Who are you? When you meet somebody new, who do you say that you are? You probably start with your name, but that doesn’t tell the other person much about you, except what you prefer to be called. Maybe you tell them what you do for a living, or what you did before you retired. Maybe you tell them where you’re from, or who your parents were, or what you like to do in your free time. But the truth is, none of that is you. Those things all say something *about* you, but they *aren’t* you. In order to know who you *are*, this person must spend time with you.

All those things are parts of what make up our *identity*, along with other things like our gender, our ethnicity, our political views, and everything else that we use to make sense of ourselves. Each of those little factoids helps us categorize people: man or woman, Black or White, pilot or insurance salesperson or plumber. We take what we know about other people like that, and we apply it to the people who wear those labels. Usually this works, and it helps us know something about one another very quickly; but sometimes, it doesn’t.

When I meet people for the first time, especially people I know I won’t see again or get to know well, I usually avoid telling them I’m a pastor. “Pastor” is one of those identities that often comes with a lot of assumptions about who a person is, assumptions that I don’t necessarily want strangers to apply to me. I want them to get a sense of who I am before they apply that “pastor” identity to me.

Stephanie’s youngest sibling came out recently as gender non-binary, and uses they/them pronouns. Their biological sex is female, but, much like how I feel about people’s assumptions about the “pastor” identity, they aren’t comfortable with the assumptions that come with the identity of either “female” or “male;” they have both masculine and feminine traits within who they are: they fall somewhere in between what people think of as either a “man” or a “woman.”

These are just a few examples of how fluid and artificial identities are. The reality is that identities are constructed: we all spend a great deal of time building and curating our identities, carefully deciding what we will show people so they will make the assumptions about us we want them to. For most of us, it’s an invisible and automatic process. Only on rare occasion—like when somebody like my sibling-in-law rejects a traditional identity, upending both our expectations and our grammar—does that process become intentional and obvious.

When John appears on the scene, baptizing and preaching, and the Pharisees in Jerusalem want to know who he is. In other words, they want to know on whose authority he’s acting and how they ought to treat him. To figure this out, they start asking: “Are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah? Are you ‘the prophet’?” They are asking which of these identities—which of these sets of assumptions and expectations—they can use to make sense of him.

But John rejects all these identities. He rejects all the assumptions they try to make about him. Who he is cannot be explained by words like “Messiah” or “Elijah” or “prophet.” But that’s not all John is rejecting. With his message and his ministry, he rejects the Pharisees’ understanding of God. He is saying that the identities they are using to describe God—like the labels they try to use to describe him—are incomplete, and so they really don’t know who God is.

Can you understand why the Pharisees are upset? Their entire identity—their entire way of understanding and knowing themselves—is built on their understanding of God. To be Jewish means to be a part of God’s chosen people. By suggesting that they are wrong about who God is, he’s also saying they are wrong about who they are; that everything they know about themselves is false.

We spend so much time cobbling together these little bits of identity—gender and social class and race and career—that when something calls these things into question, we feel the need to defend them. It’s not unlike a child on the beach, trying to defend her sandcastle against the bigger kids who are trying to kick it down.

When John shows up, claiming to be sent from the same God who chose them, but proclaiming a very different message, it’s like he’s trying to kick down their sandcastle. To the Pharisees, this is a declaration of war. It is an attack on them and the identity they have spent so much time and energy curating. This is what gets John arrested and executed.

The Pharisee’s problem—and our problem—is that we try to know God the same way we know ourselves. According to the Evangelist, however, in Christ God offers us an alternative to identity by which we might know God; and knowing God is important, the Evangelist says, because knowing God helps us to know ourselves in a way we could not otherwise. Jesus wants to make God known to us so that we “may have life, and have it abundantly.”

The truth to which John testifies is that identities—even our religious identities—are not who we are. Beneath these identities—the small, separate selves that we create—at the center of our being, exist our real Selves, our Truest Selves, what we sometimes call a person’s “soul” or “spirit.” Thomas Merton, the 20th century American monk and contemplative, writes about this center:

“At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak [God’s] name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our [birthright]. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it, we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.[[1]](#endnote-1)”

That point of light at the center of our being is the Light Which Is the Life of All People. It is what St. Paul means when he says, “It is no long I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” At the center of our being, beneath our identity, is a being created by God, animated by God, and at one with God. This is why, when the priests and Levites question John about who he is, he doesn’t do what you or I might do and explain who his parents are, or how he came to be doing this, or recite a creed. Instead, he points directly to God: “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight.’”

To understand this is to understand who we really are apart from who we think we are. When we mistake our constructed selves for Truest Selves, we get so caught up in the sandcastles we have made that we think they are us! And we defend them, even to the death, never realizing that they are just the walls and the ceiling and floor around the pure glory of God alive within us, the Light of Creation shining through us. We fail to recognize that we are united in God with everyone else, that all these separate, constructed identities are just an illusion that we have created.

John points out this fundamental tragedy: that because we do not even know who we are, we do not know the One who Stands Among Us. “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” As long as we remain ignorant to this truth, we will spend our entire existences fighting over the bits and bobs we stick together with spit and mud to construct these separate selves.

And so, to show us who we are, Christ comes to show us God. The Light of Creation comes among us so that we may recognize the same Light shining within us, and within all humankind, and see that, because it is Christ who lives in us, that we are indeed all branches of the same vine, all castles made of the same sand; that Jesus meant it literally when he said “love your neighbor as yourself: not *like* yourself, but *as an extension* of yourself, as a part of you. This kind of love is not only God’s will for us, it is the very fulfillment of our being. Living in this reality allows us to know, to enjoy and to draw upon the “light that is the life of all people,” to experience that True Life that Jesus describes as “abundant” and “eternal.”

Knowing this God-made-flesh, this Christ who dwells within us—allows us to finally do what we never could on our own: to “repent,” to turn away from the incomplete, separate selves that we construct and turn toward an existence in union with the Light of All Creation, a life of union with God and one another. Such a turning away from these things we think of as ourselves might feel like dying; but during Advent, we remind ourselves what it is that we are turning toward, and suddenly, losing even our very understanding of who we are feels like losing nothing important at all.

1. Thomas Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (Doubleday & Company: ©1965, 1966), 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)