

"Who Is Jesus - To You?"

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 30:1-5

New Testament Lesson: Luke 7:11-17

Freelance writer Caroline Hwang tells of her experience growing up in America as the child of Korean immigrants, born two years after her parents arrived here.¹ "To ensure that I reaped all the advantages of this country," said Hwang, "my parents saw to it that I became fully assimilated."

So like any American of her generation, Hwang spent her youth strolling malls, talking on the phone, and "... analyzing the meaning of a certain upperclassman's offer of a ride to the homecoming football game." "To my parents, I am all American ...," says Hwang. "They do not see that I straddle two cultures, nor that I feel displaced in the only country I know. I identify with Americans, but Americans do not identify with me."

Can you imagine being born and raised in this country but having everyone you meet look at you as an outsider? I know you can imagine this to some extent, because to some extent, we are all outsiders.

Each of us has felt like the odd duck in one group or another. It's so uncomfortable in those times when we don't identify with the people around us. At times like that, we would do anything to fit in, to have our outer selves match our inner desire to connect with those around us. It's a question of identity – our identity in relation to others.

This question of identity is an important one. It's a question that runs throughout our Bible story from Luke today. There are five different identities in this story, all related to Jesus in different ways.

There are the disciples traveling with Jesus, the crowd of newcomers who followed them into town, the man who had died there, his widowed mother, and the community who surrounds her in her hour of need. What's amazing about this story is how identities change and get transformed in relation to Jesus.

Of course, the biggest transformation is of the man who had died. Luke tells us that Jesus saw his mother weeping and had compassion for her. "Then he came forward, touched the (stand on which the body was laid) ... and ... said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" And "the dead man sat up and began to speak." By the word of the Lord, he went from dead man to young man, alive and returned to his mother alive and well.

¹ Caroline Hwang, "The Good Daughter: As the child of immigrants, I'm torn between my parents' dreams and my own," Newsweek, September 21, 1998, 16.

Now watch as the effects of this miracle ripple outward. The woman's identity goes from "widow" back to "mother." Jesus gave her back her son, her identity as a mother.

Being the mother of a son or the wife of a husband was important back then. A woman's identity was tied to the men in her family. As a widow, she was an outcast. As the mother of a son, her future was secure, her identity transformed.

We see this ripple effect continue as word about Jesus spreads throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. The townspeople and the newcomers who arrived there with Jesus go from being townies and Jesus groupies to being witnesses of a miracle, bearers of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Everyone takes on a new identity in relationship to Jesus.

I hope we can all relate to that. I hope that our identity is affected by our relationship with Jesus. Think about that for a moment. How has your identity been changed because of Jesus? What would be different about you if it weren't for Jesus? Would anybody care to share an example? Can you think of something? How has Jesus changed your life? Can people see that change in you? How about through prayer? Don't we respond to life's difficulties differently because Jesus is there for us, to help us through?

How about our finances? Anyone who gives to the church or to charity because of the teachings of Jesus is a new person in Christ. Without Jesus, our tendency is to only look out for ourselves. But in Christ, we are stretched. We risk our own security and comfort for the sake others, for those in need.

How we spend our time is affected by our relationship to Jesus. We come to church on Sundays, stay after (come early) for Sunday School, volunteer for Vacation Bible School, Project Shine, GenOn, and Cherith Brook; we participate in ChristCare Small Groups and Presbyterian Women Circles, we serve on Session, committees, boards and ministry teams – all because of Jesus.

As hard as it is to do those things, can you imagine who you'd be without them? Just by being a part of this church – through worship and fellowship – you are a part of all of those service activities and more. It's part of your identity, as a member or friend of First Church.

Being in relationship with Jesus through the church changes who we are. It changes us in ways that those who are "spiritual but not religious" don't get. They don't get the same sense of being part of something bigger than themselves, of giving of themselves for the sake of Jesus Christ, that sense of being touched by a sacred moment in life, when God slips in and surprises us.

Of course, there are also those who are religious, but not spiritual. Their faith doesn't seem to affect their lives. Don't know what I mean?

How about the wife of a certain elderly man who lay in bed dying. Suddenly, he smells the aroma of his favorite homemade cookies wafting up the stairs. Gathering his last remaining strength, he lifts himself from the bed. Leaning against the wall, he slowly makes his way out of the bedroom and down the stairs, gripping the railing all the way. Out of breath, he leans against the door frame, gazing wide-eyed into the kitchen. There on the table are literally hundreds of his favorite chocolate chip cookies! Is this heaven, he wonders. Or is it one final act of love from his devoted wife, seeing to it that he leaves this world a happy man? Mustering all his strength, the man throws himself toward the table, reaches out his hand and senses the familiar warmth of a soft, fresh-baked cookie. Suddenly, he feels a slap on his hand and hears his wife saying, "You stay out of those. I baked those for the funeral."

"The dead man sat up," "and began to speak." And what do we do? Do we even see such miracle amid the busyness of our lives? Do we pause to take them in, when someone's life is transformed because of Jesus? Do we allow ourselves to be changed because of such an encounter? Do we dare speak of a fleeting glimpse of God slipping in and surprising us, even amid our ordinary, everyday lives?

Whether or not you experience the miracles of a life with Jesus by your side depends not only on your identity as a Christian, but also on Jesus' identity to you, who Jesus is to you. To the disciples in today scripture reading, Jesus is a friend and teacher. Not yet the Messiah; that realization comes later.

To the crowds following Jesus, he is a wonderment, someone to trail behind, looking to see what he might do next. To the community alongside the widow at the death of her son, Jesus is a sign of God's blessing. "A great prophet has risen among us!" they say. "God has looked favorably on his people!" they say. But to the widow and her son, Jesus is life itself. For the widow, Jesus makes life worth living. For her son, Jesus is life, his life's force!

It matters that you identify yourself as a Christian but it matters more that people identify Christ in you. What would it take for people to see Jesus as your life force? What would that mean for you, to be dead without Jesus, and alive only in him? How would your life change? ***How might God use you to change the lives of those around you?***

Take those questions with you this week. Who are you in Christ, and who is Christ in you? And then let us all come back next week, changed because of our identity in Christ, and Christ's presence in us, in who we are in the world. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

O God, conform us to the likeness of your Son, Jesus Christ. We know that he was patient, full of love, and never selfish.

We know that he cared for the poor and broken, and he welcomed the least of these into his arms.

We know that he was one with you, that he always made time for prayer.

We know that he knew the Scriptures and was always proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.

God, we desire to be like Jesus. Form us and mold us, so that the world will see him in us. And let us begin to share Jesus with others through the prayer that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**