

“How to Avoid Identity Theft”

Luke 15:11-24

Series: Finding Your Way Back to God Week 4. Awakening to Love

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One of the curses of the twenty-first century is identity theft. I know this from personal experience. In the last two years I needed to replace my credit card four times. Once, the credit card company called us on Christmas day to tell us our card number was used to make a lot of purchases in Cranford, New Jersey on Christmas Eve. The representative asked, “Now sir, just to verify that you did not make these purchases, do you know where you were on Christmas Eve?” I paused and said, “Yes sir. I know where I was on Christmas Eve. I was not even in the state of New Jersey.” “Do you have any witnesses?” he asked. “Yes. About a thousand.”

Last year at this time, the identity thieves upped the ante. When I submitted my taxes, my accountant said, “I have bad news. Your 1040 was rejected.” “Why?” “Apparently, someone stole your identity and already filed a false return.” This type of tax fraud is expected to reach \$21 billion this year. I didn’t lose any money but I had to file an affidavit with the IRS and the Federal Trade Commission, place a fraud alert on my credit report with the three major Reporting companies, enroll in a credit monitoring program and even contact my local police department to report a crime. It can be a little unnerving to have a police officer in full uniform visit your house. But then I realized the officer was a member of Woodside. When he recognized me I think he became a little nervous because he hadn’t been to worship in a while. I told him if he could clear my name of this identity theft I would put in a good word for him with my Boss.

I can’t tell you how to avoid this kind of fraud. Yet there is another kind of identity theft which costs more than money, is harder to stop, and goes right down to your soul. This is about your real identity. Psychologists have long discussed the concept of the “ego” which comes from the Greek word for “I.” Your identity is who you are. It’s a mixture of how you see yourself and how others see you, what you tell yourself and what others say about you, what you think about yourself and what others think about you. There are powerful forces which mold, stretch and squeeze your identity, ego, or self-image. Some of these are positive and build us up. Others, perhaps many others, are negative. They reject us, knock us down, beat us up, or crush us. These are the forces that steal your true identity. Some of these forces are outside you.

- Your past: did you receive love and security or neglect, abandonment or abuse?
- Your current relationships, family, friends, school, work: do they affirm you and encourage you or criticize you, pressure you, put you down or reject you?
- The media: what does it tell you about who you should be and do, how you should look?
- Your future: what’s ahead for you? Exciting opportunities or worry and anxiety?

Some of these forces are inside you.

- What you think about yourself
- How you feel about yourself
- What you wish for yourself
- What you regret about yourself

If you want to catch your self-image in action, try to observe how you compare and compete with others at home, school, work or in the community. We often don't realize how we are measuring ourselves against one another. In 1921, a German psychologist noticed chickens form into a hierarchy. Each hen knows which hens are above and which are below. From his study he coined a term: "pecking order." We humans compare ourselves to one another in terms of income, possessions, intelligence, beauty, size, accomplishments, and strength. We use these comparisons to determine our position in the pecking order. We feel superior to some, inferior to others, intimidated by some and critical of others, better than some, worse than others.

To combat the pressure of outside forces on our self-image, we sometimes build a strong outer shell to show the world. We want others to see us as strong and successful, important and impressive. Unfortunately, we know what's inside and we don't believe what we show others. In 1978, two American psychologists, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, observed what they call "The Impostor Syndrome." They describe it as:

A feeling of "phoniness in people who believe that they are not intelligent, capable, or creative despite evidence of high achievement." While these people "are highly motivated to achieve," they also "live in fear of being 'found out' or exposed as frauds."

If it sounds familiar, you aren't alone. The late American author and poet Maya Angelou won three Grammys and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award. Yet she shared,

I have written 11 books, but each time I think, "Uh oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out."¹

Maybe we feel like frauds because no matter what we accomplish or achieve, it never satisfies the emptiness in our identity.

The other side of a strong outer image is a hunger to receive outer approval and to receive applause. Yet the applause is never enough. Comedian Jim Carrey gave a revealing speech this year just before he presented the Golden Globe award for the best comedy motion picture.

I am two-time Golden Globe Winner, Jim Carrey. You know, when I go to sleep at night, I'm not just a guy going to sleep. I'm two-time Golden Globe winner, Jim Carrey, going to get some well-needed shut-eye. And when I dream, I don't just dream any old dream. No sir. I dream about being three-time Golden Globe winning actor, Jim Carrey. Because then I would be enough. It would finally be true. And I could stop this terrible search for what I know ultimately won't fulfill me.

¹Carl Richards, "Learning to Deal with the Impostor Syndrome," The New York Times (10-26-15).

Notice: he didn't say "it" would be enough. He said, "**I** would be enough." This constant search of the I, the ego, to impress and please others steals our identities.

Life stole the identity of the prodigal son. And he went along with it. First he "Awakened to Longing." He thought the emptiness and hunger inside him would be answered by the thrill of a wild life far beyond his small village. He was willing to give up everything for it: his family, his community, his country, his money and his religion. Most of all, he killed his relationship with his father by wishing him dead, gathering up his inheritance, and leaving home. When life steals our identity it doesn't just affect us. It steals from everyone around us.

Yet this hunger for a new identity actually stole his identity and left him hungry – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When he hit bottom in the mud of a pig sty, the boy "Awakened to Regret." Regret drove him to a decision: he would go home and try to recapture some of his old identity. They say "You can never go home" and in his case he knew it would never be the same. The people in the village will likely shame, shun, and reject him. His father and brother will certainly not let him back in the house or the family. The school of hard knocks taught him he will have to earn his way back in, his place in the pecking order again.

He has an "Awakening to Help." He is not asking for a hand out but a hand up. He wants to apply for a job to pay back his debt. The scribes and Pharisees listening to Jesus' parable would approve of this. Their image of God is a Judge who requires us to prove ourselves, to demonstrate our sincerity with actions, to earn our salvation. Yet like Maya Angelou and Jim Carrey, no matter how much we do it's never enough. I am never enough.

Then, in one breathtaking moment, his entire plan is turned upside down. Before the villagers can publicly shame him, before they can attack his self-image with their curses, before he even makes his plea for a job, his father comes running.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20b)

His father saved him from the humiliating attack of the villagers. His father took all the shame and sin of his boy on himself. And the father did all this before the boy said a single word. Grace is a freely given gift we do not deserve. Grace means that forgiveness comes before confession, that salvation is waiting before repentance, that love does not require conditions.

Now comes the fourth awakening: the Awakening to Love. The boy is so overwhelmed and undone by love that his job application speech suddenly becomes his confession:

The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' (Luke 15:21)

Sometimes, when studying this parable in a group, I am asked, "How do you know the boy won't go out and do it again?" I don't know that. Neither does the father. Love requires a risk. Yet I think the change of heart we see in this moment reveals the boy has finally received his true identity. What the father does next proves this identity. Seemingly oblivious to the boy's confession, the father gives directions to the servants standing by.

But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:22-24)

The father instantly gives his boy three symbolic gifts.

1. The Robe. This is not just any robe. It is the father’s robe – the one he wears at special celebrations. He directs the servants to dress the boy which tells them they must respect him as a son again. The best robe also tells the villagers they must honor him as they would the father.

2. The Ring. This is a signet ring. It is a sign of the father’s authority. Documents were sealed with a signet ring. It’s like the father’s signature. It’s like giving him the credit card or the user name and password to the bank account.

3. The Shoes. Servants do not wear shoes in that culture. When the servants put the shoes on the boy they show that they accept him as their master again.

The point of these three symbolic gifts is to demonstrate the boy’s true identity as a son of the father. He does not deserve it. Yet the father freely, graciously gives it. Then the father orders the servants to sacrifice the fattened calf. This was only done for great celebrations when you plan to invite over a hundred people. Clearly, the father wants the whole village to celebrate the return, the resurrection of his son.

Now before you say, “This doesn’t seem fair” let me tell you that this is what God the Father wants to do for you. This is the true identity God wants to give you. One passage that was very important to Jesus was Isaiah 61. He selected it for his inaugural sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. In that chapter it says,

I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness. (Isaiah 61:10)

You are covered, wrapped, enrobed by the righteousness of God. What does that mean? When God the Father looks at you, He doesn’t see your mistakes. He doesn’t see your sin. He doesn’t see your low self-image. He sees you as forgiven. He sees you as pure. He sees you as righteous. He sees you as right. He sees you as His beloved child and He wants everyone to know that that is your true identity. He wants to celebrate that you have come back to life. You won’t find your true identity outside or inside. Your true identity as a child of God comes down from above.

Now you may say, “Wait, I know I’m not right. I know I’m not pure. I know I make mistakes. I know I sin. Is God blind?” No. The truth is we are identity thieves. We have taken on someone else’s identity. Elyse Fitzpatrick says,

The surprising reality, however, is that Christians are, by definition, people who have taken the identity of someone else: the Christ. Not only have you been given an identity that you weren't born with or that you didn't earn the right to use, but you're invited to

empty the checking account and use all the benefits this identity brings! This is so much better than identity theft—it's an identity gift!²

When I look at my own life, I realize I am a prodigal. So many times I live under the shadow of shame and lose my true identity. I carry around all sorts of regrets from years past as well as regrets from last week. So, I often don't feel worthy of God's love. And maybe you feel you've lost your identity too. That's why even after we find our way home; we still need the 4th Awakening...The Awakening to Love. Here you can cast off the shadow of shame and realize that God loves you deeply after all. Your true identity is a beloved child of our heavenly Father.

My hope is that when we walk out of here today, every one of us will walk confidently in the truth of our new identity. All throughout Scripture we see reminders of the identity God gives to us when we come home:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old is gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Your past is in the past. You are a new creation. You are home!

“God made Jesus who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). God sees you as right as Jesus. You are home!

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Ephesians 1:7). Your sins are forgiven. Your record is clean. You are home!

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). You are not condemned. Goodbye shame! You are home!

“Nothing in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). You can never be separated from God's love. You are home!

I want you to say no to any voice, inside or outside you, that tells us we are not accepted by the Father. Father Henri Nouwen says:

Every time you feel hurt, offended, or rejected, you have to dare to say to yourself: 'These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity, and held safe in an everlasting belief.'³

This is awakening to God's love. Shame, guilt, and a negative self-image are a jail cell. But now, in Christ, that door to your jail cell is wide open. Don't let the voices inside or outside steal your identity. Take Jesus' hand, walk out of the jail cell and say, “I am God's beloved child.”

² Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Because He Loves Me: How Christ Transforms Our Daily Life* (Crossway, 2008), p. 51

³ Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroads: 1992)