

Let's start with a question. What makes you,... you? Before you think too much I'll give you the "correct" answer and then we'll go from there. The correct answer is to say that you are a child of God, that and that alone makes you who you are. But that correct answer may be easy to say but difficult to live.

I think if you sit down and really think about it you'd discover that there are a whole lot of factors that come together to make you who you are. Some of it is certainly genetic - you inherit traits and abilities from your father and mother. These are things you cannot change no matter how you'd like to.

Certainly part of our self-understanding comes from our environment. Psychiatric professionals always stress the life-long impacts of how our parents treated us when we were little. But of course it goes beyond that. Our peers, our living conditions, the influences of other adults, and the hardships and successes we've had all come into play when it comes to making us who we are.

The factors that create us can be very very subtle. I was at a party in September and I was in conversation with a man who is a business manager but quite short. I made some comment that prompted him to say, "Well of course, because you're tall." I said I didn't think it mattered but he disagreed. He said that I could never know what he experiences. He said that when I walk into a room people automatically give me more power and respect than he gets. He can get that respect, but he has to earn it. And the simple difference between getting something effortlessly and having to work for it makes a huge difference.

I was reminded of studies I've heard where if you put a dozen people in a room who have never met before the first task they do is establish a pecking order. Someone's going to be on top and someone's going to end up on the bottom. Apparently it only takes a short time, usually less than half an hour, for a complete social stratification to develop. I believe that where you find yourself often ending up on the social pyramid can greatly impact your sense of self. These forces may be subtle, but they are powerful.

We encounter John the Baptist in our gospel reading again this Sunday. He has a lot to teach us about how we understand who we are. The whole point of the gospel reading appears to be answering the question of who John the Baptist is, or perhaps, who he is not. John is out in the wilderness preaching and baptizing and he's making quite a stir. Religious leaders in Jerusalem hear about him and send some lackeys out to investigate.

"Who are you?" they ask. It's hard to know what they were looking for. Perhaps they were just trying to get a handle on this newcomer to the political landscape. Perhaps they were genuinely hoping he would be a sign from God that a new day was dawning. Their questions seem to suggest that. They ask whether he is Elijah or the prophet. According to 2 Kings Elijah was transported to heaven without dying, and many Jews expected his return as the sign of a new age. Similarly a great prophet like Moses was hoped for who would lead the people again.

Right off the bat though John points away from himself. He is not the Messiah, he is not Elijah, nor is he the prophet.

They ask him again, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us." I always imagine a young low-ranking new hire in this. He can't go back to Jerusalem and report that he doesn't know what he saw. His career would crash before it got off the ground!

John's answer and why he responds the way he does is what teaches us about ourselves. He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

John points away from himself and towards something else. Why? Is he being humble? No. Is he shy? Certainly not! John saw on the horizon God's in-breaking presence and he knew that a new reality was about to begin. He had no power over it. He couldn't limit it or control it. He could just point to it and have people see it for themselves.

John seems to have built his entire sense of self around what he felt from God - that something big was going to happen.

Of course something big was happening - Jesus!

Jesus was coming and he was going to reveal God in a whole new way. Jesus was going to reveal the reality about God that people had been longing for since the time there were people. What is God like and what does it mean for our lives? Jesus gave the answers.

You live and could easily be consumed by our world which pressures you in many and various ways to be a certain person. Our whole lives can become caught up in playing the games of social status: rich/poor, strong/weak, smart/stupid, ugly/beautiful, capable/incompetent. But like John the Baptist who could see beyond the obvious, we can too. Indeed we are children of God. It is what make us who we are. It is our self-identity.

We know that there is much more to existence than this life. The Bible tells us this life is but a fleeting glimpse of what God is really up to for us. And so we treat it that way, and we put everything that happens in this life into that context.

When we, like John the Baptist, build upon what we see God doing in the future and the present is transformed too.

If I could have any wish for people this upcoming Christmas season it would to be able to see the present and future as they really are - in God's hands. And then build from there.

When you can see that perspective being a follower of Christ is not a hardship or a burden at all. It is a life-spring of hope that never runs dry. Evangelism becomes easy - second nature really. Stewardship just naturally flows. Sacrifice isn't sacrifice at all but empowerment for God's work.

If you find yourself caught up and unable to see God's future then pray for that first. From that sight the rest will come. God's reality will drive your life and make you who you are. Amen