

“Baptism Seals The New Identity”

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

We live in a society where bias exists in attitudes and actions. As with Peter’s confession in Acts, the good news of Jesus points us to an identity that guides one’s life. And that identity is not biased. It is inclusive. Clayton M. McClesky gives this illustration about bias operating in one’s identity,

Unfortunately, a new study reveals many of us have a hidden bias against anyone with a foreign accent. According to a summary of the study in *The Wall Street Journal*, “The further from native-sounding an accent is, the harder we have to work, and the less trustworthy we perceive the information to be.” It gets worse: “Researchers found that the heavier the accent, the more skeptical participants became.” In other words, if it sounds like you’re not from around here, my suspicion radar is on high alert. My bias about you isn’t based on your character; it’s based on the fact that you talk “different.” ...In biblical terms, we show favoritism toward people who resemble us. Perhaps this study shows why we need Jesus’ help to uproot our partiality and love people who don’t resemble us, especially people from different racial, ethnic or national groups.¹

Each of our texts, Isaiah 42, Psalm 29, Acts 10, and Matthew 3 articulate the dangers bias has on refocusing our sense of self, sense of worth, and identity in Jesus Christ. I will focus our attention on Acts 10:34-43 and Matthew 3:13-17 to flesh out my assertion that bias impedes the journey of refocusing your sense of self, sense of worth, and identity in Jesus Christ.

The text in Acts 10:34-43 makes two points for our consideration of a non-biased journey to discover and experience one’s sense of self, sense of worth, and identity

¹Clayton M. McCleskey, “Accentuating Bias,” *The Wall Street Journal* (10-2-10) | posted 1/10/2011 on www.preachingtoday.com

in Jesus.

First, Jesus's ministry was an Epiphany. Jesus was anointed at his baptism “with the Holy Spirit and with power.” All that Jesus and his disciples did, was an epiphany—an embodied manifestation of God's character, purpose, presence, compassion, servanthood, and how everything is in relationship to and with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Cornelius was a Gentile and Peter was a Jew. For the most part, the Jewish establishment did not want Gentiles to convert to Jesus without adopting certain Jewish practices as well. Peter made it abundantly clear to Cornelius that following Jesus was radically different than assenting to a religion's structures and practices. Anyone could follow Jesus.

Second, Jesus dispensed salvation, healing, and forgiveness showing no partiality. Cornelius wanted the salvation Jesus offered. He not only wanted eternal life, but also the ability to live life differently now. Cornelius rejected the notion that Gentiles could not speak with Jews and sent for Peter. Through Peter, Jesus healed Cornelius. Peter declared to Cornelius the power of the resurrection. He didn't start with Cornelius' family history or a psychological profile. Peter pronounced the transformative power of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Finally, Peter announced to Cornelius that his sins were forgiven in Jesus Christ. Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead not for any benefit to himself, but for the benefit of Cornelius.

The text in Matthew 3:13-17 makes two points for our consideration of a non-biased journey to discover and experience our sense of self, sense of worth, and identity in Jesus.

First, doing the gospel without bias flows from being. What does that mean? If we do not have a clear sense of self, sense of worth, and identity in Jesus our deeds are based on societal, community, or personal biases. Being in Jesus matters. Jesus confirms his

identity at his baptism. Jesus' core identity with God was grounded in God's character, purpose, presence, compassion, servanthood, and the claim that everything is in relationship to and with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Second, one's identity and mission is announced and confirmed at baptism, Infant or Adult Baptism. At baptism, one is affirmed and confirmed as a child of God. One's union with Christ is expressed at baptism. This anchors one's identity in God's character. By adopting spiritual practices which reinforce one's baptismal identity, one will undergo ongoing conversion and transformation in a non-biased journey of discovering and experiencing one's sense of self, sense of worth, and identity in Jesus.²

Baptism seals our new identity. Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Baptism is not only the sign of God's promise of salvation but is the seal of God's promise to save humanity. It is in baptism by water, in and with a community faith, we experience the power of God at work...changing and transforming us on the journey of discovering our true sense of self, sense of worth, and identity. All along the way, we'll be confronted by biases informed by society, community, and self. The inclusive benefits of the cross and resurrection are declared at the font. Timothy Keller writes this about being anchored in God's definition of one's sense of self, sense of worth, and identity,

...there are people who, as it were, look neither outward nor inward but upward [for their sense of self, sense of worth, and identity.] ...What if we were created by a personal God and given a personal mission and calling? Then neither does the individual take precedence over the group (which can lead to social fragmentation), nor does the community take precedence over the individual (which can lead to oppression). What matters is not what society says about me, nor what I think of

²In the four paragraphs above of textual analysis, I have benefited from the thinking of James H. Evans Jr., John C. Holbert, Erin Keys, Stephen Farris, Matthew L. Skinner, Stanley P. Saunders, and Mark Abbott in *Connections, Year A, Volume 1* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 162-164, 164-166, 167-168, 169-170, 171-172, 173-174 and 175-176.

myself, but what God does.³

God's acting in Jesus makes salvation real. The Bible teaches that this identity in Jesus Christ is characterized by servanthood, compassion, and the claim that everything is in relationship to and with God. When one's identity is rooted in the compassion, servanthood, and knowledge that everything belongs to and with God, then one's sense of self and self-worth have purpose. One knows who they are and to whom they belong. Jesus. Take seriously reinforcing your identity in God, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 25, and the Great Commission. Confess biases and repent. Jesus' baptism was on our behalf and for our benefit. Jesus was baptized for you and for me. Amen.

This sermon was preached (for the In-Person, Online, and Village TV 6 congregations) on Sunday, 8 January 2023 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California

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³Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God* (New York, New York: Viking, 2016), 134.