

Betsey Moe
“Identity Test”
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Romans 8:1-11

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, 8and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

10But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” 4But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” 5Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” 7Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” 8Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 10Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” 11Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

When I was growing up with three siblings, probably no single book was out on the counter more often than Dr. Benjamin Spock’s *Baby and Child Care*. The pink cover picturing the smiling, bright-eyed 6-month-old was probably supposed to calm the frantic parent – because we all know that only frantic parents, parents who were at the end of their rope, parents whose child was throwing up in the next room, would be reading Dr. Spock. Nowadays, the section on parenting at any bookstore fills rows upon rows of shelves. So much for Dr. Spock’s mantra, “You know more than you think you know.” We don’t. Shortly after our first child was born,

Eric would know it had been a bad day if when he came home, I was asleep on the couch, and there, nestled in the crook of my arm was the stack of our six parenting books.

Most parenting advice in these books over the years has served a purpose for a time, and then I've forgotten it. But there are a few tidbits that I have read and incorporated, and it has stuck. One of these gems is the phrase, "in our family." If a child acts out in some way, say, pushing another child, you as the parent are to say, "We don't push in our family." It's the softer, less controlling version of, "Don't push." The phrase can also be used in the positive sense: "We stop and help people in our family." It doesn't always work in the moment, but it is a way of making clear, over time, your family identity – and inviting your child to be a part of it.

The goal is that eventually, the child will see that there is a difference between living according to their nature and living according to their family identity.

This tension between nature and family identity is a major theme in scripture. Israel was an ordinary nation of people who happened to be chosen to live in a relationship with God. Their whole code of living, including the Ten Commandments, was a way of establishing a distinct identity. "We keep the Sabbath in our family," "We don't kill in our family." If individuals failed to keep the commandments, there were consequences to face, sacrifices to make. These were ways that the community kept each other accountable to live according to their identity, not according to what they would naturally do if they weren't a part of the covenant family. And if the whole community failed to keep the commandments, God sent prophets like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, to remind the whole *community* of their family identity: "We worship only one God in our family." "We take care of the poor in our family."

This family identity versus human nature theme is carried over into the New Testament. Paul uses the language of "flesh and Spirit," or "living according to the flesh" and "living according to the Spirit." We heard this in the first reading from Romans this morning. It is possible, in Paul's mind, for a believer to live according to the flesh or the sinful human nature, but it is because that believer has forgotten his or her core identity, of which Paul reminds the Romans in so many ways through this letter. "You are not in the flesh," he says. "You are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you." Further on in the passage, Paul talks about our adoption as children of God. It is as if he is saying, "In our new Christian family we choose life in the Spirit over life in the flesh." Our new family identity is such a gift to us that it would be ridiculous to let our old human nature guide the way we live.

But what does this new way of life look like for Christians? The story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness fleshes out this new way of life in story form. These are not mere temptations that the devil puts in front of Jesus; each one is a test of Jesus' core identity as Son of God – an identity that was made clear just forty days prior at Jesus' baptism. In Jesus' responses to the devil, he might as well be saying, "In *our* family we _____." Jesus' answers – and subsequently, his whole life and death -- set up our fundamental family identity that we are invited into as children of God.

In the first temptation, the devil comes to Jesus when he is famished and says over Jesus' growling stomach, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of

bread.” I can imagine that Jesus wanted nothing more at that particular moment than to have something to eat. But he knew at his core that his mission was for others, not for himself and his own gain or comfort. And so Jesus said, “NO. Life doesn’t come from bread, but from every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus refused to perform a miracle to fulfill his own needs, and in so doing, he said, in effect, “In *our* family, we use any power we have for sacrificial service.”

After Jesus resisted the first temptation, the devil took him to the top of the temple in Jerusalem and said, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down;” and then the devil quoted a part of Psalm 91 that seemed to say that angels would literally catch him if he were to fall. This suggestion at first glance seems reasonable. God’s promises are sure; if Jesus really trusted God, he would put his money where his mouth was and step off the temple roof. But Jesus said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” He knew that throwing himself into the arms of God would not be a sign of faith; in fact, testing God puts God in the follower position, and that’s far from a demonstration of trust. “In our family,” Jesus was saying, “we don’t give God orders; we follow God.”

In the final temptation, the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will fall down and worship him. It was an offer that would allow Jesus to bypass the hard parts of ministry – in particular, the cross. This would have been tempting for *any* human, and for all we know, it could have been a temptation for Jesus throughout his ministry. Jesus could have brushed shoulders with the politically powerful rather than with lepers and children and tax collectors. He could have fairly quickly brown-nosed his way to the top by biting his tongue about providing for the poor and the outcasts. He could have skipped the physical pain of crucifixion, the mental pain of being betrayed and denied by his friends. But he didn’t. Jesus refused the easy road to glory. With this last refusal Jesus said, in effect, “In our family, we do not shy away from struggle and conflict and loss. In our family, we enter into the plight of the suffering.”

Jesus’ responses give a clear picture of what he was establishing as the new Christian identity: In our family, we use power for service, not for ourselves; in our family, we follow God in the context of a trust relationship rather than making demands of God; and finally, in our family, we experience the heart of God when we enter into the suffering of the world.

The earthquake in Haiti this week is one of those situations in which we are faced with a choice: will we live into our identity or our nature? Our nature would be to do nothing differently. But what does the Christian family do about those in need? This story has made it clear that in our family, we care and we respond. But there are all kinds of justifiable questions right now about how the money will be used, how the resources will be distributed. I think we need to follow our convictions and be open to how God is calling each of us to give. But I also know that giving catastrophe to catastrophe is not all there is to our family identity. The way of life, the identity defined by Christ is something that guides us every day, wherever we are. Disasters, especially in impoverished areas, are wake-up calls to the Christian community to live sacrificially and enter into suffering in our families, our schools, our workplaces, our city. They are wake-up calls to care about Christian mission in impoverished places *before* they hit the news.

Sometimes we will live into our identity, and sometimes we will not. We are not as consistent as Jesus was. But Jesus, the one who was tested and proved strong is with us. Without him, we would not be capable as a church of ever living into our identity. But with Christ by our side, with the Spirit dwelling in us, we do have hope of being the church, a clear reflection of Christ in the world.