



## **A Life Transformed**

### **Session 1 – Identity**

#### **Transformation**

The New York Giants football team went from a disappointing 8-8 record in 2006 to a Super Bowl victory the following season. The team's unlikely David v. Goliath victory over the New England Patriots shocked fans, especially because many of the players attributed it to the major change coach Tom Coughlin had undergone over the previous year.

With one year left on his contract and a team full of players that resented his gruff and unforgiving coaching style, Coach Coughlin's wife and kids advised him that he might want to change his ways. He put together a veteran players council to help communicate with the team, met with reporters who he'd famously previously snapped at, and made an effort to tone down the short-temperedness.

Coughlin reflected to the NY Times, "I, quite frankly, got a long way with that one for a long time. But you know what? That's not working so well right now. So are you smart enough, even though you've got a lot of years behind you, to change? To tweak it a little bit? And hopefully I am."

He went from yelling at his players to taking them bowling. Coach Coughlin didn't take the football less seriously, but he did take himself less seriously. Michael Strahan, who'd played under Coughlin for four years, told the Boston Globe that it was "a transformation, sometimes I barely recognize him."

What Coughlin realized is that there was no amount of threatening, yelling, condescending, or punishing that could change his players. He couldn't transform the players, but he could transform himself. And what he found was that *his own transformation led to ripple effects across his team.*

Our vision at St. Luke's is of a city transformed by the love of Jesus. But no matter how many plans we make or how much work we do, we must first be individually transformed by Jesus in order to carry out the work to which he calls us.

Over the next few weeks, we are going to look at all of the ways that God is working to transform our lives.

- Identities
- Families
- Neighborhoods

- Work
- Ordinary life

Our hope is that you will be able to confidently answer "yes!" when someone asks you if your life is distinctly different because you are a Christ follower.

Let's get started!

### **I do, therefore I am**

A story is told of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French artist Gustave Doré who was stopped at a border crossing when he was traveling through Europe. He discovered he'd misplaced his passport and travel documents. The officer at the border did not want to let him pass. Doré told the officer he could prove his identity if he was given paper and a pencil. The officer requested the he draw a group of nearby peasants, and Doré was able to do so with such ease and in his signature style that he was allowed to pass.

Doré's identity was verified by what he was able to do and based on his work. That concept probably doesn't surprise you at all. After all, so many of us base our identities on what we do.

In the movie *Batman Returns*, Bruce Wayne (whose alter ego is Batman) tries to deflect attention from himself by acting like someone he's not. When he runs into a childhood friend while putting on this outward show, she reminds him, "It's not who you are underneath, it's what you do that defines you." Many of us have bought into this ethos as well: our culture has taught us to define ourselves based on *what we do*. Our identities are based on our jobs, our financial status, our education, our appearance, our marital status, our education, and what others think of us.

Of course, when you experience success in the things you've used to define your identity, there's very little motivation to change the way you think about your identity. But what happens when you experience failure? Become burned out in your job? Disappoint someone? Struggle in your relationships? The things that have formed your identity crumble and you likely find yourself scrambling to find new external things by which to define yourself.

Because we were created to be relational people, we thrive when we are loved, accepted, and chosen. So we work to make ourselves appealing to other people so they will love, accept, and choose us. We might pretend to be interested in something we don't really care about in an effort to appeal to someone. We may buy shiny things so that people will think we are financially successful. We may pour ourselves into our jobs, hoping that it will bring us recognition.

Take a minute and think about the things you do to be loved, accepted and chosen by others.

As Christ followers, we know that it's not about *who* we are, but *whose* we are. That is, all of the things that we do on our own don't really define our worth. Our identity is defined because we belong to God. But in just the same way that we strive and attempt to prove our worth to other people, we do the same thing with God. We get caught in the trap of feeling like we have to earn God's love through our efforts.

I used to think that I would feel successful if I could do everything and be perceived as perfect – my greatest goal was for someone else to look at me and say, "I don't know how she does it all!" I wanted my identity to be primarily defined by how capable I was.

Of course, no one can do it all and do it perfectly, and my pride eventually led to feelings of failure, anxiety, and worthlessness. I tried to overcome those feelings by restructuring my days or trying to do the same amount of work from a different approach. Over time, I came to realize that the underlying feelings of worthlessness and failure were coming from a deeper place than just incomplete tasks. Instead of just accepting the gift of God's grace, I was trying to earn it.

When I find myself trying to overcompensate or do work for the sake of accolades, I am intentional about pulling myself back and reminding myself that I am not only already worthy of love, but already a recipient of it.

### **Our identity in Christ**

It's counter-cultural to base our identity on what God says about us rather than the world. And not only is it counter-cultural... it's just plain hard! We are conditioned to catalog our faults and shortcomings, making it hard to feel worthy. We can make a long list of why God wouldn't love us – we are selfish, we turn our back on God and other people, we are greedy, our motives aren't pure, we don't pray enough, et cetera.

Fortunately, none of that is true! God doesn't love us because of anything we've done or not done. God doesn't look at us and see our failures. God looks at us and sees God's beloved children. The Presbyterian pastor and counselor Jack Miller was famous for saying, "Cheer up! You're a worse sinner than you ever dared imagine, and you're more loved than you ever dared hope."

Read Matthew 3:13-17 (NRSV)

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. <sup>14</sup> But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

<sup>15</sup> Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

<sup>16</sup> As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

God says that Jesus is loved and that God is well-pleased with him. Remember, this is before Jesus has done much of anything. He hasn't performed any miracles, hasn't healed anyone,

hasn't stood up to the Pharisees about Sabbath, hasn't resisted temptation. He is, simply, loved for who he is. As Tish Harrison Warren writes in her book *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, "This is the same word spoken over us in our baptisms before we've done much of anything... we are eternally beloved by God."

Because we've been conditioned to think that love is something we earn, it can be hard for us to absorb the fact that God loves us, full stop.

In *Grace (Eventually)*, Anne Lamott writes that the most radical thing we can do is **believe** that we are loved and chosen by God. Lamott teaches children's Sunday school at her church in Marin City, CA and one of her favorite things to do with the kids is to do the "Loved and Chosen Exercise." She gathers them in a circle and looks around and asks "Is anyone here wearing a blue sweatshirt with Pokémon on it?" The children look down and one of them is astonished to discover that he matches her description. He jumps up to sit with her on the couch and she looks at him in the eyes and says, "You are so loved and so chosen by God." Lamott does this over and over again with each child. She is helping the children learn a counter-narrative to what the world will try to tell them.

It is critical that we believe that we are loved and chosen by God because it frees us from unwarranted and unattainable self-imposed expectations. When we aren't held captive by external measures, we have greater security and confidence. We know that we don't have to perform for others in order to be accepted.

Not only does defining our identity by how God sees us change the way we live, but it also changes how we see everyone around us. If we are beloved by God just as we are, that means everyone else is too. Our first thought when we look at others ought not be about their car or their career or their failures or their children. It ought to be: he or she is deeply loved by God.

Let's look at two practices we can incorporate into our lives to help us continue to remember that our identity is based on God, not on what the world tells us.

### **Wake Up Differently**

What is the first thing you do when you wake up? A study by RootMetrics found that 25% of folks check their phone within one minute of waking up, and a study by SMS Global found that 80% of folks check their phone within 15 minutes of waking up.

If your first conscious thoughts when you wake up are defined by the information you find on your phone, it's likely that you are looking more to external measures to shape your day and your life than you are looking to God. When you immediately look to see how many folks "liked" a photo you posted, or how your boss responded to your email, or if your child's teacher emailed an update on behavior issues, then you will end up letting those things shape your day.

Making a small change to your mornings – spending time with the Lord before anything else – is like hitting a reset button on your soul's intake. Reminding yourself that you are

loved by God no matter what makes the hurdles you may face throughout your day easier. You will tie less of your worth to those things and more of it to Jesus.

Try this practice: keep your Bible, a devotional, or a journal by your bedside. When you wake up in the morning, instead of grabbing your phone, take 10 minutes to read scripture or a devotional, pray, or journal.

### **Practicing Sabbath**

Read Matthew 11:28-30 (MSG)

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me — watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

When we base our identities on external measures – on our striving, our productivity, our wealth, our accomplishments – we don’t allow ourselves to stop and take a break. We burn ourselves out because we are afraid if we slow down, we’ll lose everything we’ve worked so hard to attain.

God declared Sabbath on the day after humans were created, which means the beginning of human life is marked by Sabbath. It should set the tone for our whole lives, rather than it being a rare occurrence. We are instructed not to do any work during the Sabbath, but to rest. This was a foreign concept when it was first introduced to the Israelites – rather than having their lives defined by the number of bricks they produced for the Pharaoh, their lives were defined by being God’s people. For people who have known nothing but work and striving in their lives, the Sabbath is a generous gift from God.

Tim Keller writes that “anyone who cannot obey God’s command to observe the Sabbath is a slave, even a self-imposed one... Sabbath is therefore a declaration of our freedom. It means you are not a slave—not to your culture’s expectations, your family’s hopes, your medical school’s demands, not even to your own insecurities.” (*Every Good Endeavor*)

Through Christ, we have been freed from slavery to sin and death – this is both literal and metaphorical. We are no longer yoked to the exploitation of our materialistic culture.

Making time for Sabbath rest in our lives is a deliberate choice to situate our worth and identity in what God says about us instead of what the world says. When we slow down, we are reminded that we are not indispensable. We find that we are not the ones actually holding up our corner of creation, even though we may believe we are. We learn to trust that the world will continue to spin and that God will continue to work in the world, even when we are resting.

Rev. Katie Montgomery Mears

## **Who I am in Christ**

John 1:12 — I am God's child.

John 15:15 — As a disciple, I am a friend of Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:1 — I have been justified.

1 Corinthians 6:17 — I am united with the Christ, and I am one with him in spirit.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 — I have been bought with a price and I belong to God.

1 Corinthians 12:27 — I am a member of Christ's body.

Ephesians 1:3-8 — I have been chosen by God and adopted as God's child.

Colossians 1:13-14 — I have been redeemed and forgiven of all my sins.

Colossians 2:9-10 — I am complete in Christ.

Hebrews 4:14-16 — I have direct access to the throne of grace through Jesus Christ.

Romans 8:1-2 — I am free from condemnation.

Romans 8:28 — I am assured that God works for my good in all circumstances.

Romans 8:31-39 — I am free from any condemnation brought against me and I cannot be separated from the love of God.

Philippians 1:6 — I am confident that God will complete the good work God started in me.

Philippians 3:20 — I am a citizen of heaven.

2 Timothy 1:7 — I have not been given a spirit of fear but of power, love and a sound mind.

1 John 5:18 — I am born of God and the evil one cannot touch me.

John 15:16 — I have been chosen and appointed to bear fruit.

1 Corinthians 3:16 — I am God's temple.

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 — I am a minister of reconciliation for God.

Ephesians 2:10 — I am God's workmanship.

Ephesians 3:12 — I may approach God with freedom and confidence.