

Sermon Draft

Text: Acts 17:16–31

Sermon: “Who Are You?”

Is your identity, that is, who you are, a product of what you decide and do, or is it what you receive from God? To put it another way, is who you are a self-construction, or are you instead a creation of someone else, namely, God?

There seems to be much confusion about this in our world today. A few years ago, in a paper for *The Minnesota Review*, culture and gender-studies researcher Whitney Stark argued that Newtonian physics is oppressive because it divides the observed world into binary categories, such as particles versus waves and space versus time—structures that she believes are arbitrary and lead to oppressive categories in other aspects of life. She contends, for example, that positive and negative charges observed in nature encourage people to think in terms of male and female. She believes that conclusions drawn from nature should be suppressed in the name of social causes.

She maintains that individuals should construct for themselves who they are (Whitney Stark, “Assembled Bodies: Reconfiguring Quantum Identities,” *The Minnesota Review* 88 [2017]: 69–82). She is not alone. This has become part of mainstream thought in our culture today.

This type of thinking, however, is disconnected from reality. The fact is that human social and moral life are not arbitrary or human-made constructions; rather, they are connected to nature that is, to reality, and ultimately to the reality of God. As Paul reminds us today, “[*God*] *himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything*” (v 25). Paul goes on to say that we know who God is because we see Jesus Christ: “[*Of this [God] has given assurance to all by raising [Jesus] from the dead*” (v 31). That is to say, first, the identity of God is made known in and through Jesus Christ and, second, “in him we live and move and have our being” (v 28). In other words, God’s identity is revealed in and our identity is in Jesus Christ.

Knowing who God is, is necessary for us to know who we are. While passing through the marketplace of Athens, Paul found an altar with this inscription: “[*To the unknown god*” (v 23).

²²So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

God, to the philosophers of the Areopagus, was a product of human imagination, someone we or others construct for ourselves. This is a form of identity theft, and identity theft is a real problem in our world today. With this ideology we lose not only who God is but who we are in Christ Jesus. We are God’s creation not the other way around. God made us who we are we do not make god into who or what we want. And when we do, that’s called sin.

If we don't know who God is, or if we seek to claim his identity for ourselves, we will never know who we are, and we will never truly live as God created and redeemed us to live. Paul states, ***“Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man”*** (v 29). If God is only a product of our imagination, it makes us God, Creator. But then to whom could we turn for help that’s bigger than ourselves? We often do make God a figment of our imagination, imagining he’ll answer prayers as we want, tolerate sins we hold dear, side with us in politics or personal squabbles. But that isn’t the real God; the real God would remain unknown to us. So where would we be?

In Christ, we do know who God is and who we are. Unlike the ancient Greeks, we do know who God is. The Athenians scoffed at the resurrection since they didn’t believe flesh was worth raising (v 32). The Greeks pictured their gods as appearing like humans, but never being humans, enfleshed.

We know our God because he did become human—flesh and blood that was not strange to him, but precious, worth being the sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the whole world. And when we see the man, Jesus Christ (v 31), in the flesh, we see God fully. Jesus says, ***“You will know that I am in my Father”*** (John 14:20).

Knowing God, then, we do know who we are. We who are flesh like Christ are thus made in his image: God ***“made from one man every nation of mankind”*** (v 26). We, as Christ’s brothers, are God’s children, as Jesus is his Son: ***“You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you”*** (John 14:20). God has called us by name to be his child in and through Holy Baptism. ***“Baptism . . . now saves you”*** (1 Peter 3:21). We therefore, have the purpose of being Christ to the world, not a purpose of our own imagining. Jesus said, ***“He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself [in] him”*** (John 14:21). We have the task to share the Gospel but we also must not neglect the Law. Sin is still sin despite what Satan, the world and certain groups or organizations say.

I want you to picture a pall, put on a casket at a funeral, is a reminder that in Holy Baptism we are clothed with Christ. It is like a bookend to the baptismal garment an infant wears when baptized into Christ. Both are reminders that in Baptism we are clothed with Christ. We are clothed with his forgiveness, his righteousness, and his life that conquers death.

Often there are symbols on a pall. Picture in your mind a pall with a red cross encircled in gold. This reminds us that the glory of God is seen in Jesus shedding his blood and dying for us on a cross. Such is his love for us. Somewhat to the side of the cross is a pitcher with streams of water and blood flowing out of it. This calls to mind the living water of Christ's love for us that flows from the font into our hearts and lives and the blood of his life, which we drink from the chalice. Below all of this are still waters (Psalm 23) that remind us that in Christ we have a *“peace that surpasses all understanding.”* Finally, blooming out of the still waters is an Easter lily that in the cold of winter is dead but with the warmth of the sun blooms anew.

In Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, we bloom anew in the glory of God, never to die again. We have a new identity in Christ, for ***“in him we live and move and have our being”*** (Acts 17:28).

We are in Christ and will live forever: ***“Because I live, you also will live”*** (John 14:19). There is no life without Christ.

God said, ***“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them”*** (Genesis 1:26–27). Isn't that interesting? Quantum physics confesses the reality of what God has created. Our Lord has made you and redeemed you by his name and Word to be who you are, and it is good. There is no one else like you. To top it off, God loves you for who you are, who he created and redeemed you to be. You are important to him, and he will be with you forever in Christ.

Amen