

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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## Who are you?

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Questions of identity are some of the most fundamental and important questions we grapple with. We spend much of our lives either trying to learn who we are or being moved by motivations we do not understand. I've taught before that the mirrorwork of self-reflection is a key component to walking the Way of Christ. It is a key component because it is how we become righteous.

Remember, righteousness (as far as I'm concerned) is being who we were created to be. But due to our brokenness, and the chaotic nature of the world, that is often easier said than done. One of the main points of the Incarnation, I believe, is Jesus taking on human flesh and form to show us the steps necessary to learn who we were created to be. To learn how to be righteous. Which can be very different from person to person, since we're none of us made the same. Though we do know from the teachings of Christ that righteousness has to do with connection and community; it involves being together in healthy and whole ways.

Given this definition of righteousness you can see the link between righteousness and identity. One of the main goals of the teachings of Jesus Christ is to shepherd us through the process of learning who we were created to be. God formed us to live in harmony with one another and with creation, but we do not. So, God sends prophets like John the Baptizer who live out their righteousness and identity in powerful ways as an example for us. But ultimately God sends Christ to assure us of our identity as children of God and to invite us into the life we were created to live. A life of community and connection, a life of health and wholeness, a life of *shalom*!

“Who are you?” the priests and Levites ask John in verse 19. And amazingly, he knows! He knows who he is far better than most! He responds to their question by getting at the heart of their motivations. He begins with a list of who he is not: he is **not** the Messiah, he is **not** Elijah, he is **not** the prophet.

He **is** the voice, nothing more nothing less. He is **not** the word, rather he is a proclaimer of the word. His baptism, though important, is nothing in comparison to the baptism that is coming. As a matter of fact, in John's gospel, John's title might be John the witness as opposed to John the baptizer. For that is really at the essence of who he is... a witness, a testifier, a proclaimer, an evangelist, the voice. Preparing the way for Jesus is John's righteousness, his purpose, his identity.

Now, our righteousness, our identities, are going to be different than John's. But we could do worse in terms of examples of where to begin. He begins from a place of humility; God is God and he is not. He isn't even worthy to untie the Messiah's sandals! Why don't we start there too. We are **not** God. We mess up all the time. Even when we try to do good and help others, it can go awry, and we can inadvertently hurt them instead.

This is not to belittle John's gifts or agency, or our own for that matter! We have a part to play in the continual in-breaking of God's Kingdom too. God gave John the gifts that he needed to be righteous as a part of his very identity. God used the people in John's life, along with his wilderness experiences, to bring him to the point where he could say "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness."

God has given you the gifts you need in order to be righteous, to live as God created you to live. You are made in the very image of God, that means something for your identity! In the waters of baptism God claimed you as a beloved child. You are now and always a blessed and beloved child of God. That is our first answer to the question "who are you?" I am a child of God.

As you can see, answering the "who are you" question is a difficult thing to do because it often requires a very large answer. So, our starting point is that God is God and we are not. In fact, we are blessed and beloved **children** of God. Our identity is bound up in God's desire for who we were created to be. And given that we have been made in the image of God, our identity is also grounded in God's Triune (read: communal) nature.

So that's our starting point, and I believe it is John's too. And from that starting point John arrives at the place where he can say with confidence, even in the face of conflict, who he is: the voice. The voice of one calling out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord. The voice calling for a great leveling of things. The voice calling for God's justice, the sort of justice

that would not necessarily please the powerful in Jerusalem or in Rome. The sort of voice that will find itself beheaded.

For that is one of the challenges of knowing who you are. When we are firm and grounded in our identities as children of God, we may find ourselves in difficult circumstances. Forced to defend our actions to those who would have us ground our identities in other things: in power, in wealth, in popularity, in status, in ideology. Do not be surprised, my siblings in Christ, that being grounded in the way of Christ will put us in opposition to the world. And such conflicts that involve identities are fiercely fought!

There, we have a starting point based on the example of John the Witness and you've been given a warning about where grounding your identity in God may very well take you. From here, continuing to answer the question depends largely on you. The teachings of Christ give us an excellent pathway for exploring our identities, but it is still our work to do. Important work! Difficult work! And, thankfully, communal work! We help shape our identities together too! Our family and friends impact who we are. All the communities of which we are a part help shape us too!

During this season of expectant waiting, I pray that you be challenged by the question "who are you?" As you will spend time with friends and family in the weeks ahead, I would invite you to reflect upon the impact that they have had on your life and your identity. What gifts has God given you for the work that God is calling you too? How will you become righteous, become who you were created to be, unless you explore who you are?

You'll never have a complete and total answer to this important and fundamental question. But wrestling with it will lead you to greater confidence, greater peace, and a greater understanding of your calling. For that is really at the heart of identity. Our calling. Our purpose. The calling we experience inwardly, as well as the calling we hear from the people and world around us. How is God calling you? How is God forming you? Who are you?!?!? Amen.