took out another blanket off the same pile and brought it back, and said, "That will be \$50." Some of the old customers were sitting by the stove and just kind of smiled.

But the man once again protested, "No you see, I want the very best for my horse. Do you have something else?"

The owner went to the back, pulled another identical blanket from the same pile, and brought it back, "That will be \$150," he said. The stranger forked over the money and left the store satisfied. One of the old timers who had watched the whole transaction asked the store owner, "Now what scripture can you cite for that?"

Without missing a beat the store owner said, "He was a stranger and I took him in."

It is strange how easily we can sometimes be taken in by the belief that we are defined by what we own – the right car, the right address, the designer label in our clothes. If we are counting on these to give us our identity we are poor indeed.

So, if not what or where or how much, how do we answer the who question? Because answer it we must. Identity, how we see ourselves, is the question which determines how we answer every other question.

In the first century there was a fledgling Christian community in Asia Minor. They were a tiny minority in a pagan culture. We get a glimpse at that community in I Peter. This letter was written during a time in which Christians were being persecuted. For this persecuted minority, identity wasn't a matter of what they did. Many of them were slaves with no sense of worth as far as

their job went. Nor was the who question answered with where because many were living as exiles from their own homes.

If you asked them how much they had, it wouldn't have been much – the clothes on their back, an extra pair of sandals, maybe, a few utensils, trinkets they could call their own. But that was it. Not a Gold Card or Cadillac in the whole crowd.

If we measured by the standard of what, where and how much then these people were nobodies from nowhere. They had come from nowhere, they were going nowhere. And besides that, they lived under a government which demanded to be worshiped as God – bow down or die. Either you are one of us or you aren't. Wave the flag into line.

But these nobodies from nowhere refused to do any of that. They stood up to Caesar, stood firm about the subtle temptations to discover their identities in all those false ways people use to answer. How did they do it? Because they knew who and whose they were.

Listen to how Peter answers the who question from them: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.... Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.”

You can be so far down and live so far out that nobody knows who are. But God knows. No matter what we do, where we live, how much we have or don't have, we know who we are. God has told us. We are God's own people. A chosen race, a holy nation, a royal priesthood. God takes us even when we are nobodies and makes us into somebodies that can never be stolen from us.