

Wayfinding in a Weary World
Part Two: A Pilgrim's Identity
Mark 9.41, Galatians 3.26-29, and Colossians 3.12

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David Henderson

Last week we started a new sermon series that we're calling *Wayfinding in a Weary World: A Pilgrim's Guide*.

We decided to do this series because people seem especially weary and distracted and weighed down these days, and with good reason. There are so many things eroding our peace and our wellbeing, some more obvious, some more subtle: politics, AI, social media, performance pressure, the temptation to go it alone, relating across lines of difference, and more.

We reminded ourselves last Sunday that, as followers of Jesus, we are pilgrims in this world. This world is where we live and love, but it is not our home. Ultimately, God is our home.

And what I suggested is that, the more we remember that we are passing through this world on the way to our true home, that we are citizens in God's realm and foreigners and strangers in this realm, and the less we mistake this world for our home, the less weary and distracted and uneasy we will be in this world.

Listen to these wonderful words of reminder from I Peter chapter one that we will allow to lead us into our messages each Sunday during this series:

Peter, writing to God's chosen people who are living as foreigners:

Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world.

Live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living. Be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy.

Live in reverent fear of him during your time here as "temporary residents." For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. God chose him as your ransom long before the world began, but now in these last days he has been revealed for your sake.

Through Christ you have come to trust in God. And you have placed your faith and hope in God because he raised Christ from the dead and gave him great glory.

You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth; so now, show sincere love to each other as brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply with all your heart. For you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God.

As the Scriptures say,

“People are like grass;
 their beauty is like a flower in the field.
 The grass withers and the flower fades.
 But the word of the Lord remains forever.”

This is the Good News that was preached to you.
 (1 Peter 1.1,13-25 NLT)

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The question can emerge in the most unexpected of moments.

- When you walk through an airport in an unfamiliar city where no one knows you.
- When you catch a glimpse of your own reflection as you walk down the street.
- When you hear a group laughing and then someone in the group looks across the room at you.
- When you share something of real interest and importance to you and you are met with a glazed look in their eyes or a flat smile on their faces, or you find that their attention is directed past you to someone else.
- When you are scrolling through someone else's posts and their life seems far more interesting and compelling than yours does.
- When, with age, your energy and abilities begin to decline, and you feel less fruitful and productive, less able to make a difference.
- When you are in a conversation with someone and realize you are trying to manage their impression of you, and to present yourself in the best possible light.

The question is: Who am I, really?

That's the question we're wrestling with in our message this morning:

What is our true identity?
 What defines us?
 What makes us us?



I know at this point some of you are thinking that the very next thing out of my mouth will be the name "Inigo Montoya." Sorry to disappoint you.

So – who am I? Well first, how does our culture answer that question?

The writers of *Psychology Today* would be considered among the nation's experts on the topic of identity. Here's their answer:

What is identity? Identity includes **people's roles** in the many relationships they cultivate, such as their identity as a child, friend, partner, and parent. It involves **external characteristics** over which a person has little or no control, such as height, race, or socioeconomic class. And it encompasses [the **values** people hold:] political opinions, moral attitudes, and religious beliefs, all of which guide the choices one makes on a daily basis.

So . . . there are roles we each have.

I'm a son, a friend, a husband, a father, a grandfather, a pastor, a citizen, the guy who does the neighborhood directory for Hartman Court.

There are characteristics that are true about each of us.

I am male, six feet tall, right-handed, in my sixties, a US citizen, of European descent. I was born in Chicago. I live in the Midwest. I have a few degrees. I own a few books.

There are interests and preferences we each have.

I cherish my wife. I love my kids and grandkids. I love my church family. I enjoy reading and nature and books and art and photography and writing and rocks and puns and adventure and a few other things.

There are values we have and opinions and convictions we each hold.

For example, I believe, as all reasonable people do, that the movie *Princess Bride* should be on everyone's top ten list. I take deep offense at dog owners who do not clean up after their dogs – especially in my front yard. I'm not a fan of the color brown. Those two things are unrelated. And I do not like garlic, bleu cheese, or raw onions. Forgive me if I just offended any of you.

So according to *Psychology Today*, identity "includes" all of those things that are true about us. Which things or in what way, they don't say.

But then they take it a step further. They conclude that, because our roles and our characteristics and our values change over the course of our lives, so too a person's "identity continues to evolve over the course of an individual's life."

So our culture says our identity is just the most obvious or most distinctive part of me, or all of the different parts of me together.

And it says identity isn't something that is a fixed and settled question. Identity is temporary and changeable. It's up for grabs. It changes, like hair color, with your latest whim.

I think those two things – confusing identity with personality, and seeing identity as something we put on and take off – tend to come together in one of two ways as people try to get a grip on this slippery thing called identity.

Here's one common way people define their identity.



For them, the distinguishing characteristic around which we build our lives is the *cause* that gets our blood flowing, and we think everyone should get everyone else's blood flowing, and that should be as impassioned about it as we are.





In our culture, t-shirts are like billboards on which we advertise our identity. Here are some examples of a few of the many causes around which people can seek to build their sense of identity. I particularly like the one on the upper right.

Here's the other common way that I think people answer the question of identity. Their identity is built around not who they are, but who they want you to *think* they are.



There are all sorts of interests and passions and obsessions around which we can be tempted to try to construct a sense of self.



You're probably aware that there is a whole industry that has developed around the idea of creating a personal brand.

Five simple steps: I find my unique voice, I craft my signature look. I script a compelling narrative. I identify my preferred platform. And then I curate a version of my best life to present myself to the world in the best possible light.

I shift from being a person to being a *persona*, and spend my life in unceasing image management. As Victoria Beckham said in a recent interview about her own personal brand, "It's all about creating an illusion." Wow.

So much uncertainty about who we are and what makes us us. Such a rudderless sense of self. So much up for grabs. No wonder we feel weary as we try to make our way through this world.

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Roles, characteristics, interests, preferences, opinions, convictions, causes. The question is: which of those, if any, will become the basis of my identity? My sense of self?

Our culture says: well, any of them, or all of them can. Choose something that distinguishes you and build your identity around it. And if you want to build your identity around something else next week, go for it.

But none of those things about us are able to bear the weight of our identity. That's true for several reasons.

Because they are all vulnerable and shaky as the basis for an identity. What happens if you don't share my cause, or if you don't like my brand? Where does that leave me?

Because none of those external things that are true about us are lasting – not eternally lasting. None of them will pass through the narrow gate between this world and the life to come.

And because none of them really have to do with who we are at the core of our being. Personality is not the same thing as identity.

When we stop and think about it, it becomes obvious. I am more than just *one* thing that is true about me. And – interestingly and counterintuitively – I am more than *all* of the things that are true about me. There is a huge difference between things that are true about me and who I *am*.

A year ago or so I was at an appointment having a conversation with someone in the medical community.

I could tell something was weighing on her so I asked her what was troubling her and she said she was wrestling with her sense of identity.

She went through the list of things that could be the basis of her sense of self. She was a woman. A wife. A mom. She came from another country and was proud of her ethnic heritage. She was a medical professional. She enjoyed health and fitness.

But none of those things really seemed sufficient to define her.

"So what have you arrived at?" I asked.

She shook her head and said, "I don't know." She'd been talking to her husband, and seeing a counselor, and talking to her friends, but she felt as though she wasn't really getting anywhere.

"What about you?" She asked. "How do you answer that question?"

What would you have said if you were me? What gives you your sense of identity? What most defines you?

This is what I said.

"Well, as a follower of Jesus, I don't think my identity is mine to discover or to determine for myself. I believe it is defined by God. Actually, it's defined by my relationship *with* God. I am his. I belong to him. That's my core identity."

Let me use the rest of this message to elaborate, and to give you a biblical basis for my response.

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I'm convinced we have a completely wrong way of thinking about identity. We think it is based on something that is true about *us*.

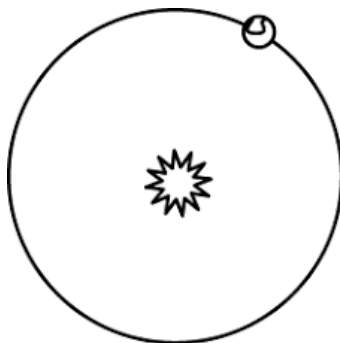
But it isn't. Our identity is based on something that is true about *us and God* together. *We cannot understand who we are without reference to God.*

Let me give you an example to explain what I mean. This might be helpful. Think of the earth. What comes to mind? Probably this.



We think of the earth as a thing in itself: what it's made of, how big it is, how much land and water we see on its surface, or maybe something about the resources it holds or the atmosphere that shelters it. All true and important things.

But think of how much we leave out if we speak about the earth without reference to the sun.



The earth's path through space, its changing seasons, its rhythm of night and day, its hot and cold regions, its resulting wind and weather, the life that teems and thrives in its oceans, on its lands, in its skies: every one of those things is defined and determined by the earth's relationship to the sun.

We can only ever truly understand the earth when we see it in its conjoined relationship with the sun: that it is a sphere in orbit around, bound to, illumined by, enlivened by, a massive nearby star.

Turns out that the most important and defining truth about earth is not to be found in or on the earth at all. It is that the earth is paired up with the sun.

In the same way, we can easily fall into considering ourselves in isolation, in and of ourselves, and focus on the things that are true about us apart from anything or anyone else.

But it is utterly inadequate for a follower of Jesus to define himself or herself in isolation. The deepest and truest things about Christians cannot be said until we see them – see ourselves – not in isolation, but in unceasing relation to God: creature bound to Creator, subject yielded to King, child loved by Father, captive saved by rescuer, sheep following shepherd.

There is much discussion about *identity* in the surrounding winds of our culture these days. But almost all of it is misguided – even within the church. The reason is we have lost the proper starting point. We think identity begins and ends with *us*.

You are familiar with the way people from long ago were named and known – their personal name followed by the name of the city they were from: Leonardo da Vinci,

Thomas a Kempis, Julian of Norwich, Nicholas von Zinzendorf, Teresa de Ávila, and so on.

Our home – that place that shapes us and defines us, that place we know best and are best known, that place from which we go out each day and to which we return each night – that place defines our identity.

The exact same thing is true in a spiritual sense for those who are followers of Jesus.

We talked last week about how we are pilgrims, and God himself is our true home, and that the place that is the destination of our pilgrimage, that is what defines us.

That's exactly how Jesus talks about his followers.

In Mark 9.41, Jesus says:

You are of Christ.

Which is rightly understood and translated as, "You belong to the Messiah, the Promised King. You are *his*."

So it's Peter of Christ, Andrew of Christ, Mary of Christ, Joana of Christ.

Paul picks up on this same language to describe all followers of Jesus, including us.

In I Corinthians 3.23 and Galatians 3.29 he says: "You are of Christ."

In Galatians 5.24 and I Corinthians 15.23 he says: "They are of Christ."

And in I Corinthians 1.12 he says, "*Ego Xristou*. I am of Christ."

So it isn't just Peter of Christ, and Mary of Christ. It is David of Christ and Troy of Christ and Sang of Christ and Dulcy of Christ and Nico and Novia of Christ, and all the rest of us.

This isn't just a cool last name, like Leonardo da Vinci. This is a statement of our truest identity as followers of Christ. We belong *to him*.

You cannot understand who I am unless we bring God into the picture. He explains me. He defines me. He gives me my identity.

The last novel written by CS Lewis, the one he said far and away was his favorite, is also his most difficult. It is challenging but it is well worth the read. It's called *Till We Have Faces*.

The book is a retelling of the Greek myth of Psyche and Cupid from a Christian perspective. It is the story of two sisters. One, Psyche, falls in love with an invisible Greek god named Cupid. The other, Orual, is unable to see the god, and she is jealous of her sister and becomes mean and spiteful, doing everything she can to make life difficult for her sister.

The first sister lives in the greatest possible joy and freedom because of her relationship with the god, and her face is radiant with the love they share – she is his! But Orual lives a small and bitter and inward-turned life – and she lives it all behind a veil. That veil represents not a mask but a lack of true identity because she has no relationship with the god.

She wears it until she finally comes face to face with the god and, seeing him, sees herself for the first time. She finds her face by looking in the face of God.

Peter Kreeft wrote a book in which he explores the meaning of *Till We Have Faces*. This is what he says:

Finding God's face and finding our own cannot be separate from and independent of each other. We cannot face God without facing ourselves, and we cannot face ourselves without facing God. . . We know ourselves only by knowing God. . . Our identity is found in God. (40)

Bottom line: *who we are is answered by whose we are.*

This is exactly what Paul is getting at in Galatians chapter 3 when he writes:

Galatians 3.26-29:

So in Christ Jesus *you are all children of God* through faith, for all of *you* who were baptized into Christ *have clothed yourselves with Christ*. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for *you are all one in Christ Jesus*. If *you belong to Christ*, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Paul says: It is so easy for us to try to define ourselves on the basis of earthly distinctives: gender (male or female), ethnicity (Jew or Gentile), cultural status (slave or free). And that's exactly what we see our culture doing.

But that's wrong. In Christ, when we put our faith in him, those distinctions recede. Those are things *about* us, but those things are not *us*.

Paul says: here's the only sure footing for our identity. We are clothed with Christ. One in Christ. Belonging to Christ.

He elaborates in Colossians 3.12:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Looking for a verse to memorize this week? Here's a great one.

Three words that define our identity. Five words that describe how we will be as a result of who we are.

First, the words that define us.

We are *chosen*. Selected. Picked out. Chosen from among the many. His heart was set on us.

We are *holy*. Distinctive because of having been chosen, and because of who did the choosing. We were pulled out of the world's realm and placed in the realm of God, and we are different as a result.

And we are *dearly loved*. Whoever is chosen by God and set apart by God is loved by God. God prizes us. We are the object of his affection. He takes pleasure in us and seeks our best even when that costs him – as it did, greatly.

Want to hear a great story? It's a short one. Once upon a time, God chose you. He set you apart for himself. And he made you the object of his affection forever. And you lived happily ever after. (I'd say "the end," but this story doesn't have an end.)

Do you believe it? Tim Keller said, "You are the stories you believe."

We are chosen, set apart, and dearly loved. And here are the five words that describe how we will *be* as a result of who we are and whose we *are*. Those who look in our lives should be able to draw a straight line from where we're from to how we live.

"I am your home now," Jesus says, "and this is how we do things where I come from."

God makes us

- compassionate, tuning in to the needs and struggles of others
- kind, good-hearted, open-handed, quick to be good and do good
- humble, not having a high view of ourselves compared to others
- gentle-hearted, not resorting to strength or anger to get our way
- and forbearing, not quick to anger but patient in the face of opposition or attack

One summer a number of years ago our family headed west for vacation. At one point we were cutting across Illinois on a two lane highway and we found ourselves coming into a small town that had a sign that said, "Welcome to Tampico, population 690, birthplace of Ronald Reagan, fortieth president of the United States of America."

Why do you think that town put that sign up? Because they believed where he came from shaped who he was, and who he was shaped what he did. So who he was, was a reflection on his home.

Jesus says, "Exactly."

As followers of Jesus, God is our home. And our home defines us. Shapes us. We are his. We **belong** to him. We are the **beloved** of God. And our lives cannot help but reflect where we are from and who and whose we are.

This is us.



The declaration on our t-shirt, the banner over our lives, is: *Ego Xristou*. I am of Christ. I belong to him. I am his beloved.

So what would it look like to go through life as this guy, as someone whose identity is rooted in belonging to and being loved by Jesus?

I think it might mean if we caught a glimpse of ourselves in a reflection in a window, we'd say, "Thank you Lord for making me me, and for making me yours."

I think it might mean if we walked into a room full of people, we wouldn't be watching ourselves, monitoring our own every move, and how others responded to us. Our focus wouldn't be on us at all. We'd be thinking about them – how we could be God's person in their life today.

If we found ourselves rejected by a friend, we wouldn't be crushed, because our sense of self doesn't rise and fall with the approval of others. God chose us, he set us apart for himself, and we are the object of his affection. How someone else views us doesn't change that or diminish it in any way.

If we were on our phones we wouldn't get sucked into doom scrolling, constantly comparing ourselves to others. We would use our phones to build real relationships with real people, not to prop up curated versions of ourselves.

And if we got a bad grade, or didn't get the part or make the team, that wouldn't change the way we thought about ourselves. I'm not defined by how I do, I'm defined by who and whose I am.

I am of Christ. I belong to him. I am his.

And that isn't just our this-world identity. This is our this-world-and-the-world-to-come forever identity.

T-shirts are a you-wear-them-and-they-fade-and-you-throw-them-out fleeting way of expressing identity. But there are more permanent expressions of our identity as well.

Have you ever thought about this? What you would want your tombstone to say?

As we think about being pilgrims passing through this life on our way to the life to come, it's actually a relevant question.

Isn't a gravestone the place where the essence of our identity is summed up and preserved for future generations? How would you want your identity summed up?

There are lots of things that are true about us. Our name. When and where we lived. Who we loved. What we accomplished. All those things could go on our gravestone. All things that some people try to put on their gravestones.

But really, one word can sum up the entirety of our identity as pilgrims making our way home.



We are his. When my body is eventually laid in a grave, I kind of think I'd like that one word to be on my gravestone.

You, who are looking at this gravestone: this is all you really need to know about the person whose life this stone commemorates.

That is the truest thing that can be said of him during the years he lived as a pilgrim here on earth.

And it's the truest thing that can be said of him still, as he lives eternally in joy in Christ's presence.

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To wrap up this morning, I've asked Laura Murray-Kolb if she would come and share with us a little bit about her faith and how she has been processing this question of identity.

As you just heard, my name is Laura Murray-Kolb and I'm a professor and the Head of the Department of Nutrition Science at Purdue. My research focuses on iron deficiency and anemia and their effects on neural development and functioning. When Dave asked me if I would be willing to speak on my identity in Christ, I started by making a list of my "labels":

According to my passport, I am a U.S. citizen.

I am a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a mom. I'm a scientist, a professor, a department head.

I am a Jesus follower.

I am pragmatic – I ask lots of questions and I seek out data and facts to guide my decisions.

I started my labels with "according to my passport...", because I was raised in a missionary family, with parents who were church planters in northeast Italy. As a result, I often find it difficult to answer the question, "where are you from?" I have two sisters and one brother. My earliest sense of identity was shaped around the dinner table, especially through family devotions when we would not only read the Bible together but would also learn about different cultures around the world and pray specifically for them. Many of the cultures that we discussed were ones where girls were not allowed to receive an education and women were oppressed and I have vivid memories of my dad reaching his hands across the table to place them on my and my sister's hands and assure us this was not OK – that girls were just as valuable as boys and that we could become anything God wanted us to become. Two lessons that were deeply engrained in me during those family devotion times were: 1) people are what matters most to God and 2) God created me and my personality with a specific plan for my life; I shouldn't shy away from whatever He calls me to, even if it's something really hard, as He is faithful.

This understanding shapes how I live and lead day-to-day. I work in a very high-achieving environment where students and faculty are judged by their performance. Because of my identity in Christ, I am purposeful about upholding our very high standards while simultaneously conveying to students and faculty

that their achievements (or lack thereof) do not define who they are. Am I going to hold them to those high standards? Absolutely. But their ability to achieve them doesn't define who they are. My prayer is that the tie of identity and achievement being intertwined will be untangled as students and faculty understand that their identity comes from Christ; He has already fought and won the battle so that we could be free.

Throughout my life, I have come back to these important foundations, especially in difficult times. As I was finishing my PhD, I was diagnosed with a very rare hematologic neoplasm (i.e. blood cancer); it puts me at high risk for blood clots and for bleeding, which makes treatment very challenging. In 2011, as a result of complications from this cancer, I experienced a severe medical trauma and lost a massive amount of blood. I was life-flighted to a regional trauma center and later released with the understanding that the probability of it recurring was nearly certain and the chance of surviving it again, was almost nonexistent. The days that ensued were filled with multiple instances of a gripping sense of fear. I had a 3-year old and I was forced to face the reality that I might not survive to raise him. Moments like these have a way of stripping identities down to their core. Control disappears. And the question of identity becomes very simple: Who am I, really, when everything else feels uncertain? That's where I go back to the foundation – that my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. Two lessons that I learned during this time that are specifically related to my identity in Christ are that I am loved and I am free. I could rest in the fact that God loved me, my husband, and my son and that He had good plans for us. That deep sense of being loved allowed me to also experience the deep sense of being free – especially free from the worry of my son growing up without me (after all, God is able to raise him into the man he created, even if I'm not around); I was free to die.

Those lessons came flooding back, two years later, when I received a diagnosis of uterine cancer. I'd love to tell you that I had no fear but that would be a lie. However, I was able to more quickly rest in the fact that 1) I am loved by the God of the universe and 2) because of His love for me, I am free.

My identity is anchored in knowing that I am loved, providing me with the freedom to live for Christ. While I'm still on this journey as I make my way to my true home, I am learning more and more what Jesus meant in John 10:10 when he said, "I came that they may have life and have it to the full." While I still have breath in my lungs, I intend to embrace the fullness of life that Christ has provided.