

Jesus' Kingdom Movement

The Gospel of Matthew

If I Were Just Someone Else: Jealousy, Identity, and Desire

Part 3: Building Identity in the Age of Multiple Identities

Matthew 3:13 – 4:11

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Last modified: October 16, 2022 for Neighborhood Church of Dorchester

Introduction: My Mom's Passing

First I want to say thank you to all of you for holding us up in prayer,

Thanks also to Pastor Val for asking me if I still wanted to preach today. I decided that I did want to preach, and share, because I'd rather share with all of you together, rather than share multiple times.

My mom Yoshimi Nagasawa was born in 1941 as Yoshimi Hara to a proud family of farmers and teachers in Katsuyama, Japan. The house she lived in is 450 years old and itself has a proud history. My mom was child number 5 of 6. They lived in the mountains and farmed rice and soybeans and chickens. When she was a little girl, as she told me several times, my mom walked miles to school, often through the snow, uphill, both ways. Then when she got home, she had to do farm work by sunlight, and homework by candlelight. She immigrated to the US in 1963, took classes to become a nurse and also met and married my dad. I came along in 1972 and my sister Mari came along in 1976.

My mom's character impacted my sense of identity very deeply. Even though I had my doubts that she walked uphill both ways to school, I had no doubt that she was a strong and disciplined woman who expected a lot of me, in part because she expected a lot of herself. Her marriage to my dad lasted until my senior year in college, and she worked hard for years at that relationship. Then there was me. Before I could drive, she took me to morning swim practices at 4:30 in the morning while she napped or read the newspaper in the car. Then we came home, and she took me to school. She picked me up and drove me to afternoon swim practices. I got my driver's license when I was 16, and she had a break, but not for long because I got into an accident two months later. My license was suspended for 6 months, so she was back to driving me. The thing is, I don't remember her getting on my case, or complaining. To the extent that I can work hard without complaining, I owe a lot of that to her.

My mom was also generous, especially as a cook and host. She made most Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners for us as a family, and my dad's side of the family. It was incredible. And there were times she asked me if I wanted to invite my friends over to our house, and she made sushi dinners. It was amazing. I love cooking and having people over, and I think I also get that from my mom.

In 2012, my mom came out from Los Angeles to Boston, to live here. She helped us by picking John and Zoe up from school, even though she hated driving in Boston. But she got to be with us as a family, know her grandchildren. She took John and Zoe on a vacation trip to Canada one year. She might have taken them to Japan one day. She took really good care of herself. She walked on a treadmill, ate really healthy.

In August of this year, my sister Mari, her husband Richard, and their two kids Lucas and Gabrielle came from France to visit with us for three weeks. She got a chance to enjoy them, and she went all out shopping for them and making a few meals for them, and showing them her apartment and setting out her nice dishes and cups.

In September, she went to New Zealand and joined an organized tour for almost two weeks. This was one of many trips she took. She loved traveling. She came back on Friday, September 30th. On Saturday, October 1st, John and I took her out to lunch at one of her favorite Japanese restaurants. She gave us gifts from the hobbit town that the lord of the rings movies built in new zealand. She showed us pictures of the beautiful land, of the presentations by the indigenous Maori people that she seemed quite interested in, of her holding a small New Zealand lamb.

On Thursday morning, I went to visit my mom. I found her on the floor of her bedroom. From the discoloration on her skin, it was obvious she had already been deceased for a few days. The medical examiner said it was entirely

natural, and that it was likely a heart attack. Her phone was in the other room so it did seem like she didn't have time to reach it and call me. It was a total shock because she looked like she was in such good health.

This is where an identity question for me comes in. Was I a good son? Have I been a good son? She had not answered my calls from a few days before that. But I didn't immediately go over because my mom sometimes turned her phone off because she hates getting scammer calls. And I thought she was healthy and fine. I should have gone over sooner. And while I'm not sure exactly when she passed, I wanted for her to not die alone. I wanted to be there. So not just in her passing but overall, was I a good son? It's a question that I'm wrestling with.

Relevance:

Now let me step back. Questions like that get at the issue of identity. Have I been a good son? And when we go through great loss or great celebration, or great choices that are fork in the road type choices, we have moments of clarity. Your identity becomes a bit more clear -- identity not just in terms of what you've done and who you've been in the past, but identity in terms of who you want to be and who you would become in the future. Identity in the future-oriented sense is a type of calling, a destiny, or destination. For example, after my teenage years, I knew that I had not been a good son, but I wanted to be, because I had just given my life to Jesus.

One challenge today is that in our culture today, we don't use the word identity in this way. We sometimes speak of multiple identities, as if we're carrying a wallet with different membership cards. Because we are part of different groups of people, like I am a Japanese American male. And I appreciate that way of speaking, it doesn't tell us whether there is one commitment that is more central than the others, that shapes the others. It's not that there is disconnection,

Or, we think of identity as a brand. I think social media has a lot to do with it. I've been commenting a lot in this October sermon series about how social media impacts us, and the spiritual disciplines we need to practice to build different strengths. In our culture, an identity is something you can put on and take off, like another social media profile, or like a disguise. It's like having a Facebook account, and a Twitter account, and an Instagram account. We compartmentalize ourselves and our relationships. We think of identity as if it were a skill. Identity is not a skill. Because when we face the question of have I been a good son, it cuts across all of it.

So, was I a good son? That's a complicated question, and I'm talking with Jesus about that, and I want to let you in on that conversation.

Context:

I'm drawn to the same place in Scripture that we've been in for the last two weeks, the story of Jesus' baptism and wilderness temptation. It's a story when Jesus was tempted by the devil to build multiple identities. This is another look at Matthew 3:13 to 4:11.

The Gospel of Matthew is one of the four authoritative biographies of Jesus, along with the Gospel of Mark, Luke, and John. When we look at Jesus in this story, he is about thirty years old, and he is beginning his public career, when he began to announce that he was the King of Israel. He was bringing the kingdom of God, the reign of God on earth for the renewal of all things.

Text:

Here is Matthew 3:13 - 4:4

3:13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him... 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' 4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' 4 But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down... [Jesus said no.] 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world

and their splendor. 9 All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” [Jesus said no.]

Identity in Relation to the Father Comes First

At this point in his life, Jesus is bracing himself to disappoint many people. By this point, Jesus has had many roles. He has been a human son, an older sibling, a carpenter, a Jewish male in occupied land, a respected leader in the Nazareth synagogue. But now he was stepping into a new role: the king of the Jews, the king of Israel. He would have to deal with all the expectations people would put on him, rightly or wrongly. And also temptations that came with public power. But Jesus has already lived focusing on his heavenly Father, and allowing that relationship to shape all the other relationships he had. And that core identity was a relationship that he lived out in every role and in every stage of his life, even when it meant disappointing people but still loving them, because the Father loved them. He did the difficult thing of loving people who said, “I’m disappointed with you.”

When I gave my life to Jesus late in high school, he helped me to appreciate my mom more and more, which made it painful when he also led me to disappoint her very deeply. Here are two incidents.

My first real conflict with my mom was when I was in college, and I wanted to explore becoming a teacher. She and my dad were totally against it; they wanted me to make a lot more money. But for me, Jesus was challenging me to consider something totally different. During my sophomore year of college, the Rodney King incident and uprising happened in LA, so that was one reason I was considering teaching in LA Unified. Another reason was that my sister came to know Jesus because of a high school teacher, and Jesus was asking me whether I would serve him that way, too. I couldn't explain all that to my mom, especially because she didn't know Jesus and said she was more Buddhist and Shinto, but I also felt like I wasn't sure about the teaching, I didn't need to explain all my reasons yet for considering it.

My second real conflict with my mom was when I was one year out of college and I was working at Intel and I moved into an apartment complex that was almost all Mexican immigrant families in a very poor community. I was being mentored by Jose and Jennifer Espinosa as they led a Spanish speaking Bible study in that community. I invited my mom to visit me there. She hated it, and disowned me for a time. That is when I had to say to her I was following Jesus, and his heart. I promised I would care about her as she got older and she didn't have to live where I lived, and we recovered in our relationship. But choices like that made my mom very disappointed in me. That increased over time. My mom found it very hard to accept that vulnerable people outside the family are worth investing in. She found it hard to accept that imperial Japan was like Nazi Germany and like the US destroyed the lives of many other vulnerable people and that we owed other people our participation to repair. Meanwhile, Jesus challenged me to love her as best I could. We talked at least once a week. I read more about Japanese history and culture even as I also studied Mexican history and culture. I even rewrote Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, set it in the time of Japan when my mom grew up, and made the son a daughter, and I read it to my mom and she asked, “Is that real?” and we had an amazing conversation about it.

So this question comes back in a fresh way: Was I a good son to my mom? But who measures that? Is it just my mom? No. It's actually Jesus. And I know that sounds crazy. But why is he the one to measure it? Because Jesus was and is the Beloved Son of God the Father, who was even before he took up our humanity in his incarnation, always eternally begotten of the Father before all ages, Light from Light, very God of very God. He reveals all reality to us. And so who am I, fundamentally? I am a child of God the Father because I'm joined to Jesus his Beloved Son, and by his Spirit I am adopted into God's great family and I inherit everything Jesus inherits from his great Father.

So again, in a culture where we are tempted to say that my Instagram identity is different from my Twitter identity is different from my Facebook identity, we cannot compartmentalize. And even when we disappoint other people and when it is heartbreaking on both sides, it is still Jesus and his truthful love that anchors who were are on the deepest level. Jesus disappointed a lot of people, too. But he always loved them with the love of the Father by the power of the Spirit.

On this level -- on the deepest level -- we have to decide. Identity in this sense -- in a future oriented sense -- is who are we becoming? Who are we committing to becoming? That is so real. It guides every decision. It saturates everything else. It doesn't rule out other ways of identifying. It answers the question: Which shapes which? I

invite you to sit with that. If there are ways you are negotiating that question, wrestling through that, and you're still getting to know Jesus, let me say that he is so worth it. Every moment is worth it, because of the sense of clarity, because of the power of his love that is present, because of the way I've grown to appreciate things about my mom that I never could without him. I could see the ways she was made in God's image.

Identity Must Be Built

Here's the next practical thing: We have to recognize that identity is something we practice. In life and in this passage is that our identity in Christ must be practiced time and time again by trusting what God says. Jesus hears the Father tell him his identity: You are my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. And Jesus trusted the Father and what the Father wanted him to do. But the devil tells him to look and see the stones, see the people, see the high point of the temple, and interpret all these things out of a center in yourself, not with the Father and how he interprets those things.

Do you hear or do you see? There is often a conflict between what we hear from God and what we see around us. Other sayings in Scripture go like this: "We walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). "Faith comes by hearing, hearing the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Why does faith come by hearing? Why doesn't faith come by seeing? Why isn't faith grown by seeing the physical things around us?

Here is why. On the human level, what we see always needs further interpretation. There is a voice in my head, these days, that says, "Look at how your mom died, alone." I saw her body. I saw her picture at the Medical Examiner's office. And the voice says God is cruel and not worth serving. I think that's demonic. I'm tempted to conclude something based on what I saw, but that's not the only way to interpret it. What else did I see? I saw that it probably didn't last long. I saw that in the last months of her life, she did her favorite things. I heard her say she didn't want to be a bedridden person and not be physically active, because she is a physically active person. So just on the human level alone, what we see is never enough. We always need an interpretation. Even if we're not sure exactly -- like I'm not sure exactly -- of some of the details.

That's why how God interprets things for us is so important. What we hear from Him about death, about hope, about resurrection, about choices is so important. Faith comes by hearing. We walk by faith and hearing and not by sight.

Look at how Jesus answers these temptations of the devil. He quotes from Deuteronomy three times. What he's doing first is, "I'm trusting what God says about my identity. I am the Beloved Son. I don't need to prove that to you. I don't need to add conditions to that, as if life needs to go that way, in order for it to be true. No, I trust the Father. That's number one. But not only that, I know my place in this story. I've heard this story from the Scriptures." The divine author has learned as a human about the story he lives in. He knows that he is retelling Israel's origin story. They went through water, and wilderness for 40 years, and they then came to a mountain, and they heard more from God. But they failed. They blew it in different ways, not in every way, but in some critical ways. And Jesus said, "I have come to fulfill that story, to succeed where everyone else failed. That is why I've come. And that is why I'm thinking about Deuteronomy. They were in the wilderness. I am in the wilderness. I will succeed where they failed. I will not give in to temptation. I will not be dissuaded from my identity. I will give salvation and redemption through my human faithfulness, so that everyone who wants to can, by the Spirit, participate in me."

That is ultimately how Jesus understood this battle between hearing and seeing, between trusting the Father's interpretation of his story and destiny, and coming up with his own. He knows there's a larger story, and he knows to listen for it.

The same thing is true as I think about my mom and appreciate her and process my own questions and memories. We had a relationship for 30 years that was painful. That wasn't the only thing that it was, but it was painful. But over the last few years, I've seen her be stretched in love because of the way I introduced her to the things that I love, and the things Ming loves, and the things our children love. So she watched a Korean drama with my son about Imperial Japan taking over Korea. She would never have done that, because Japan oppressed Korea and she would rather not think about that. When she went to New Zealand and the Lord of the Rings set, I was really psyched about that, because we were talking about watching the movies together. The pictures showed that she really enjoyed being there, and that might have become one of the few things that my mom and I felt authentic joy

about. When I look at her pictures of the Maori people, I wonder about the interest she had in the story of another indigenous and colonized people, she seems to have been impacted in some way. There are all these other things that I have heard that I now bring into conversation with Jesus. Jesus said in Colossians 1:17, "In me all things hold together." He said in John 1:3, "I am the light of all people, as they come into the world." Over the last 30 years, I saw her wrestling. That I know of, I don't think she committed herself to Jesus. But what happened in those last moments? I don't know. What happens when Jesus reaches out his hands and says, "Your mom did not die alone. I'm offering her my hand. I'll take it from here." I don't know. But there are traces of hope that I have because of these small heart changes I've seen in her, that she might take his hand.

So I rebuke that thought in my head that says, "Look at how your mom died, alone." I affirm that God is good, that even on our bad days, God is good. We walk by faith, by hearing the interpretation of the most important things. We do not walk by the sight of things that are most shocking, or superficial. Because in our social media age, we take pictures. And what we see seems to be reality, as if everything is self-evident. It is not. We must listen to the Father in Jesus through his Spirit. We must know our place in his story. We must know his interpretation of the biggest, most important things in our lives. This is what identity means. And we must practice our identity, build our sense of identity, to resist the culture that says, "Compartmentalize. Carry a wallet of multiple identities. Or treat our identity as if it's a brand that you sell to others." No, it goes much deeper than that.

So practice your identity in Christ. Make him first. And if you notice that there's a difference between how you are interpreting something and how he interprets it, go with his interpretation, and not your own.