

Finding Your True Identity in Christ, Pt. 4
Utterly Redeemed: Jesus Assumes our Identity
Romans 8: 1-4; 2 Corinthians 5: 21

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**March 11 AD 2018
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God himself has undertaken to save us. That's the wonderful news of the Christian Gospel. God has taken it upon himself to restore us to what we were meant to be. The Apostle Paul said it simply and powerfully, "This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (I Tim. 1: 15). This morning, we take up the heart of Christian identity. Who am I? I am created. I am fallen. And, beyond hope, I am *redeemed by Christ*. Utterly and completely he has saved me and that's the core of my being. That's what we're after this morning. How did he do it?

Jesus saved us by exchanging identities with us. He became what we are, so that we might become what he is. He became a son of man that we might be restored as children of God. He took the side of sinners so that sinners might take the side of God. Let's see how this works.

The very first public act of Jesus' ministry was to get baptized. Jesus' cousin John the Baptist was out by the Jordan River, preaching for people to repent of their sins in preparation for the coming of the Savior. Then, those who confessed their sins would enter the river with John and be baptized. Their willingness to go under the water was a sign that they were sorry for their sins and desiring change. They owned the identity of "sinner" and asked for power to receive a new identity as those belonging to the coming Messiah. The washing of the water symbolized God's forgiveness. The rising from the water meant entering this new identity.

At age 30, Jesus also came out to John for baptism. John wanted to decline: "I should be baptized by you!" But Jesus insisted. He identified as a sinner. He went under the waters *as if* he had sins from which to be cleansed. Of course he did not have sins. But he entered baptism *for us*. Just as he would later go to the cross to die a criminal's death though he had committed no crime. In everything he did, Jesus took our place. He acted in our name. So Jesus underwent a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins because he identified with us as fully human and in need of grace. At his baptism Jesus committed himself to being on the side of sinful humanity. This was essential to all his saving work on our behalf.

Often overlooked, the baptism of Jesus is one of the most important events of his life. It is an emblem of our focus this week: *Jesus identified with sinners*. He took the side of the mortally wounded and hopelessly fallen. He embraced being fully human. That was a condition for redeeming sinful people. He took what is ours to give us what is his: sonship with his Father.

When we explore the rest of Jesus' ministry, we see that he continued to identify with lost, broken, compromised, bereaved humanity. Once a woman caught in the act of adultery was thrown at his feet. "The law says we should stone her. What do you say?" The crowd formed a circle of condemnation around this woman. They were ready to hurl rocks. But Jesus remained inside the circle. He stood with her. He was willing to be identified with the guilty and the scandalous. He would not leave her side. For Jesus would soon know the sting of condemnation by the elders. "Cast the stones," he said. "Only the first one to throw must be without sin." One by one they dropped their stones and went home. "Woman, neither do I condemn you. Go in peace and sin no more."

Once when Jesus was entering a town, a funeral procession was coming out of the town. Jesus heard that the man being carried out was the only son of a widow. He was moved in his soul for the grief in this world. Jesus had the audacity to stop the funeral procession. He made himself unclean by touching the stretcher on which the body lay. But he was willing to touch our dying. He did not turn from our death. For Jesus would soon sink into the realm of death himself. Then he raised the young man and gave him back to his mother.

Another time Jesus sailed across the Sea of Galilee to a forbidden zone. He went to the land of the pagan Gerasenes. His boat landed in a place of tombs. There a man possessed by demons roamed and raged in his agony. His only clothing were the dangling chains that once bound him. He howled and gashed himself with rocks. Jesus went to the place of our madness. He went to the land of our self-harm. He went to the regions where we are possessed by evil we cannot control. For he would soon submit to the schemes of the Evil One. Then he commanded the demons to leave, and the man was sitting clothed and in his right mind at the feet of Jesus.

Our Savior strode deeper and deeper into the battered, bruised, lost and forsaken condition of our humanity. He took it all on himself, and returned to us the power his forgiving, healing, and life-restoring love. All the way to the time when he was *baptized* again. That's the way Jesus himself described it when he

predicted his death, “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and great is my distress until it is accomplished” (Luke 12: 50). Baptism symbolized death and new life. Jesus knew that on the cross it would be more than a symbol. He would be baptized not with water but with blood. And once again it would be not for himself but for us. He went to the cross as a man condemned for crimes he did not commit. But he went to bear our sin. To take God’s judgment against human rebellion. As the man who went all the way through death and hell in our name and on our behalf.

A few decades ago, British poet John Heath-Stubbs wrote some lines about the crucifixion, taking us straight to Golgotha, the place of the skull, where criminals were executed. He imagines the dead wood of the cross as God’s replanting the Tree of Life in the middle of the garbage pile of human life.

In the middle of the world, in the centre
Of the polluted heart of man, on a [dung heap];
A stake [was] stemmed in the rubbish.¹

God staked his life on us in becoming man in Jesus Christ. God staked a wooden cross in the ground of the place of the skull. He was replanting the Tree of Life in the polluted human heart. He placed himself in death in order to give us life. He took the worst that we could do to him and made it the best he could do for us.

Five hundred years earlier, John Calvin contemplated this switch of identities and called it a “wonderful exchange.” Jesus trades identities with us.

This is the wonderful exchange which, out of His measureless benevolence, He has made with us, that, by His descent to earth, He has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, He has conferred His immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, He has strengthened us by His power; that, receiving our poverty unto Himself, He has transferred His wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon Himself (which oppressed us), He has clothed us with His righteousness. (*Institutes*, 4.17.2)

It’s an insane trade. A ridiculous switcheroo. A crazy swap. Who would do this?! Trading places with a bum. Switching names with a scoundrel. Taking the stigma of a predator. Asking for the penalty of a felon. Yet the Son of God exchanged identities with us! If you were the righteous and holy One, would you

give your place, your prerogatives and privileges to someone like the “you” who is hearing this sermon? No, I wouldn’t do it. Not in a million billion years.

But Jesus did. He pulled the ultimate identity switch. This is the heart of the gospel. There is nothing like this anywhere in all the thought and religion of the world. God exchanges identities with us. So Paul writes in our text this morning:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5: 17-21)

Jesus fully entered our human condition. He suffered, labored and was even tempted as we are, though he did not sin. Yet, he took the full consequences of human sin *as if he himself had sinned!* Paul says that God made Jesus, who knew no sin, to *be* sin for our sake. Jesus embraced our condemned and hopeless identity as sinners. He identified with our lost and forsaken condition to the point of making our sin fully his own, as if he himself had become sin and been condemned.

But this horror for Jesus had a glorious purpose for us. Jesus identified with us as lost, rebellious sinners in order to give us his identity as the one righteous, faithful man. As Paul says, “In him we might *become* the righteousness of God.” We may receive the identity of Christ as our own. He gives us his life as beloved Son of God. The glorious truth of the gospel is the switch of identities that occurs to those in Christ Jesus. This transforms everything. So Paul affirms, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come.”

Now we may take the identity of Utterly Redeemed. For Jesus has already atoned for our sins. He has already created the grounds for our reconciliation with God. He is the Mediator. In him we meet with our Father and find peace. Jesus is the meeting place between God and humanity. He brought together in himself estranged humanity and holy God.

This identity change is a deep mystery. I try and try but cannot find the words to adequately express it. We can never fully explain it. More often in prayer we come close. More often in worship we begin to taste the mystery. One reliable way into this mystery for me has been an extraordinary prayer by Paul Hobbs. It's evocative, even disturbing, but ultimately deeply joyful. It's called "God on a Stick."

They spit on his face and then they crucify him
Jesus our Lord
He dies as a sinner
He dies as a blasphemer, as an idolater, as one who denies God
As one who betrays him

I stand before the cross and wonder
He is not guilty of these things but takes our place

He dies as one who boasts, who gossips
As one who dishonors his parents
As a cheat, as a liar, as a thief
He dies as a fraud and an embezzler

I stand before the cross and fear
He is not guilty of these things but takes our place

He dies as a sinner
He dies as one with evil thoughts
As a slave to lust, as a fornicator
As an adulterer, as an abuser of children

I kneel before the cross and weep
He is not guilty of these things but takes our place

He dies as one full of jealousy
As one who is selfish, unkind and rude
As one who destructively manipulates others

As one who envies and hates
He dies as a sadist
As one who destroys and murders

I pray before the cross and rejoice
He is not guilty of these things but takes our place
He is not to blame but dies to take the blame for us

He is dying to forgive us

Stand, stand...
And watch Jesus die
Alone and with nothing...
God on a stick.²

In view of such grace, we can only fall silent. We can only gaze in wonder. We can only accept in grateful faith. Jesus became what we are all the way to death and hell. So that we might become what he is. A son. Faithful to his Father. He gives us his place. He took the worst we could do to him and returned as the best he could give to us: loving communion with our God in a body and a world made new. The gospel assures us that in the middle of the earth, in the center of the polluted heart of man, a cross was planted which became the wondrous Tree of Life. Thanks be to God.

¹ John Heath-Stubbs, "Golgotha," *Selected Poems*, 1990. Also in Malcom Guite, *Word in the Wilderness: A Poem a Day for Lent and Easter* (Canterbury Press).

² Paul Hobbs, "God on a Stick," in *Alternative Worship*, Jonny Baker and Doug Gay (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), p. 104.