

Series: Who Am I? I AM . . .
Part I: The Bread of Life
C. Gray Norsworthy
Johns Creek Presbyterian Church
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Kara Powell is a professor and an expert in youth and young adult ministry. This past week I was thumbing through a magazine when I saw this quote next to her picture: “Who am I? Where do I fit? What difference do I make? While questions of identity, belonging, and purpose cut across all life stages, young people feel them intensely.” (*Relevant*, Issue #96) The reason her quote caught my attention was because “identity” is what I planned to talk about for this next sermon series. As I am sure Powell knows well, the main question of identity is “Who am I?” She rightly notes that this question of identity can “cut across all life stages.” Whenever we go through significant transitions in life, we may find ourselves asking the question, “Who am I now – given this change in my life?” For example, if we change or end a job, move, call it quits in a relationship, lose a loved one, or face an illness – any of these can cause us to wrestle with our identity given that “new normal” in our lives.

However, I want to return to Powell’s comments that young people feel these questions of identity “intensely.” A couple of weeks ago someone tweeted a quote and video by a young person that had to do with identity and the question of “Who am I?” Here is a picture of the young man. If you are not a college football fan, you may not recognize him. But, if you are, especially if you are a Clemson football fan, you will probably recognize him as Trevor Lawrence, the 6’ 5” freshman quarterback from Cartersville, Georgia who will lead his team in the championship game tomorrow night against Alabama. Prior to this week I didn’t know that much about Trevor. I have to admit that when I saw his long blonde hair, he reminded me of the actor who played quarterback Ronnie Bass -- who was also known as “Sunshine” in the movie *Remember the Titans*. I think they do look alike. I want to share with you a 60-second video clip that appears to be Trevor’s response to how he handles all of the pressure and expectation others put on him without it seeming to affect him. Listen to his answer:

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qua3pwff3_Y)

This is part of what Trevor said: “I put my identity in what Christ says, who He thinks I am and who I know He says that I am.” Again, the words “identity” and “I am” caught my attention. I don’t know who taught Trevor this or how he came to believe that, but what he says is really good. In fact, identity is at the core of what we plan to talk about over the next seven weeks.

When it comes to questions of our identity such as “Who am I?” -- I think that the best way to answer that is to first look to who God is. And the best way to know who God is, is to look at Jesus who is God in the flesh. So today we are going to start by looking at the first of seven different statements Jesus makes about himself that begin with the words, “I am.” Each statement is a little different and uses something from everyday life to convey some aspect about who Jesus is. I think that the best way for us to know who we are is to begin with who Jesus is. And I think that knowing who Jesus is helps us understand who we were created and called by God to become.

These seven different sayings of Jesus are like looking at a great work of art like a sculpture from different viewpoints. If you look at a sculpture like Rodin's "the Thinker" from one perspective, you see one thing. But you can look at the same sculpture from a different perspective or in different light and see something else. And if you change the context of the sculpture, you may see still another perspective. So, each of these seven "I am" sayings of Jesus will be like seeing different sides of a great work of art.

Before we read our passage for today, I want to set the context of these words we are about to read. Like each of these seven sayings, it is from John's gospel. What has happened right before this is what we call "the feeding of the five thousand." Jesus was out in the middle of nowhere teaching the crowds for a while when it got to be time to eat. No one appears to have brought food -- except for a young boy who offered his meal of loaves of bread and fishes. Jesus takes these and miraculously there is enough for everyone to not only be filled -- but there are even leftovers!

According to Matthew's version of this story, immediately after this, Jesus put the disciples in a boat to head over to the other side of the huge lake to Capernaum. Capernaum had, by this time, become Jesus' home base. You will remember he was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, but now he and his family are based in Capernaum. (John 2:12, NIV) Jesus sends the disciples on ahead in the boat and a storm comes up that night. Then Jesus comes walking on the water to them and ends up getting into their boat.

If you were to go visit Capernaum today, which I have done twice, you would see some amazing ruins. The darker stones you see there have been dated back to the time of Jesus. They are the foundations of the actual buildings Jesus would have been walking by. The lighter stones are the ruins of a Jewish synagogue from a later period of time, but an earlier synagogue was probably built on the same site in which Jesus spoke these words we are about to read from John 6:25-35:

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." So they asked him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." "Sir," they said, "always give us this bread." Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

So, the crowds coming from the feeding of the five thousand find Jesus, and they seem to be confused how Jesus got there. But Jesus doesn't even try to explain that. Instead, he tells them that the real reason they are looking for him is because he gave them food to eat -- implying that they saw Jesus as their meal ticket. Jesus then starts dropping hints that the real bread they should be looking for is more than just bread to fill their stomachs. He talks about working for food that "endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man" (a term Jesus used to describe himself as the Messiah and the Son of God) could give them.

Either they miss the point because they are very literal when it comes to the meaning of this "bread" -- or maybe some do understand that he is saying something about actually being the Son of God and the Messiah sent from God, but they don't believe him. Whichever is the case, they tell Jesus they want him to give them a sign like the one Moses did back in our Old Testament, when he provided bread from heaven while the people of Israel were wandering in the desert after escaping from Egypt. Jesus corrects them in saying that bread did not come from Moses, as if he were some magician who could do tricks on demand, but from God. The crowds seem to want to see a sign to authenticate who Jesus is before they believe in him. Asking for a sign was not an uncommon practice.

I don't know if you happen to see this news story about the Top Discoveries in 2018 related to the Bible in which the number one discovery was a seal ring belonging to Pontius Pilate. ("Biblical Archaeology's Top 10 Discoveries of 2018 - A glimpse at the important excavation work revealed this year." By Gordon Govier, December 27, 2018, 7:00 a.m.) If genuine, it would have been a ring used by someone who was authorized to act on behalf of Pontius Pilate, the local Roman ruler who ordered Jesus put to death by crucifixion. The ring was actually discovered back in the late 1960s, but recent advanced photographic techniques revealed on the ring the inscription "of Pilates." It is only the second piece of history that mentioned Pilate's name and showed he was a real figure. The ring was used to make an impression in wax or clay which authenticated that the item had Pilate's approval.

In the same way, the crowds wanted to see another sign or miracle from Jesus to prove and authenticate who he was before they believed in him. However, Jesus seems to flip things around. Instead of the normal way of looking at things that says, "seeing is believing" -- Jesus suggests the order may be reversed.

We may see something like this in the story that writer and pastor Robert Fulghum tells about a midnight Christmas Eve service in which he planned to tell the story of a juggler who wandered into an old monastery looking for refuge. The story goes by many names, but I have heard it called *The Clown of God*. According to the story, the monks were making gifts to put before the altar in the chapel to honor the Virgin Mary. If she was pleased with the gifts, her statue would shed a tear of compassion for humanity. But, when the gifts were presented, there was no response. Later, in the middle of the night, the old juggler came and juggled before the statue to the very limit of his capacity -- giving all he had. In response, the statue of Mary sheds a tear and the baby Jesus she holds in her arms smiles -- all because of the gift of that old juggler.

Fulghum wanted to bring the story to life, so he decided to have a real juggler perform as he told the story on Christmas Eve. The service began, but the juggler was nowhere to be seen (a

preacher's nightmare!). It was not until the middle of the second hymn that the juggler arrived, but he had no costume and no juggling equipment. Fulghum and the young juggler conferred. The young man said that his car had been stolen, along with his costume and all his equipment, but he said not to worry – go ahead and tell the story.

So, Fulghum did, and when he started, the young man appeared . . . with nothing! Fulghum told the story, and the young man started into his routine just as if he had brought balls and clubs and knives and scarves with him. Everyone had seen enough juggling to know what was going on. He did all the tricks, adding ball after ball to juggle – doing tricks no one thought he could do. He even went as far as juggling all of the animals and characters in the song *The Twelve Days of Christmas* (Getting the maid and the cow off the ground was not that easy!) People cheered, but when it was over, the juggler put his finger to his mouth and called for silence . . . and silence came. A very profound silence that comes from seeing something amazing.

In reflecting back on the whole adventure, Fulghum said, “Some of the most wonderful things have to be *believed* to be *seen*.” (From *Uh-Oh*, 1991, Villard Books) Maybe that is where “seeing” starts with us – with *believing*. For when we believe, we then begin to see our world differently. Believing leads to seeing. We may even see Jesus in places and faces we would least expect it.

Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35, NIV) Jesus is indicating that not only do we have physical hungers as human beings, we also have a spiritual hunger to be in relationship with God. And the “work” we have to do for this “bread of life” is not something we can earn by our efforts. The “work” is to “believe” – to take that step of faith in response to God’s grace. That gift of grace comes first. All we *can* do -- all we *must* do in order to experience this eternal life is to receive the gift with open arms. And it is that act of believing that enables us to begin to see life from God’s perspective. We find this expressed in the words of the great song about God’s amazing grace that says this: “Amazing grace how sweet the sound/that saved a wretch like me/I once was lost but now am found/was blind but now I *see*.”

So, when we ask that basic question of identity, “Who am I?” -- the response Jesus points to in this saying about Jesus being “the bread of life” is this: “Who am I?” *I am a believer*. And this believing leads to seeing, and not the other way around.

And if you are not yet a believer, I hope you will consider taking that step of faith. God loves you more than you will ever know. Each one of us is created good -- in the image of God, but we are also sinners in need of God’s grace. Both of those things are true. However, we all need God’s grace to fully become the person God created and calls us to be. Friends, every time we come to this table, this bread reminds us not only of who Jesus is, “the bread of life,” but also who we are -- *those who believe in order to see!*

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.