

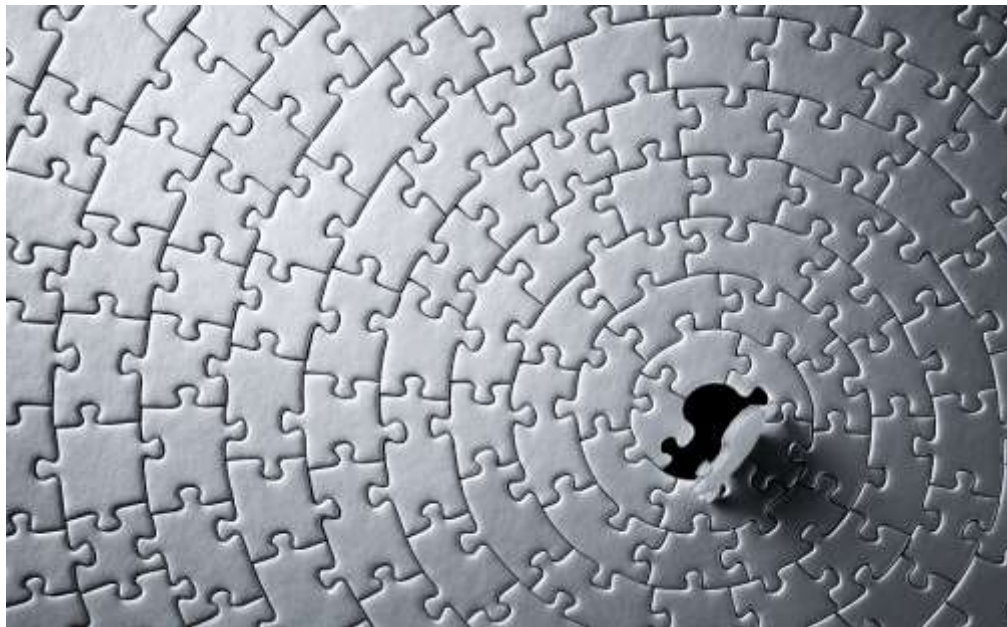
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Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Life Beyond Death: Says Who?”

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Isaiah 43:1–7

43 But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. ⁵Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth — ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Mark 8:27–35

²⁷Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. ³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." ³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

“Life Beyond Death: Says Who?”

Isaiah 43:1–7, Mark 8:27–35

A first-year high school teacher walks down the hallway on the first day of school. He pauses at the door of a veteran teacher who is sitting at her desk, reading the paper. “It’s my first day of teaching,” he says, “I need some advice.” Without looking up from her newspaper, she holds up two fingers. “Two things. One: know all their names by tomorrow. Two: It’s more important that they know *you* than that they know what you *know*.”¹ *“It’s more important that they know you than that they know what you know.”*

The eighth chapter of Mark represents a **turning point** in the gospel story. Up to this point, Jesus has been making the rounds of the towns of Galilee, healing and teaching, casting out demons, angering religious authorities, sharing meals with all kinds of sinners, and stirring up strong emotions in people wherever he goes. Now Jesus wants to find out what his followers have learned. So he asks them, “Who do people say that I am?”

The author Amin Maalouf was born in Lebanon but has lived in France for over forty years. He knows something about the challenges of identity, observing in his writing that, often, we allow other people to pick our identity for us – usually by criticizing a certain aspect of ourselves. For example, if someone criticizes your gender, you feel your gender identity more acutely. If someone calls out your religion or nationality, your allegiance to that community grows stronger.” People often see themselves in terms of whichever one of their allegiances is most under attack,” Maalouf writes.²

This exchange between Jesus and the disciples in Mark 8 suggests that Jesus is well aware of this dynamic. He knows that the disciples have been trying to figure out *who he is*, and that one of the ways they are doing so is by listening to what **other** people say. And sure enough, they have answers to his question, “Other people say you are, John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets.” But it turns out, this is really not what Jesus is interested in. He knows that if the disciples are truly going to be his followers, then they are going to have to figure out for themselves not only Jesus’ identity, but their own. So the next question he asks is, **“Who do you say that I am?”**

¹ Boyle, Gregory (2010-02-14). *Tattoos on the Heart* (p. 54). Simon & Schuster, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

² David Brooks, “In Praise of Equipose,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2017.

Rachel Held Evans is a devout Christian. She has made a name for herself as an intelligent and insightful writer about matters of Christian faith. From the outside, she looks like a faithful follower of Jesus. But she knows differently. Evans has identified a disturbing cycle to her faith. In phase one of this cycle, she realizes that her commitment to Jesus is primarily intellectual -- it's all in her head. Jesus is an idea she believes in, not a person she follows. In phase two, she reads through the gospels – again – and discovers that Jesus doesn't want her just to *like* him, he wants her to *follow* him. In phase three she reads the latest book on how Christians should fight poverty and decides that following Jesus means selling all her things, and starting an inner-city monastic community. In phase four she remembers that she has a job, a mortgage, and a husband who is really not interested in doing those things. Finally, phase five: overwhelmed by the growing sense that her convictions are entirely unrealistic, she gives up and goes back to phase one where she can believe in the *idea* of Jesus and not disrupt her life too much by actually following him.

Once Evans finally recognized the cycle and its phases, she realized she could do something to break the cycle. But in order to do this, she has to be realistic, not just about who she understands Jesus to be, but about who she is. Yes, she needs to get her faith out of her head and into her hands, but she has to do this *within* the reality of her own life and responsibilities. In other words, she realized she has to follow Jesus as Rachel Evans, not as anyone else.³

We can't follow Jesus by trying to live into someone else's idea of what it means to follow Jesus. One size does not fit all when it comes to discipleship, which is why Jesus says you have to pick up *your* cross, and not someone else's. To follow Jesus, we need to know – for ourselves – that he is the Christ, God's chosen one, the Messiah, but it's just as important, if we're going to deny ourselves, and pick up our crosses and follow him, that we know, really know, *who* we are...and *whose* we are. We need to be able to move beyond our intellectual and emotional attachments to the identities that others have given us, in order to embrace the identity that God gives us.

Father Gregory Boyle, who works in the projects of Los Angeles, writes about a conversation with a gang member who epitomized cool. This kid didn't walk, he swaggered, with a head bob and a serious scowl. When they first met, Father Gregory asked him his name. "Sniper," he sneered. "Okay, look," Father

³ <http://rachelheldevans.com/jesus-without-shane-claiborne>

Gregory said, "I have a feeling you didn't pop outta your mom and she took one look at your sorry [self] and said, 'Sniper.' So, come on, *what's your name?*" The kid relented, just a little. "Gonzalez," he said. "Now, son," said the priest, "I know some people will call you by your last name, but I'm not down with that. Tell me, what's your mom call you?" "Cabron," he responded, with the slightest flicker of innocence, even though, if you know Spanish slang, you know this is not a nice name. "No doubt." Father Gregory said. "But, son, I'm looking for birth certificate here." Finally, the kid softened. His posture and his expression lost their swagger and revealed embarrassment and a newfound vulnerability. "Napoleon," he managed to squeak. "Wow," Father Gregory said. "That's a fine, noble, historic name. But I'm almost positive that when your mama calls you, she doesn't use the whole nine yards. Come on, tell me, do you have a nick name? *What's your mom call you?*" Then, in front of Boyle's eyes, the kid went to some far-off, distant place – a place he hadn't been in a long time. His voice, body language, and whole being took on a new shape. "Sometimes," he said, "sometimes...when my mom's not mad at me...she calls me...Napito." Father Gregory writes, "I watched this kid move, *transformed*, from Sniper to Gonzalez to Cabron to Napoleon to Napito. We all just want to be called by the name our mom uses when she's not mad at us."⁴

When Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and pick up their cross and follow me," he isn't talking about denying ourselves material things; he's talking about getting beyond those layers of identity that we put on or that other people put on us. He's talking about that transformation from Sniper to Gonzalez to Cabron to Napoleon to Napito....or from Dr. Sullivan to Robert to Dad to Rob to Bobby...or from Mrs. Edwards to Cassandra to Aunt Cass to Cassie. *Underneath all the names that others give us is a **core identity** given to us by our **Creator**.*

God doesn't look at us and call us doctor or your honor or professor or pastor; God is not impressed by whatever titles or authority the world gives us. But you know what else? God doesn't look at us and call us addict or failure or glutton, either – even though we might know, deep down, that these things define us too. God looks at *all* those names and passes over them to call us by our first name, our original name, the name no other name can cover up or take away: *beloved*. God knows what other people say we are, God knows who we think we are...and God calls us *beloved*.

⁴ Boyle, Gregory (2010-02-14). Tattoos on the Heart (p. 53-54). Simon & Schuster, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

In a recent article, David Brooks introduces the concept of *equipoise*, which he describes as the ability to move gracefully through multiple identities. According to Brooks, “The person with equipoise doesn’t feel attachments less powerfully, but weaves several deep allegiances into one symphony.” In other words, equipoise is a trait that enables us to experience *life beyond identity* – beyond the identities assigned to us because of our gender or sexuality or marital status or profession or race or religion or ethnicity. My identity – and yours – is both the sum of and something much more than our unique combination of traits.

In this same article, David Brooks writes that is a myth to think that there is one identity that matters most, and here I have to disagree.⁵ Because, theologically speaking, there *is* indeed one identity that matters most, one identity that defines us and connects us to God and one another, and that identity is that we belong to God, we are created in the image of God, we are – first and foremost and forever and always – God’s *beloved*. This is the identity that can never be altered, no matter what other identities change.

In 1975, an ex-marine and Vietnam veteran named Oliver Sipple happened to be standing in a crowd of people in San Francisco waiting to catch a glimpse of President Gerald Ford as he exited a hotel. When the president came into view, a woman in front of Oliver reached into her bag, pulled out a handgun, and shot at Ford. She missed, and before she could take a second shot, Oliver’s instincts kicked in, and he grabbed the woman’s shooting arm and held her until the police got to her and took her away. The press hailed Oliver as a hero. But as reporters worked to find out more about this seemingly all-American guy, they discovered something else about him that did not fit with the picture they had tried to paint: Oliver was gay. And not only was he gay, he was a friend and supporter of the gay-rights activist Harvey Milk.

Unfortunately, Oliver’s family back in Michigan did not know about his sexual orientation, and when they found out about it through the national press, they were inundated by reporters and shunned by their community. In response, Oliver spoke at a press conference, where he said this, “My sexuality is a part of my private life and has no bearing on my response to the acts of a person seeking to take the life of another. I am first and foremost a human being who enjoys and respects life. I feel that a person’s worth is determined by how

⁵ David Brooks, *Ibid.*

he or she responds to the world in which they live, not on how or what or with whom a private life is shared."⁶

Just a few weeks ago, reporter Al Letson showed a similar understanding of the shared identity that connects us all, when he put himself between a white nationalist and the anti-Fascist protesters beating him up. When asked why he – an African American – would protect someone who seeks to deny his humanity based on race, Letson said, "it doesn't matter to me if he doesn't see my humanity, what matters is that I see his."⁷

What does a life beyond identity look like? How does it change the way we navigate the world? How does it change the way we interact with others – loved ones *and* enemies? Well, the questions Jesus asks today are a good place to start figuring that out: Who do other people say that you are? Who do you say that you are? Most importantly, who does God say you are? May you find your connection to God through your identity as God's beloved, and may you find your connection to others through their identity as God's beloved too.

Amen.

⁶ <http://www.radiolab.org/story/oliver-sipple/>

⁷ <http://www.npr.org/2017/08/28/546831794/i-saw-his-humanity-reveal-host-on-protecting-right-wing-protester>