

A Series of Identity Crises

Texts: John 4: 4-30, 39; John 7:53-8:11; Date: 03/15/2020

In his book *Lament for a Son*, the Yale theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff writes about the tragic death of his son, Eric, in a mountain-climbing accident in Austria. He says, “if someone asks, ‘Who are you? Tell me about yourself,’ I say – not immediately, but shortly – ‘I am one who has lost a son.’ That loss determines my identity; not all of my identity, but much of it.”

The question of identity is at the heart of who we are. We tell our story as best we can, but we can never be quite sure how to tell it until it is completely done.

That’s the nature of stories, that you can’t tell them when you are in the midst of them, because you don’t know that you are in the midst of them. No one can write about their childhood until they are no longer a child. What happens later may shape the way we see everything that has come before in some way that changes its meaning.

This month is women’s history month, and to celebrate that, I want to look at two women of the Bible who aren’t named, who get their identity from the men around them, but who nevertheless are central to the question of Jesus’ identity. Their stories shape Jesus’ story, and our stories.

The story of the woman caught in adultery brings up profound questions of identity. When the story begins, a woman who has been caught in the very act of adultery with a man not her husband is brought in to the Temple Courts and set before Jesus.

Already there are questions of identity, but not hers! It all happens because of the question of Jesus’ identity. The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law are trying to trap Jesus. They think they have identified him already: a fraud, an imposter, someone who will lead the people astray.

Jesus doesn’t have the qualifications they have, the education and the learning. He’s just some guy who’s attracting a lot of people. They think they know who Jesus is, and it’s not who everyone else thinks he is. They are out to expose him.

Here’s the trap: the woman is caught in the act of adultery, and the law says she should be stoned. If Jesus agrees, and the woman is stoned, his reputation for mercy will be gone. If he disagrees, and tells them not to stone her, then he will be condemned as someone who ignores the Law, an unworthy teacher.

Jesus’ identity is up for grabs here, depending on what he chooses to do with this woman.

That is, of course, only one of many questions of identity in this story. We have another question to grapple with: if this woman was caught in the act of adultery, where's the man she was caught with? What's his identity? Why isn't he standing before Jesus as well?

It raises the intriguing possibility that he was a plant, that this woman was set up. I mean, usually people are very careful about committing adultery, and go to great lengths not to get caught.

How is it that the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law just happen upon this woman at the very time that they want to set Jesus up? They caught **her**, but not her partner? Something fishy is going on here.

But wait, that's not all! There's more. Who is this woman? What's her identity? We never get a chance to find out. She's not named. She has no identity at all, except as the Woman Caught in Adultery. That's how history knows her.

One act, on one day, and she is defined forever. It is an act that overrides the rest of her life, as if that one act is the summary of her life. Her identity is given by that one act; it is all she has become.

We all know how one thing we do *can* become the overriding fact of our lives, how we never seem to be able to escape it. Jesus is here to show that that isn't the case.

Now, the only people who are sure of their identity are the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. They know who they are: they're the pious ones, the righteous ones, over against this sinful woman who deserves to be condemned, and this fraudulent teacher, who deserves to be tricked into ruining his reputation with the people.

They are the holy ones who are going to use deceit, a trick, a ruse, a *lie*, right in the Temple courts, to fool Jesus into betraying who he really is. There's something wrong with this picture, isn't there!

Jesus does something that says a lot about who he is. He stoops down and starts to draw in the dust with his finger.

Here is this woman, possibly still naked, certainly utterly shamed in the midst of a group of accusing men, condemning eyes glaring at her as a sinner, no, worse than that, as someone deserving to die, already dead, as they have decided that that's what they will do to her no matter what Jesus says, and Jesus doesn't add his eyes to theirs. He refuses to identify with them in their glaring condemnation of her, in their shaming of her. He looks at the ground.

Jesus goes even further than that. He stoops, lowering himself beneath the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, not standing up to them, making himself tall, to confront them, being all macho, but taking a lower body position, stooping down close to the

earth, so that he identifies with the woman as being beneath the dignity of these pious men.

Only a man who knows who he is would do this. Most men would indulge in macho preening or metaphoric chest thumping of some sort when aggressively confronted by people out to get them, destroy their reputation and their mission.

But not Jesus. That's not who he is. He ratchets down the tension by stooping. And he doesn't answer them right away, he won't tell them what to do immediately. They keep asking the question, he keeps doodling in the dust. Though his body language says he is one down, the fact that they have to wait for him to answer, that they have to keep asking him the question begins to raise his status again, makes him one up on them. He is the one who will answer. They are the ones who must wait.

When Jesus does answer, he pierces the veil of identity that surrounds the Pharisees and teachers of the Law and goes straight to the heart of who they are: he stands up straight, and seems to agree with the Mosaic Law that stoning is what this woman deserves, but says, "Let him who is without sin throw the first stone."

He turns it around on them. Now it is ultimately a question of *their* identity. Who is sinless among you? Who can throw that first stone. This answer catches the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law by surprise. Jesus just stoops again and writes in the dust.

We don't know what he wrote there, but some have suggested that he wrote down the sins of the pious Pharisees and the holy teachers of the Law, so that, one by one as their own sins got written down, starting with the older men first, all the "righteous" men leave, their identity as self-confessed sinners revealed to all around. They have been exposed for who they are, their pious pretence stripped away.

The woman caught in adultery is now left, one on one, with the only person who could throw that first stone at her. Jesus looks up, looks her in the eye, and asks, "Dear woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, Lord," she answers.

"Then neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more!" Jesus says.

Jesus has given her a new identity. She is no longer "the woman caught in adultery," she is now "the woman forgiven for her sins," "the woman who will sin no more." She is starting life again!

Jesus has shown his identity as well: the compassionate Lord, who holds to the Law but can still offer forgiveness, the teacher who reveals the inability of anyone to throw the first stone of condemnation at another, the one who chooses not to condemn.

When we come to the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, we face another crisis of identity. There are some obvious differences between Jesus and this woman: first, he is a man, and she is a woman. That's a major difference of identity right there, especially in this society.

But then there is also the fact that he is a Jew and she is a Samaritan.

Jews and Samaritans had a mutual dislike for each other. Samaritans claimed to be the true followers of the religion of Abraham. They had a temple on Mount Gerizim and the Jews had a temple on Mount Zion, in Jerusalem. And this was only one of many disputes between the two peoples.

But it goes further than that. The woman is at the well alone. Women usually went to the well in the early morning in groups, for the cool of the day, for mutual protection and for social reasons.

Yet this woman is alone at the well. In the middle of the day, when the sun is beating down on her. It's a crazy time to go to the well, and you would only do it if you were an outcast in your community. We're going to see why she has this lonely identity in a moment.

Jesus asks the woman for a drink. He is already breaking down the barriers of identity between them. A man talking to a woman; a Jew talking to a Samaritan.

She notices it and they start to talk. Jesus tells her to go get her husband and come back. This, too, is a question of identity for the ancient world: to which man do you belong? Who is responsible for you?

She tells him that she has no husband. And Jesus laughs, at least as I imagine it, and says, "You're right! You have no husband! You have had *five* husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband! You spoke the truth!"

Embarrassed, she tries to turn the conversation to something less personal: theology. She tries to rebuild the *wall* of identity between them by starting a fight about where the temple should be. Jesus doesn't take the bait.

As they talk, Jesus reveals to her that he is the Messiah. This is the only time that I can find that Jesus ever tells anybody directly that he is the Messiah. This is the only time that he identifies himself directly to anyone. It is an astonishing moment.

The woman believes him, and she goes and tells her town, "come and meet the man who told me everything I ever did." And many Samaritans in her village believed because of her.

But note what has happened here. Jesus didn't tell her everything she ever did. He just told her *the one thing* that had defined her life, that she had had five husbands and that

she was now with a man who wasn't her husband. This is what had defined her life to that point. Either she had had the incredible bad luck to marry men who were about to die, or, more likely, that she kept on marrying men whom she trusted, but who used her and then divorced her. The word probably got out that she couldn't keep a husband, and the other women shunned her.

In her town, that's how she was known, old five-man, the husband loser. Keep away from her! But see what Jesus does for her? He utterly changes her identity.

Now she is the woman who found the Messiah! What a difference! From an outcast to a person of honor. Everything else she ever did now takes a second place to what she has now done, led her people to Jesus.

This is what an encounter with Jesus does: it changes who we are, it changes our identity. No longer the sinner or the outcast, but the forgiven and the honored. Every encounter shows who Jesus is: the one who finds a way to save life when death seems imminent; the one who finds the one troubling thing about us that is at the center of our identity, and heals it. And it changes our identity through our meeting him at the one place that shapes us and holds us back.

As we travel through Lent, we face the question of God's identity. And today we realize that if we were to say to God, "Who are you? Tell us about yourself," God would say – not immediately, but shortly – 'I am one who has lost a son.'

This is what determines God's identity for us – not all of it, but much of it. God is the One who has lost a son – for us.

We are in the middle of our story, and it's not yet sure who we will be at the end. But Lent reminds us that we are the ones for whom Christ died, for whom God lost a son. We are the ones who were caught in sin, whose identity, whatever else we were, is now shaped by our identity as followers of Jesus. We are the ones whom God will love to the very end.

That is our new identity. That is who we are. And thanks be to God forever for it.
Amen