

Stewardship Series: Lives Transformed “Who Am I?”
Romans 12: 1-2; Matthew 5:1-12
Salem United Methodist Church
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Today we begin a three-part Stewardship Sermon Series called, “Lives Transformed.” Stewardship is an examination process which begins with knowing, “Who am I?” In particular, “Who am I in relationship to God?” Second, we will examine how the church has been an integral part of assisting us in developing that relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And then third, with these blessings from God, how then are we to be a blessing? Today we begin this examination process with the question, “Who am I?”

Have you ever played the ice breaker party game called “Who am I?” A name is taped on the back of each participant. The participants do not know what name is on their back. They can read the names on the backs of others, but not on one’s own back. The goal of the game is to find out what name is on your back or find out who you are. Participants can ask questions, but the questions have to be phrased so that the answers are “yes” or “no.” For instance, the participant can ask questions like, “Am I dead? Am I male? Am I an inventor? Am I a rock star?” Each answer that one receives helps the participant formulate their next question. Through a process of deduction, one makes an “educated” guess as to what the name that is on taped to one’s back. This is how one finds out, “Who am I?”

This game is not the only time we ask ourselves this three word question. We ask it over and over again as we go through various stages in life. It may begin with a toddler discovering that the reflection in the mirror is hers. Teen-agers wrestle with the question, “Who am I?” by trying new things, testing their parents, and attempting to push their boundaries. Young adults ask the question as they deal with the freedoms and responsibilities of adulthood. Even adults look in the mirror and ask, “Who am I?” as we parent, as our children leave home, as we change jobs, as we see the person in the mirror looking more and more like our parents! Who am I? Some of us are blessed to have people in our lives who have known us since childhood such as siblings, cousins, and childhood friends. They can remind us of who we are as we go through these stages of life. Sometimes just being in their presence reminds us of who we are.

All people from the beginning of time have asked the question, “Who am I?” except for Jesus. He never asked himself this question. From a child Jesus knew he is the Great I Am. At twelve years old, Jesus told his parents that he was about his father’s business. The human Jesus knew who he was, is, and will be. Being the Great I Am, Jesus understood that we as humans don’t always know who we are. I can just imagine him looking over the crowd who came to hear him speak on that mountain. He saw people who questioned presence of God in their lives. He saw people who were grieving. He sees people who knew that they belonged to God. He saw people who wanted a relationship with God. He saw people who cared for others. He saw people whose hearts were right with God. He saw people who worked hard to get people to live together peacefully. And he saw people who were being bullied or persecuted for their beliefs. Jesus knew these people. Jesus knew who they are. No matter what their circumstances, Jesus also, knew that God is blessing them in some way and he told them.

The word, blessing or blessed, is an interesting word. It comes from the Latin word, *beatitudo*, which is where we get the English word, *beatitudo*. However, the Greek word is *makarios*. The ancient Greeks used it to refer to the gods. The gods were blessed just because they were gods. *Makarios* was used to refer to those who were dead because they didn’t have to put up with this world any more. The dead were blessed to be dead. And *makarios* was used to refer to the privileged because they didn’t have to struggle in life. They had it all. If you were rich and powerful, you were blessed. Jesus takes this word that is meant for those who are not of this world, for those who don’t have a care in this

world, and offers it to the people he saw sitting in front of him- to those who were suffering in some way, to those who were loving and caring for others, to those who were humble, to those who were trying to make the world a better place, to those who loved God. Because of who you are, Jesus tells them, God is doing something great in you. God is pouring out all that God is upon you. God is healing you. God is raising you up. God is doing a great work in you. God is giving you God's best so that you can be God's best. The word, "blessed," connotes the Hebrew word, *shalom*, as well. Last week we said that *shalom* means, "peace." It also means, "well-being." Jesus recognized that the people sitting in front of him: the broken ones, the ones just hanging in there, the ones who would give the cloak off their back to another, the ones who yearned for God, and the ones who knew God. Jesus knew that God was going to make things all right for them. One of the meanings of blessed is 'ok.' Jesus is telling these people, everything is gonna be all right. Everything is ok. No matter what happens, God's got this! God can take whatever situation and transform it into a blessing from God. This is how Jesus begins his most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. With just eight examples of our human condition, Jesus is saying, "No matter who you are, you are blessed." With these eight blessings, Jesus got the crowd's attention, so he could instruct them in the rest of his sermon on the ways they can bless others and bless God.

Have you ever been in any of these eight categories? Have you ever been at the end of your rope? Did you ever lose someone you loved? Have you ever been content with who you are? Have you ever yearned for God? Have you ever cared? Have you ever had a heart that loved as God loves? Have you ever tried to create peace in a situation? Have you ever been abused or persecuted for your beliefs? These questions are asked so that your answers are either "yes" or "no" like in the game, "Who am I?"

I invite you to remember the first time you walked into Salem. Were you in any of these categories? Or maybe you don't remember the first time you walked into Salem, then as I ask these questions, reflect if there was any time in which you walked into Salem like this. Did you walk into Salem at the end of your rope, looking for God? Did you walk into Salem after you lost someone you loved? Did you walk into Salem being content in who you are and in your relationship with God in Christ? Did you walk into Salem caring about people? Did you walk into Salem with a heart that loves as God loves? Did you walk into Salem after trying to get some people in your life to cooperate, and not fight? Did you ever walk into Salem after being bullied or persecuted because you believe in Jesus? If you have answered, yes, to any of these questions, then I ask you a question that can't be answered with a "yes" or a "no." How has God blessed you here at Salem?

When people outside the church hear the word, Salem, they think of the Salem witch trials, but the word, Salem, comes from the word, *shalom*. This church is a place of peace and well being. This church is a place in which God blesses us and transforms lives. Being blessed doesn't make us elite in any way, or not have a care in the world. Being blessed does not mean that we can lie around and bask in the blessings of God. Being blessed means that we recognize what we offer to God in our every day routine, our "walking around life." Being blessed means we know that God is in every part of our lives, the joys, the concerns, the cares, the worries, in our sleeping, eating, going-to-work. Being blessed means that we know God sees our sin. Being blessed means we recognize our sin, and seek forgiveness through Jesus. Being blessed means we accept this forgiveness, and with God's grace begin to live differently. Being blessed also means recognizing how God wants us to be a blessing to others. We come to Salem perhaps broken or hurt or filled with love and joy. No matter how we come, we come to seek who Jesus in our lives, to recognize how we are blessed, to grow in our faith; and we come to learn how God wants us to bless others. We come because we seek God to bring the best out in us, so we can bring the best of God to the world. So how do you answer the question, "Who am I?"

Resources: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*; *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*; "Who Am I?" by Casting Crowns

