

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. I wonder if I were to ask you today, “Who are you,” how you would respond to me. Well, first, you’d probably give me a name, right? After that though, if I wanted to know more about you, who you are, what would you tell me?

I’ve moved a bunch of times in the last four years so I’ve had the pleasure of getting to know many new people and a few things that almost always get brought up are home town, work, and family.

It might not be all three at once, but I most often would both hear and end up sharing these pieces of life as I got to know someone new.

Now sometimes, I hear people say things like, “that’s not really who you are, tell me who the *real* you is.” The *real* you. While it’s meant to illicit some other kinds of information about someone’s identity, I’d say that those pieces *are* really important parts of who we are. They are formational pieces of our lives and can underscore the context in which we were formed.

Our understanding of work, family, or home can and often does change over time, but they continue to shape who we are or more precisely, who we understand ourselves to be.

If you go on a social media website like Instagram, it won't be long before you find someone with a bio that lists pieces of their identity. It normally includes pieces of the information like work and family mixed in with their passions like coffee or a sports team. I may be over explaining some of you may HAVE Instagram bios like this.

The tricky thing about identity is that we often associate it with what we think about ourselves and separate it from our everyday experience. If you are a mother, even when you go to work and are not around your children, you're still a mother. My brother is hundreds of miles away from me but growing up with him still impacts how I speak and interact with you all today.

We cannot turn our identities on and off, they live and breathe inside us. They can change but they continue to impact how we live in the world. In our passage from Isaiah, we hear about the suffering servant. This is someone who continues in their dedication to God. God's will is done through the servant despite all of the pain and death that comes.

“Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”

We as Christians often hear this description and immediately fill in Jesus. There is no doubt Jesus fits the roll of a suffering servant. It is part of Jesus' identity as crucified savior, redeemer of life, who did not skirt death but overcame it. This passage does not have to be restricted to Jesus' identity alone.

The suffering servant imagery would bring comfort to many people at the time of this writing, who were oppressed and enslaved by foreign powers. They too, suffered through pain and death but continued in their faith and dedication to God. Suffering transformed from a punishment reigned down for the personal faults of a person or nation to a consequence of an imperfect world. Not a moral judgement on the oppressed but a reminder that God is on the side of the oppressed. God continues to accompany and shape us even in our broken identity.

When James and John ask Jesus if they can hold power beside Jesus, he never says outright, "No." Instead, Jesus once again tries to reframe his disciples understanding of what His mission on Earth is. James and John are looking to be a part of Jesus' triumphant reign, but who Jesus is will not bring him to conquering the Romans with military might, instead it brings him great suffering and eventually, death. Jesus' mission is not to coerce or to enslave, shackling humans forever in sin. Instead, Jesus is a liberator who comes to free creation from the burden of sin, offering forgiveness and salvation to all.

Jesus is not interested in negative freedom; if all the rules are followed or you're the best person you can be, THEN you get to lord it over others like the Roman rulers at the time. Jesus offers a positive freedom, one that frees us from pride and focuses us on our responsibility to creation and the Other.

When your eyes meet those of another. Someone afflicted by suffering or strife, we can pursue justice and love with reckless abandon. Not constrained to our own selfishness but freed to be disciples. To be servants.

As we seek to be like Christ in the world, we hear from his own words, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” Servanthood is part of our identity as Christians. Jesus calls us into being servants, truly making that a part of our identity.

The sons of Zebedee and do not seem to ever feel too challenged by this assertion. Jesus throughout his ministry, preaches servanthood to God and for disciples to live lives that serve others. Still, the disciples keep running into the same questions of glory and righteousness. They know the power that Christ has, but only can understand it in the oppressive forms that it manifests in the world. A ruler who serves does not compute. Maybe the means to be coming a ruler is serving but, in the end, Jesus will still be some sort of king who has control.

The teachings of Jesus bring into the world something different, not a technical change, but a transformational one. The systems of the world the disciples knew and that we know today are incompatible with Jesus’ teachings. As Jesus died on the cross, a consequence of these systems, He absolved our sin and called us again into radical discipleship, part of who we are.

We have a complicated understanding of service today, as well. We too, are affected by the world we inhabit. Service may look like a job or a requirement that we have, one that is monitored by our supervisor or by customers through digital technologies. Service can be a hobby we pursue, stepping into “places of service” or stepping away when it is not convenient or comfortable.

Jesus embodies an identity of service; this is not limited to place or person. Jesus calls us to seek out those who are in need, in our work places, in our homes, in our

city, and in the pew next to us. Our responsibility and love for God and our neighbor frees us from the hopeless need to control and trains our hearts on love and kindness.

That same love and kindness that Jesus pours out to us reflected into the world. Cared for and loved by God, who created us as God's Children, broke us from the bounds of sin, and moves with us each day through all of our lives.

Let us pray. Dear Lord, train our hearts on you and move us to live into our identity as servants. We know so many suffer in this world, work through us to mend relationships, feed the hungry, and care for the sick. We remember that glory comes not from control of others but through You, your grace and love. Help us envision the world free from the bounds of sin and fully living into the mission You call us to. Amen.