

"Who are you?" That was the question my supervisor asked me one day in one of our CPE sessions. "Who are you?"

I thought it was a straight forward question, "Craig," I answered. They repeated again, "Who are you?"

Again, I answered "Craig." Again they asked, "Who are you?" Thinking they were asking something different, I responded, "A Student."

Over and over, they relentlessly asked, "Who are you?" Over and over, getting increasingly flustered, I responded, "A Spiritual Caregiver," "a Mennonite," "a Canadian," "a Caterpillar," "A Child of God." I never knew if I got the answer 'correct,' but I don't think that was the point of the exercise. I think part of the point of the exercise was to claim a sense of who I was. To claim an identity.

"Who are you?" It's a question about identity. Who are you? Is a quick way to ask, tell me about yourself? Who do you belong to? What do you believe? Where do you belong? Our identity, in some ways, defines us, in other ways, it names our allegiances, and in yet more ways, it describes who we belong to.

Ever since Donald Trump began his campaign of tariffs and his rhetoric around making Canada the 51st state, there's been a surge of Canadian nationalism. Whether it's supporting Canadian-made, vacationing in Canada, or embracing the 'elbows up' movement. Claiming Canadian as our identity is more popular than it's been for some time. I remember travelling to Europe and sewing a Canadian Flag to my pack, but from what I'd heard, those days had passed, but now, they may be returning.

One of the challenges of the early church was who was included as a part of it. Who was 'in' and who was 'out'; who belonged and who didn't. While Jesus made a point to cross boundaries and show the disciples that people's identities, whether they were lepers, Samaritans, or widows, didn't matter in the eyes of God, the early church still struggled to

understand the wideness of God's grace and love. One of the sticking points for the early church was the inclusion of Gentiles, that is, those who weren't Jewish.

There was heated discussion about the inclusion of Gentiles into the newly forming faith. And I imagine that's a polite way of talking about the debate that was most likely arguments, the kind of arguments and protests that we see today surrounding the inclusion of 2SLGBTQ+ folk. There were also questions of what was required of Gentiles to participate in the newly forming faith.

Commentator Jerry Sumney writes:

"The debate is not between legalists and those who believe in grace, or between the open-minded and the closed-minded. It is about how church members must weigh their religious identities....The question at the Jerusalem Conference is whether being Jewish or believing in Christ takes precedence when the church gathers."¹ It's a question of identity.

Jesus and his original followers were from the Jewish tradition. They were born, raised, lived, and observed the Jewish faith and life. Some of the new believers, new followers, were former Pharisees, these were folk who were steeped in the theology, the Law and the Prophets. But things had been changing, and folk who weren't of Jewish origin, Gentiles, were seeking to be a part of the church. So the question emerges, how do they admit non-Jewish people, Gentiles? Now for a few folk, it's not a big issue, except very quickly it's not just a few folk. Peter went and did something.

Back in Acts chapter 10, Peter, hungry, is praying on a rooftop when he has a vision. A great sheet is lowered, filled with food considered by the Jewish faith to be unclean. Peter hears a voice saying, "Get up, Peter! Eat!...Never consider unclean what God has made pure."² And as with many visions or actions of the Holy Spirit, this happened three times, Peter was bewildered by this. Shortly thereafter, he was summoned to the house of Cornelius, a centurion, a Gentile, a most irreputable Gentile, a Roman, and a centurion, just like those who executed Christ. After hearing Cornelius' testimony, Peter was convinced of the sincerity of Cornelius' desire to follow Jesus, and Peter baptized Cornelius and his whole household.

¹ Working Preacher. "Commentary on Acts 15:1-18." Narrative Lectionary: Council at Jerusalem, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/council-at-jerusalem-2/commentary-on-acts-151-18-3>. Accessed 21 May 2025.

² Acts 10:13-15 (CEB)

Word of what Peter did, gets back to Jerusalem, and, conversations begin. Soon a council is convened; a conference is called to discuss and discern what is required.

What our scripture is today is a crucial conversation in the life of not just the early church, but also in the life of the church as a whole. In this passage, we are witnesses to a crucial turning point for the followers of Jesus. And, at the center of this, is, as far as I see it, identity. This central point is reflected in the question, Did you have to become Jewish before you could be a follower of Jesus. Which identity was more important, that you were a believer in Christ, or that you had to be a Jewish believer before you were admitted to the faith?

Identities are highly personal. And each of us carries different identities. Not like masked superheroes, rather, different identities for different settings. Some we choose, some are chosen for us. Some are external, i.e, how people see you, and others are internal, i.e. how you see yourself.

For example, at home, I'm Craig, but to Chloe I'm Papa. When I'm with my extended family, I'm Uncle Craig to the nephews. To my parents I'm a son. When I'm working at the church, I'm Craig, I pastor of The First Mennonite, or, if we're being particularly formal, which we aren't, I'm Rev. Craig.

More recently we're being asked to identify our genders, so in many settings I'm also he/him; and depending on what group of folk I'm meeting with I would also identify myself as heterosexual and cisgendered.

When meeting with indigenous peoples, I'm a Settler. When I'm abroad, I'm Canadian. If I'm asked to identify my faith, I'd say Mennonite or Anabaptist Mennonite.

And so some of my older friends I'm still their go to IT person who can fix their computer.

However, depending on the setting, one may be more important than another.

Identity plays an important role in our lives at different stages of our lives. As adolescents, we're on the quest to find and develop our own identity. Adolescence is a time of experimentation as we try to find the identity that best suits us, one that makes us feel like we belong and have a place in the world. For some, an internal identity is embraced, while for others, their identity comes from the outside.

As we move into our middle and working years, we settle into our identity, personally and professionally. For some, their identity is solidified by their vocation, their identity is wrapped up in their vocation. They are their job, and their job is who they are.

As we move into retirement, sometimes people struggle because their identity, the thing that has shaped who they are, has come from their work, and to be without, sets some folk adrift as they seek to forge a new identity, one separate from their career. For others, retirement is a time to fully live into their identity, which they have formed throughout their life, now with the means, they can live more fully into who they've crafted themselves to be.

The cultural differences between Jew and Gentile at that time cannot be understated. And in some respects, your faith played a significant part in your identity. And for some folk, your faith was your identity. So it wasn't a small ask to ask a Gentile to become Jewish before they were admitted into the faith. Becoming a follower of Jesus was a significant identity shift, to compound that with becoming a Jewish proselyte, and, for men, to be circumcised, just to be a follower of Jesus seemed like a big hoop to jump through.

Those who want church members to be circumcised and law-observant, adopting Jewish faith and life, see believing in Christ as a secondary identity. Paul, Peter, and the other apostles who reject this demand see believing in Christ as the most important religious identity; all other kinds of religious identity must be secondary. For them, it matters less whether one is Jewish or not. As the church continues to grow, some will be Jewish, and others will not.

For Peter in particular, this was a situation where his experience shaped and changed his beliefs. Peter's experience with Cornelius shaped how he understood the inclusion of Gentiles in Christ's church. He saw Gentiles, not as this 'other' group that wanted in, but instead, he saw Cornelius and his household. This experience transformed him in such a way that he claimed the identity of one of the primary evangelists to the Gentiles.

And I can get why the one group was so protective. As Anabaptist Mennonites, we have a distinctive heritage and history that we embrace. We have particular teachings that make us distinct, namely our understanding and practice of being peacemakers. And naturally, we want to protect that. We want to ensure that new believers, new followers, new members share that same heritage, history, belief and practices.

However, I would argue that our identity as Anabaptists, our identity as Mennonites, is only secondary to our identity as followers of Jesus. I would say that our identity as peacemakers comes out of our identity of being followers of Jesus. And, as followers of Jesus, we are called to the radical inclusion of Jesus' Gospel, which this passage highlights.

We're called to not create barriers or boundaries, which we are not willing to bear. We're called to not create rules or restrictions which we aren't willing to adhere to. We're called to see first and foremost one another as fellow beloved Children of God. And when we see one another as fellow Children of God, so many of the other identities which one carries suddenly don't seem to be nearly as important.

Of all the other identities which we embody, the primary identity which we as followers of Jesus must embrace, in my option, is that of being beloved Children of God. At the end of the day, of all the identities which we embrace and embody, it is being a beloved child of God which I see as the most significant; the primary identity which we all can carry.

The Council in Jerusalem emphatically makes the point that all kinds of people are invited into the community that bases its identity on faith in Christ. And, as a consequence of this, the Church, ideally, should look like a diverse, motley mix of folk. The uniting identity for this gathering is that of being followers of Jesus.

It's, after all, what God sees first and foremost. God doesn't care whether we're Canadian or American, the colour of our skin, the type of last name we have, or even our gender. God doesn't care about the particulars or the distinctions of the different beliefs we hold. All God sees are God's beloved Children gathered. And God delights in that.

Amen.

Sending Blessing

May God, who sees you as beloved,
And Jesus, who has embraced you as a follower,

By the power of the Holy Spirit,

Send you into the world,
to love and serve God.

Amen