

The Ones God Loves

You've probably seen it, the ubiquitous online "personality quiz." Such quizzes are regular features on social-media feeds and webpage advertisements. They are often based on pop-culture references (such as "Which 'Sopranos' character are you?"), but nearly anyone can find one that appeals to them. Quizzes range from "What type of sandwich are you?" to "What is your true aura?" According to the BuzzFeed website, pop-personality quizzes generate more Facebook comment threads than any other posts in the site's history. BuzzFeed's quiz, "What city do you actually belong in?", for instance, was viewed over fourteen million times in two days. Social-media consumers can't seem to resist them.

Personality quizzes are of course nothing new. They've been popular in magazines for decades. But what makes them so appealing? BuzzFeed admits they're not meant to be scientific. Quiz-takers nevertheless believe the quizzes offer insights about themselves. The reality is, though, that these quizzes serve more to affirm how people view themselves, than it tells them anything about who they truly are. I mean, what can learning "which Harry Potter character we are" or "what dog breed we would be" really teach us about ourselves?

In fact, it seems to me that these quizzes tell us less about ourselves individually than they do about us as a society. I mean, what does it say that so many people find them so interesting? What is so appealing about the promise to uncover some heretofore unknown aspect of ourselves? What it suggests to me is that *we just don't know who we are*, and we are desperate to find out, to know who we are and where we fit in. Now, we may scoff at the idea that online quizzes like these can offer any help on that front, but fact is, none of us really questions the motivation behind them. The search for identity, we figure, is normal, natural, intrinsic to being human.

Except it's not, not really. The truth is, before the modern age, no one really questioned who they were. It was self-evident to them. If you were to ask a 1st-century Roman slave or a 12th-century English yeoman or 19th-century Chinese woman, they'd have no problem telling you who they were. They'd identify themselves not just by their name but more importantly by their relationships—their place in their family, their position in their tribe or town, the profession they worked in, the religious community they belonged to, the nation they were a part of. Each of these were part of their identity, what made them who they were. Now, they may or may not have been entirely satisfied with their place, but they would have no confusion about who they were, as who they were was defined by concrete relationships with others, by those to whom they were accountable, who relied on them. Becoming an adult, becoming someone, meant accepting responsibility for others.

Today, this approach to understanding who we are is wholly lost to us. The traditional pillars of identity have been knocked down. Family, community, job, even nationality no longer define us, as we have no problem moving from place to place, job to job, and increasingly relationship to

relationship, trading them out when something better or more interesting or more profitable comes along. Such that the things that once gave people their identity are now seen as obstacles to self-realization, to our freedom to be ourselves.

But if family, community, religion, even nation no longer tell us who we are, then what does? That is one of, if not *the* dilemma of modern life. Unlike our ancestors, now we are free, we are told, to make our own meaning, to discover, even to define our own identity. The reality is though we are now not only “free” to define our identity but we *have* to, because the things that used to tell us who we are no longer do. Our identity is no longer given to us by family or community or our commitments to others, but has become a matter of choice, voluntary. We are who we choose to be. We are self-made individuals.

The folly of this approach can be seen in the advice we give our children; “You can be whatever you want to be.” We all know this is not true—not everyone is smart enough to be a doctor or patient enough to be a teacher or fast enough to be an Olympic athlete. But we tell our children this fiction, because we think we are being encouraging. But truth is, what we are doing is condemning younger generations to confusion and anxiety and paralysis. For, it’s not clear, if they can be *whatever they want*, what they should *want* to be, what is worthy of pursuing. And so they pursue whatever feels right in the moment.

The problem goes deeper, though. In telling children they can be whatever they want, what are we saying about who they are? Implicitly, we are telling them that who they are is determined by their wants, their desires. “I can be whatever I want to be” becomes “I *am* my wants,” no matter how ill-considered or transitory or destructive they may be to myself or others. But then what happens when someone denies those desires, refuses to give me what I want, refuses to accept my claims? Their refusal is then not just an obstacle to my desires but a denial of who I am, a threat to my identity, to my existence.

You see the progression, or should I say *regression*? When we define ourselves by our choices, our wants, those choices and wants then define us. We become slaves to our desires, akin to toddlers, caring only for ourselves, for what *we* want, demanding others fulfill our needs, and throwing tantrums when we don’t get it. We’ve all seen people, grown adults, who act this way. They’re not fun to be around, and they certainly do not make good partners.

I could go on with this critique of the modern concept of identity. But you get the point—when we have to make our own meaning, to form our own identities, the result is rampant narcissism, misery, and social breakdown, as our need to define ourselves becomes the need to dominate and control others.

How different is this from the approach to identity exhibited in this morning’s reading from the Gospel of Luke. I know it seems I’ve taken a long, scenic route to get to here, to get to the Scriptures. But I started with the issue of identity because it is a helpful setup for Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism. For Luke doesn’t really say much about the baptism itself. He’s more interested in what happens immediately afterward and what that says about Jesus, about who *Jesus* is, his identity. After his baptism, Jesus is praying when the heavens open up, the Holy

Spirit comes down on him, and a voice from heaven speaks, declaring to Jesus and everyone else that he is “My son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

This presentation of Jesus’ identity is significant for how it is made known. God himself declares who Jesus is. His identity is not something Jesus sought or chose or that was determined by his interests or actions, but was revealed by God. It’s not something Jesus needs to earn, qualify for, or have others affirm in him. He simply *is* God’s beloved Son. God says so.

And while that might seem unique to Jesus, it’s true for us too. For in our baptism, we have been united with Christ in his baptism, such that what God says of Jesus, He says to each of us: “You are my son, my daughter, my beloved, in whom I take delight.”

As with Jesus, this identity is not something we have chosen or willed or earned, but it is ours nevertheless. We did not choose to be children of God, any more than we chose our parents or siblings or hometown or native language. God didn’t give us the choice; God chose us. We *do* have a choice though in what we do with it. We can try to run away from it, we can fight it, we can resent God for it, or we can accept that we are who God says we are, his beloved, and embrace all that that means for us.

Brennan Manning tells the story of an Irish priest who was out taking a walking tour of a rural parish. The priest sees an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest says to the man, "You must be very close to God." The peasant looks up from his prayers, thinks a moment, and then smiles, "Yes, he's very fond of me."

Later, in a seminar, Manning talks about Jesus' closest friend on earth, the disciple named John, who’s identified in the Gospels as "the one Jesus loved." Manning says, "If John were to be asked, 'What is your primary identity in life?' he would not reply, 'I am a disciple, an apostle, an evangelist, an author of one of the four Gospels,' but rather, 'I am the one Jesus loves.'"

I am the one Jesus loves. What would it mean if we came to the place where we saw our primary identity in life, who we are most profoundly, as "the one Jesus loves"? How differently would we view ourselves? How would it change how we relate to others?

What would this identity do for those who are taken in by personality quizzes? How would it change their life? What hope, what confidence, what courage would it give them knowing they are beloved by God?

Lots of people don’t know who they are or whose they are and try to find an identity through performance, popularity, and possessions, acting out their insecurities and fears, seeking to prove their worth, to earn love, to buy respect. How much of that could we cut out, could they be saved from if they knew that they mattered, mattered deeply to the one whose opinion matters most—God? How much greed, violence, and exploitation of others could be avoided if they knew that they were beloved by God?

I know that sounds idealistic and Pollyannaish, but sociologists have a theory, the “theory of the looking-glass self”: it holds that we become what the most important person in our life thinks we are (be it a parent, spouse or boss).

Mike can attest to that. Mike was a leader in the congregation I once served in. I knew him as a model Christian, an example of all things good and decent and helpful, whose wise faith gave guidance to the whole congregation. But he had not always been that way. As a young man, he said, "I was always looking for trouble. And if the trouble were really bad, I'd look for it twice! But then," he said, "I met Elizabeth--a kind, sweet, moral, smiling girl who loved me no matter how big a scoundrel I was. And little by little, because I wanted to live up to her love, I became less and less a scoundrel. Finally we married, and I've spent my whole life trying to make her as happy as she made me." Then he said something I have never forgotten. He said: "The truth is, Elizabeth loved me into loving." Mike became the kind of man Elizabeth knew he was.

This is what we in the church call grace, and it is what is at the heart of baptism. "This is My beloved child." That's what God said to Jesus at the river and what God says to you and me. "This is my beloved child," whom I choose as my own, not by their merit, but by My mercy!" God promises, in the words of Isaiah, that he will "walk with you through the waters, and the rivers shall not overwhelm you ... and to walk with you through the fire, and the flames shall not consume you ... You are precious and honored in my sight, and I love you ... So fear not, for I choose to be with you" in all things, in all times, in all places, in all circumstances, now and forever. I choose to love you whether or not you are always lovable. That's the message of Baptism, one which should grip and inspire us: we are claimed by Someone special, loved by God, more often than not in spite of ourselves. And that love has a way of working in us, inspiring us to want to live up to that love, as Mike sought to live up to his wife's love.

Such is the nature of grace, of God's love, of who we are in God's eyes. You are God's child, his beloved. That is your identity. Now, go be who you are, the one God loves. Amen.