

Finding Your True Identity in Christ, Pt. 2
Created, Called and Claimed
Psalm 139: 13-18

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Michelangelo wrote a poem about how physically arduous it was to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He said he felt like a bow drawn taut as he was constantly arching backwards to paint. His face looked like an embroidered lace because it was so spattered with paint. His muscles burned and his bones ground into each other as hour by hour, day by day he stood on the scaffolding rendering his masterpiece. Between 1508 and 1512 Michelangelo suffered to bring us beauty. His four years of pain have given the world already 500 years of inspiration.

We chose “The Creation of Adam” as the theme image for our study on identity. Michelangelo rendered the verses from Genesis 2. He showed the moment in between when Adam was formed from the dust and when God made him a living human being. Genesis says God breathed his Spirit into Adam. Michelangelo depicted this sending of the breath of life symbolically by the reaching forth of God’s finger towards Adam’s finger. We can feel the finger of God coming toward a languid, limp, not yet fully alive Adam. It’s almost there, just a moment to go. Michelangelo’s dynamic image strikes people from all over the world, through all the changing times of the world, with a deep sense of awe. We are created. God brings us to life. He made us. He intended us. He gives us life by his life.

This is an essential foundation to discovering our true identity. God made me. I am not an accident. He wants me here. He designed me. Of all the arrangements of my chromosomes there could have been, what I am is what God planned for. Including strengths, limitations and quirks.

Our psalm this morning tells us:
For you formed my inward parts;
 you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
 my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,

when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
I awake, and I am still with you. (Psalm 139: 13-18)

To know yourself as created is to realize that a personal God loves you and desires to be in a living relationship with you. He values the person he has made. And he ignites each life with purpose.

For some of us, this knowledge is as natural as breathing. For others of us, it seems almost too good to be true. Can God really love *me*? For others, being created bangs against the heady belief that humans create their own meaning. If we were made by no one, then we are accountable to no one, so we can be free to do what we think is best. A Creator seems constraining and limiting. It's only when we hit the granite wall of our limits that we realize life on our own does not work.

In 1917, the Communist revolution in Russia ushered in seven decades of enforced atheism. With frightening speed, a great heritage of faith was suppressed, history books were rewritten and the people were taught to look not to God but to the new czars of cultural identity. Sounds all too plausible, doesn't it? The same forces of delusion are at work today. There is a fight over identity. We are seduced, cajoled, bullied and paid to get in line and look no further than ourselves for meaning and purpose: as long as we follow what the czars of culture tell us. The results are predictable. As we see today, with atheism comes despair. There is no point and no hope. One's individual life means nothing. Only the collective race matters. Only the cause. It's just that the human heart does not want to be alone. We don't want to be lost in a great all. We long to be known and loved personally with a life that keeps us living. All the propaganda in the world's grand illusion machine cannot quench the yearning in the human heart for a creator.

I came across an account in a book of a prayer found in the vest pocket of a Russian soldier who died in a battle in World War II. The prayer was later

published under the title, “Only Now.” This is what Aleksandr Zapeca wrote just before the fighting that killed him.

Listen, Lord! Not once in my life have I spoken with you, but today I feel like celebrating you. You know, since I was a child they always told me that you did not exist, and foolish me, I believed it. I have never contemplated your works, but tonight from the crater of a grenade, I looked at the sky full of stars above me and, fascinated by their brilliance, I understood all at once how terrible deceit can be.

I don't know, Lord, if you will give me your hand but I'm speaking to you and you will understand . . . Is it not strange that in the midst of a fearful hell, a light appeared to me and I saw you? Aside from this, I have nothing to say to you. I am happy simply because I have known you.

We must attack at midnight, but I'm not afraid because you are looking over us. There's the signal! So I must go. How good to have been with you! I want to still tell you, and you know it, that the battle will be tough. Perhaps even tonight I will be knocking at your door. And even if I have not been your friend until now, when I come, will you let me in?

But what's happening, I'm crying? My Lord, see what's happening to me, only now do I begin to see clearly. Help, Lord, I'm going . . . I will probably not return. How strange, now I'm not afraid of death.”¹

Brainwashed by atheism his entire young life, Aleksandr looked up from a grenade crater at a night full of stars and saw the truth. This can't be an accident. We are not alone. God is there. He made us and he loves us.

I have no doubt that when Aleksandr Zapeca reached the door, his Creator opened it to him. Much like the thief on the cross next to Jesus, Alexandr's faith burst upwards from the depths of his soul in open plea and gratitude.

But I also know that Aleksandr had a lot to learn. His faith was real but ignorant. There are so many more treasure chests to open. So many more jewels of identity to discover. For not only are we created, we are claimed. Our Creator not only made us, but he calls us into a relationship with himself.

In our call to worship, we have been hearing Psalm 100: For we are his people and the sheep of his pasture. It is he that has made us and we are his. If I am

created, I do not belong to myself alone. I belong to my faithful Creator. He offers me his love and protection. He summons me to a life of obedience to his Word. He calls me to acknowledge that he is king and I am not. He claims me in order to make me part of his purpose in the world. He wants me to participate in his redeeming mission.

Of course we may chaff under such a claim. Like a wild dog we long for a home but we fear being tamed: too much has been done to us by previous owners. Like wild horses, we do not want to be broken, we do not want a rider to direct us even though that is the life we were made for. In being directed we would find the purpose in all our running.

In particular, we know that our deep identity lies not only in realizing we are created but also in hearing that we are called. This is the way God chose to redeem us. One to one. Personally. Heart to heart. He claims you. Through the voice of someone who shares with you the gospel, the LORD sends his Spirit and suddenly you realize that through this person God himself is speaking to you. He calls us to himself. In the Scriptures, the words take different forms, “Come and see. Follow me. Get up. Come forth. Go to the place I will show you.” They all mean the same thing tailored to each life: be mine. I claim you. Say Yes.

We think for example of Jesus’ call of Levi the tax collector. Jesus went out. He went into the world. He went where people are in the normal course of day-to-day business and trade. There he saw Levi sitting at his tax booth. Jesus noticed him. And he picked him. Out of all the people along the road, he said to Levi, “Follow me.” In those two simple words flowed a river of meaning. Levi, I see you. Levi, I want you with me. Levi, I can get you out of the life you are living now. I can make you free. You have a place with me. I have work for you to do. Leave it all and discover that in me you gain it all. I will use you to go get others. Your future is with me. Follow me.” And just like that Levi got up and followed Jesus. He became Matthew the apostle who wrote a gospel.

Centuries later, the scholar who was so wise that he became known as the Venerable Bede reflected on this passage. “Jesus saw a tax collector and since he looked at him with feelings of love and chose him, he said to him, ‘Follow me.’” Bede’s phrasing became very famous through the centuries. Jesus looked at a despised sinner with grace-filled love. He called him from the discard pile. He made him eligible for life. He selected him to be one of his intimate friends, and in so doing, determined to change Levi’s life, to forgive his sins and transform his heart. A more literal translation of Bede’s words would be “by having mercy and

by choosing.” Christ who made us looks upon us. He sees that we have gone astray. But he also sees more. He sees his beloved. He sees his lost sheep that needs to come home. He gazes with mercy and he calls. He picks us for his team. That’s how it works. One to one to one around the world and through the centuries.

It’s crucial to understand how intensely personal is this calling. When the time comes, the voice speaks to you as if you were the only person in the world. Now is the time. I see you. I have mercy on you. I claim you and I call you. I want you with me. Will you come?

Imagine if Levi had said, “Well, Jesus, what about that guy over there? What about those women at the next booth. I’m not coming until you call them too. Imagine if Aleksandr Zapeca had said, “For the first time I know there is a Creator. I think he wants me to talk to him. But I won’t pray until everyone talks to him.” Jesus never answered questions about somebody else. That information is privileged. C. S. Lewis’ Aslan was the same way. When the children wanted to know about someone else’s faith or sins or decisions, the great Lion would reply with a low growl that meant the subject was closed. The issue is not someone else. Leave that to God who looks with mercy on the creation for which he died. The issue is you. Is me. Is right now. In this moment, he calls you. There may be another moment; there may not be. You can’t know. But you have now. Will you come? Will you accept his claim?

Just before his ordination, a young pastor named Jorge reflected on his history with Jesus who claimed him when he was but a boy. He wrote, “I believe in my history, which was infused with the loving gaze of God, who, on a spring ... crossed my path and invited me to follow him.” He understood this to be a fundamental statement of his identity. Jorge explained, “I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon. I am one who is looked upon by the Lord.” Pastor Jorge knew himself to be but a tax collector upon whom Jesus looked with love and called to serve him.

Years later, as his ministry grew more and more effective, Jorge did not forget this basic sense of being claimed and called. In fact, he loved the story of the calling of Levi. Jorge took as his own motto the very words Bede had written about that moment: “by having mercy and by choosing.” That formed the heart of his life. Jesus saw me in my sin. He had mercy on me. He chose me in that moment to follow him. He called me to serve him, and I said Yes.

Some decades later, Pastor Jorge Bergoglio was elected again. To become Pope Francis. And his motto as pope is exactly the same, “By having mercy and by choosing.” There is a reason this pontiff blows like a fresh wind through the church. He knows what it means to be created, called and claimed. He lives from the deep humility of knowing every moment he is not worthy. And he lives from the stunning authority of one who knows every moment: God made me, Christ called me and the Spirit guides me.²

You and I are here together in this church, in this moment. And it is no accident. We have met over God’s Word. And we have humbly asked the Spirit to do what he delights to do. To speak the Word straight to our hearts. So I can tell you with all confidence and all urgency. In this moment, the Triune God tells you that he created you and he loves you. He wants you to know that he looks upon you in mercy. And he wants you to know that he lays claim to your heart. Right now. To you. To each of you as if you were the only person in the room or in the world. Whether you are Aleksandr Zapeca meeting him for the first time, or Jorge Bergoglio who has known him for decades, he calls you. He invites you to release whatever you are holding so tightly. To give as much as you know of yourself to as much as you know of Christ. He chooses you today in mercy, calling “Come and follow me.” I claim you. I have work for you to do. You are mine. I choose you. I elect you. I call you. Will you come?

¹ It appeared for the first time in an Italian publication – *Le Più Belle Preghiere Del Mondo (The Best Prayer in the World)*, edited by V. Cattana, Mondadori, Milano, 2000, pg. 188) – in October, 1972. This can be found at <https://www.lasalette.org/reflections/973-learning-to-pray.html>, or in Raneiro Cantalamessa, *Jesus Began to Preach*.

² As found in Dawn Eden, *Remembering God’s Mercy* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2016), pp.93-95.