

You are Your Relationships

Good morning and great to see you here in-person or online! We are so glad that you've joined our worship this morning and I'm looking forward to meet those of you who have not been in this building!

Ps. 8:4 What is man [humankind] that You think of him, And a son of man that You are concerned about him? (NASB)

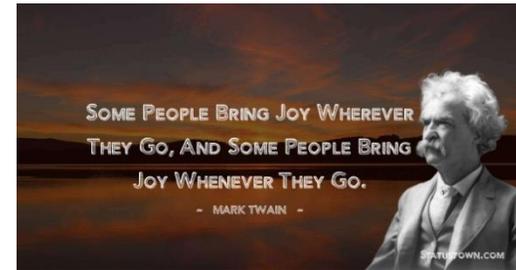
In *The Social God and the Relational Self*, Stanley J. Grenz points out that this verse is evidence that the quest for personal identity is an ancient one.

And this present series, "Who God Says You Are," explores the nine factors that shape our identity. We had covered the first two, "You are Your Body" and "You are Your History." Today we are going to look at "You are Your Relationships."

Life is all about relationships – we breathe, drink, eat, digest, and dream about relationships; we are dealing with different kinds of relationships 24/7 – family, relatives, friends, colleagues, neighbours,

etc. We have good and bad ones, healthy and unhealthy ones, safe and toxic ones.

I am sure you get what Mark Twain once quipped:



One thing I can say for sure after being in ministry over 36 yrs.: relationships are complicated but they play a crucial role in identity formation and character development.

Whether life is good or bad, relationships influence how we think and feel about ourselves and others as well as how we treat each other.

[Response moment: Do you measure the quality of our life by the quality of your relationships? Yes.]

I want to share with you two fundamental truths about the role of relationships in identity formation – individuation, i.e., “the process by

which individuals in society become differentiated from one another.”¹

Truth#1:

We live out our full identity in relationships.

Since more and more folks are apprehensive about returning to their offices to deal with their colleagues after such a long lockdown, Journalist Catherine Nixey suggests in an interesting article in *The Economist* on July 14th that they should take some advice from monks who lived in the Syrian desert hundreds of years ago, esp. from “Rule of Saint Benedict” (6th century). Take a read and see if it’s helpful to you.²

But what captured my attention is the title, “**Hell is other people: a monk’s guide to office life,**” and the caption in bold in the middle of the article:

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/individuation>.

² <https://www.economist.com/1843/2021/07/14/hell-is-other-people-a-monks-guide-to-office-life>

³ “Hell is other people” is a line from the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*. According to Sartre who clarifies what he meant when he wrote that line: “‘Hell is other people’ has always been misunderstood. It has been thought that what I meant by that was that our relations with other people are always poisoned, that they are invariably hellish relations. But what I really mean is something totally

“Because the Hell that is oneself is harder to bear even than the Hell that is other people.”³

Here lies the struggle we all face w.r.t. handling relationships and identity formation; many of us would rather stay in our self-protecting silos than deal with relational/interpersonal challenges.

[Response moment: Are you staying inside your self-protecting silo? Yes.]

If the only connection we have is with our **wifi** and people know us only by our selfies or whatever else we post in social media, then loneliness is only a symptom of a complete lost soul or we have an acute identity crisis!

BTW if you know what the ultimate punishment for the worst criminal in prison is, let us know in the

different. I mean that if relations with someone else are twisted, vitiated, then that other person can only be hell. Why? Because ... when we think about ourselves, when we try to know ourselves ... we use the knowledge of us which other people already have. We judge ourselves with the means other people have and have given us for judging ourselves.” See <https://www.vox.com/2014/11/17/7229547/philosophy-quotes-misunderstood-wittgenstein-sartre-descartes>.

Chat. You are correct, if your answer is solitary confinement!

God's word is clear about the truth: we are relational creatures – it's our DNA, no matter what ethnic heritage, family origins, gender, occupation, socio-economic status, introvert or extrovert:

Gen. 1: 27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them ...

2:18 The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Humankind made in the image of triune God – Father, Son, & Holy Spirit - has the capacity to relate to the Creator, to reflect His attributes and to act on His behalf, mirroring divine relational personality and character traits, purpose, and responsibility in interpersonal relationships.

While Adam could show many of God's characteristics, he could not reflect the communal character of God without community. This is why it

⁴ Snodgrass, Klyne R.. *Who God Says You Are: A Christian Understanding of Identity*, p. 100. Kindle Edition.

is not good for him to be alone. God uses community to bring out the glory of His creation.

Our identity emerged, formed, developed, and matured in relations.

We are communal people who need to belong, we realize our full potential, and we become ourselves in community because ***through social interactions we discover who we are and how we fit into a larger story.***⁴

This is also supported by social scientists who have pointed out that a complex process in which humans develop a clear and unique view of themselves involves people's intentions, feelings, values, purpose, and beliefs in a particular social context, in a larger community, town, or city, as well as in the macro-level such as national systems, regulation, and cultures.⁵

So, being a Lone Ranger is harmful to our self discovery and communal living; going solo is detrimental to personal growth and an identity

⁵ See for examples, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/science-choice/201412/basics-identity>; <https://ystudios.com/insights-people/influence-on-identity>.

killer! We are relational beings and made to connect with others, as the famous 17th century English poet John Donne wrote, “No man is an island, entire of itself.”

More importantly, if we are created in God’s image, our identity can be fully revealed in ***loving relationships with God and others***, as Jesus teaches about the double commandments of love:

“Mk. 12:30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’”

This then brings us to the second fundamental truth about the role of relationships in identity formation.

Truth#2:

Relationships expose our self-deceitfulness; our identity needs to be redeemed.

It’s most instructive to get back to the beginning when sin entered human history (Gen. 3:8-24). There we learn about the wholesomeness of God’s

image was shattered; humanity has no peace with God, self, others, creation, and Satan.

Adam and Eve want to be somebody else, i.e., just like God, instead of being true to their identity, guilt, shame, and social-relational alienation happened. And when God confronts Adam, he blames Eve who in turn points her finger at Satan.

All the factors that contribute to identity formation, character development, and community shalom are damaged:

the heart is wounded,
the soul is sick,
the mind is confused,
the body is deteriorating,
relationships are in conflict,
and work is demoralizing.

Instead of trust, partnership, and intimacy, we see domination, self-interest, and distance. Humanity’s identity is confused, distorts the image of God, and thus fails to reflect the glory of God.

When self-centeredness reigns, life is diminished, and the journey to self-discovery becomes an adventure of self-deception caused by “the heart of darkness” and resulting in relational chaos characterized by fear, frustration, and friction.

[Response moment: Do you want to become “a heavenly creature”? Yes.]

Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham developed this tool in 1950’s to help people better understand the dynamics of interpersonal communication and relationships, and Charles Handy [organizational behavior and management specialist] later called it by this name.

Johari Window

| | Known to self | Not known to self |
|---------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Known to others | Arena | Blind Spot |
| Not Known to Others | Façade | Unknown |

The public arena contains things that are openly known and talked about - and which may be seen as strengths or weaknesses. This is the self that we choose to share with others

The hidden area contains things that others observe that we don't know about. Again, they could be positive or negative behaviours, and will affect the way that others act towards us.

The unknown area contains things that nobody knows about us - including ourselves. This may be

because we've never exposed those areas of our personality, or because they're buried deep in the subconscious.

The private area contains aspects of our self that we know about and keep hidden from others.

If there's some truth in this Johari Window, then most people don't really know us too much and there's much "unknown territory" in each person.

Jer. 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

Matt. 15:19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

When the quest of identity and self is separated from God and others, when the self is elevated to be totally independent, everyone does what is right in their own eyes!

If relationships shape our identities, we need an identity transformation that will grow into Jesus-

shaped relationships – we need “a new heart” and “a new spirit”;⁶ we need to become new creation, because when we embrace Jesus the old has gone, the new is here:⁷

- we put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires,
- we are made new in the attitude of our minds,
- and we put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.⁸

When we are spiritually renewed and have new life in Christ, it doesn't mean “loss of identity, absorption in the divine, or negation of self ... It is to say that one's true self is only known in relation to God and in being determined by God ... a recognition that our relation with Christ defines and determines every other relation and action.”⁹

C.S. Lewis says, “... every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of

⁶ Cf. Ezek. 11:19; 36:26; Jer. 31:33.

⁷ 2 Cor. 5:17.

⁸ Eph. 4:22-26.

⁹ Snodgrass, Klyne R.. *Who God Says You Are: A Christian Understanding of Identity*, pp. 108-109. Kindle Edition.

you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature...Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.”

Before we celebrate the baptism of Sharon and Lovelle who have received a new heart and a new spirit, and now declare to all that Jesus is the Life Coach and Leader, let me suggest 3 practical takeaways:

1. **Prov. 27:17** As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. Humbly ask someone close to you and know you well and ask each other this question: “Do you see Jesus in me?”
2. Find a time in your small group to discuss the Johari Window and brainstorm ways you can bring the best Jesus-version out of each other.
3. Check out the ESTABLISH webpage for resources and opportunities relating to identity: <https://cornerstonechurch.ca/discipleshippathway/establish-identity-in-jesus/>