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## **Who Are You?**

**Matthew 10: 26-31**

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Who are you? Some questions that are asked aren't meant to be answered and this one is one of them. We often ask, "How are you?" or "How're ya doin'?" sometimes really wanting to know how the other is faring but other times, it's just one of those questions we throw out to break the silence or start a conversation.

Most of us understand this. We ask it – on the street, at work, in Fellowship Hall – and then move on to some subject other than the state of the other or even to another person, whichever comes first. But "Who are you?" Now that's a question of a different sort; it's one that demands something of us, something more than a "Not bad" to the "How're ya doin'?" Actually, unless we want to stay on the surface and answer, "Who am I? Well, I'm Tom Carr of West Hartford, Connecticut" then move on, the question of the morning causes us to look deeply into ourselves because it's a question of one's identity.

Who are you? There's a scene in Alice in Wonderland/Through the Looking Glass, when the self-contained Alice, who is the picture of rationality and sensibility, the well-put-together girl, is stopped up short by the caterpillar on his toadstool. This irrational, mythical creature of wind and smoke has the audacity to ask her in a condescending tone, "Who are you?"

The question, when put that way, bothers most of us greatly because it seems that the questioner already knows the answer – and doesn't like it or believe it.

Who are you? Of course, a lot of people think that who they are is defined by what they do. Sometimes, if you go to a conference, you'll get a pre-printed nametag and on it, and there will be your name and your title or what you do on your job: Tom Carr, Minister or Joe Smith, CEO or Jane Doe; Doctor, Jim Williams, Teacher., John Brown, Custodian; and so on. Which is OK, but if you stop and think about it for a moment, you know that all these people you're with for this conference are much more than their job – they are fathers, mothers, have hobbies, likes and dislikes and annoying habits and may have saved someone's life they never even knew – but in that setting, they are defined by their work, what they do.

There are millions of people who accept that and are defined by what they do. And, to a great extent, many of us also answer the "Who are you?" question by what

others think of us or expect of us or the place they put us. But what happens when what we do changes? What happens when we retire or are forced to change our occupation – and the expectations change. Does your identity change, too? Do you answer the question differently or is there something that stays the same about you irrespective of your occupation or station in life?

I'm not just talking about those in or facing retirement. Pastors, when we're honest with ourselves, face this all the time. Our identities are so often tied to being a pastor that when we are no longer serving in that capacity . . . Who are we? Personally, I wrestle with it, a lot. Students also deal with this when they get ready to graduate from a way of life that has been theirs for 75% of their lives – from ages 5 to 18 or 22 or so. Who am I once I'm not a student, custodian, executive, doctor, pastor?

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Who are you? Someone recently said that the major reason for the decay of our society is not lack of education or all the violence or rampant consumerism or any of the “isms” that are so prevalent. Those are all symptoms of the deeper reason: a lack of self-worth, a lack of self-dignity, not knowing who you are.

The things and people and positions that define us or our circumstances in life, that which is often beyond our control, so many times traps us into answering the question “Who am I?” by the definitions of our circumstances. And that can make us afraid, hopeless and it can suck out all the life from us.

Maybe this is one of the purposes for Jesus' teachings in Matthew 10. His disciples were being sent out on a mission to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, to cure the sick, cast out evil, give the dead new life. And it certainly would have been easy to fall into the trap of being defined by external voices and expectations: “Hey, guys! Let's see if you can do it. You're supposed to cast out demons, raise the dead, be preachers of great renown. C'mon; let's see you do it - if you are who you say you are.” A great temptation, indeed, to base your identity on expectations like that. To do so, is to fall into a trap that you'll never get out of. And your only companions on this road will be fear and insecurity.

But Jesus says to them, “Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of those who want to squeeze you into some kind of mold and define you. Don't fear those who'll give you a pat answer to the question ‘Who are you?’ Know that you are a child of God, valued by God, loved by God.” Actually, Jesus puts it this way: “Not even a sparrow lights on the ground (by the way: that's what the Greek word translated “falls” to the ground means – to light or land on the ground) apart from God's knowing it. Even the hairs on your head are all counted. So don't be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

And old rabbinic teaching says this: “When a person walks along the street, he or she is preceded by two angels who walk ahead calling, ‘Make way! Make way! Make way for the image of God!’”

Who are you? Certainly, in part, we are what we do and where we come from – in part. And, yes, in part, we are what others see in us and expect of us – in part. But the good news is that's not the heart of it. The heart of the gospel is that you and I and every other human being who has ever been and will ever be, is a child of God, created

in God's image, uniquely so, so that every hair on our head is counted, every unique and wonderful and not-so-wonderful thing about us is taken up and embraced by God. We are somebody because we are God's somebody and God, in a phrase I heard a long time ago, doesn't make junk. God makes children not bound or limited by experience or expectation. God makes children of expectation who remember who they are and Whose they are, who yearn for a life in which all the conflicting and confusing and competing parts of us come together to serve something and Someone so much greater than all our parts put together.

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For some of us, what I just said makes us fearful. Not because we feel unworthy or so small, but because we know, deep down, that it is true. And since it is true that we are, indeed, children of Light, children of the One God, then that makes us powerful beyond our imagination. Powerful, however, in the Way of Jesus who knew so profoundly that he was embraced, valued and loved by God, that he gave his life so that we might know that truth, too.

I close with words spoken by Nelson Mandela in 1994 at his inauguration as President of South Africa. Actually, the words are those of Marianne Williamson whom Mandela quoted in his speech. May they shed light on the gospel and lead us on our journey to answer the question "Who am I?"

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine, as children do.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

"Let your light shine before others that they might see  
the goodness and give glory to God."

(Matthew 5: 14-16)