

IDENTITY THEFT

April 19, 2023

Rev. Richard Rogers

Okay; so I'm going to tell a story. In fact, that's all I'm going to do tonight: tell stories. And I want you to hear in all these stories your story. Because all of us have a story. And our story is part of who we are, even though it's not the fullness of who we are. Our story kind of tells us of the journey that we've been through and how we've had to overcome things.

So I'm going to start with the story that's about you and me and most of the world. So you were born into the world as a magnificent spiritual being, created in the image and likeness of God. Is that true? [Congregation: "Yes."] Really? [Congregation: "Yes!"] Okay.

But we were born into a world that had fallen; it had fallen into doubt and fear and sometimes even ugliness, where love was not the most important thing always. Is that true? Sometimes! Right?

So we come into this world believing and knowing that we're magnificent, but slowly our identity sometimes is kind of bumped out of us. It's kind of scared out of us. It's kind of chased out of us. With one little comment and another little comment by people who are bigger than we are, that are "more important" than we are. And we begin to wonder if we were ever really magnificent.

Because sometimes it looks easier just to believe that we're not. It kind of sometimes even makes more sense to believe that we're not. It kind of makes sense of everything if something doesn't go right or we don't get this or we get that. There's this idea that the reason that all this stuff is happening in our life is because we are just not quite right or just a little off ... or something.

And slowly, but surely, these comments: they act as thieves that steal our identity; that steal our sense of who we are. And sometimes it's done by people who just had it done to them. Like, that's what they knew. They knew that they were not much, so when others around them ... they told them that they weren't much. And they got agreement: *"I won't be much and you won't be much, and we won't be much together."*

And sometimes it was said by people who actually loved us a great deal and didn't want us to be disappointed by life. So they would tell us that we are not much, so we got disappointed by people who loved us instead of by people who didn't.

And all the while, God and the messengers keep trying to remind us that we are magnificent. But the more that we hear the words of the angels and the messengers and all the holy ones that kind of remind us that we are more than that ... the more that just seems further and further like a distant echo, and seems less and less like the truth.

And, in fact, the world keeps at us. And it tells us that, if we feel too good about ourselves, that that's egotistical. And it's actually wrong and bad. And you shouldn't feel too good about yourself, because that meant you were something something. [Congregation laughs]

And all the while, these magnificent creatures that come into the world to express the glory of God -- to express their gifts and talents and abilities -- shrink a little at a time. And find it harder and harder to recognize themselves.

I think all of us have had an experience in one way or another like that, where somebody with maybe even good intentions told us something about ourselves. And they said it with such clarity and such power that we just assumed that what they were saying about us had to be true! And a little bit more

and a little bit more, we just lose our magnificence. We lose that sense of what is special and holy and sacred until sometimes it feels like it was a lifetime ago that we knew who we truly were.

See, a spiritual crisis is a form of identity crisis where an individual experiences a transformation of their sense of self: either their unique purpose; or goals; or values; or attitudes; or beliefs; or identity; or focus. Typically, it happens after a spiritual experience or an awakening. So what happens is: We tend to get smaller and smaller. We tend to feel more and more disconnected from our own magnificence, and then something happens -- a spiritual experience. Maybe it's prayer or meditation; or maybe it's in the presence of the Grand Canyon; or maybe it's in a moment of feeling absolutely loved.

And in those moments where we kind of "come back to ourselves." And it almost presents a crisis, because the way that we've reacted to life -- the way that we've experienced ourselves from life -- has gotten so small ... but this experience of us is so big that it challenges us. It reorganizes the deck. It literally changes everything! And in that moment, we have to kind of decide who we're going to be in the world.

And it looks easier to be small. But it never is! It never makes sense; it never works. Because you can never get small enough to be out of fear or worry or pain. It is only in the other direction. It's only when we expand to be more than we've ever been before.

The Scripture I shared with you last week I want to share with you again. It's ... I'm just beating the same Scripture up ... [Congregation laughs] One more week out of it! So ... It's John 10:10:

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly."

And this is the whole deal! Right? That either we're going to come and know ourselves in the way that God created us, or we're going to be lost: really, truly, deeply, profoundly lost. Because you can't believe that you're broken or "less than" or bad or ugly and know the glory of God.

You know, I've thought there was a time where the church really tried to keep people down, and I wondered why that was. Why would you do that to people? Why would you make them feel diminished and "less than." And for me, it just never made sense, because we don't have to be small to be impressed by the greatness of God. And, in fact, when we actually expand into our fullness, we can really appreciate how great God is!

And I don't want your sense of who you are to be in any way diminished. I want you to be able to hold your greatness, not as a statement of ego, but as a divine birthright. I want you to see yourself from the highest point of view. I want you to see yourself the way God sees you ... not as an egotistical statement, but as your ability to truly come home.

So I have five questions for you tonight. And just play with them.

Have you ever awakened to a greater realization of yourself? That's number one. Have you ever awakened to a greater realization of yourself? And I want you to really challenge yourself! Have you ever had a moment -- in prayer or meditation; or looking at the fullness of the sky or the beauty of nature; or looking at somebody that you absolutely love and adore -- that in that moment you realize, *"Oh! I've never been broken; there's nothing wrong with me! I really am an expression of the Divine!"*

In the story of the Prodigal Son, the young man gets his inheritance and goes off and squanders it. It says "riotous living," and some of us know what that one's like. [Congregation laughs] And then there's a moment where the only way he can make his way is by feeding the hogs, and for a good Jewish boy that's a problem. And as he's starving -- because they won't even feed him what they're feeding the hogs -- there's a line in Scripture where it says:

"And then he came to himself."

See, I think there's a moment where all spiritual beings have to come to themselves. We're living in a world that doesn't always appreciate or celebrate or acknowledge who we are. But there's a moment where we have to come to ourselves. Where we have to decide... Even if we're the only person on the planet that sees who we are, we must see who we are.

And the courage that it takes to stand and be your magnificent self -- even if everyone has told you throughout your life that you're not that -- is a spiritual statement, not of your ego. But of the activity of God that was placed within you that will not be denied.

So the first question: Have you ever awakened to a greater realization of your true identity?

Two: **Have you transformed your sense of self?** And all of us have, right? In one way or another, we've transformed from one sense to who we are to another ... to another ... to another. That we're not little kids any more. Most of us aren't even young adults anymore. And, you know, most of us would be happy to be middle-aged again. [Congregation laughs] Right?

But we've gone through a journey here, right? And so our sense of self isn't that anymore; so we know what it's like to see ourselves in new ways. And sometimes seeing ourselves in new ways is just hard. Because we're really attached to what we know ourselves, and how we've known ourselves.

So have you transformed your sense of self? And this question really isn't just about the physical transformation or the psychological transformation, but it's about the spiritual transformation. About seeing yourself through God's eyes.

And in this process of transformation, are you willing to forgive those who diminished your sense of self in any way? See, I think it's helpful if we tell ourselves the truth. If you made a list of the people in your past who have any way diminished your sense of self, how long a list would you have? Right? [Laughs] Some of us would have a really long list; some of us maybe not so long. But we would all, in one way or another, have a list. And part of giving up the wounded self and standing your magnificence is to be willing to forgive those people who labeled you in a way that wasn't becoming of a child of God.

Because if we're still angry with them, we're still in the wound of that experience. And we don't have to invite them over for Christmas, but we need to forgive them.

"I forgive everyone who's ever tried to steal my identity." Will you say that with me?

[With congregation]: *"I forgive everyone who has ever tried to steal my identity."*

It's a big statement! And it challenges us to really move into that experience of, *"Wow! It's really true! There have been people in my life who really wanted me to be smaller than I was. Who wanted me to be less than I was. Who believed it would somehow be safer or easier for them if I would show up in a smaller way."* And so they would say things, sometimes with a smile on their face. Sometimes even try to do it with love in their heart. And it just wasn't helpful.

Number four: **Are you willing to take back your magnificence?** And this is a little harder than we think! Because we want to say, *"Oh, sure! I'm magnificent!"* But I want you not only to just hold that, but I want you to take that all the way down to your core. That you are a magnificent expression of God!

Together: [with congregation] *"I am a magnificent expression of God!"*

One more time: [with congregation] *"I am a magnificent expression of God!"*

And the last one is: **Would you be willing to change your thinking about yourself?** Because you can't think rotten things about yourself and still hold your magnificence. You can't use rotten words about

yourself and still hold your magnificence. You can't diminish yourself over and over again throughout each day and still hold your magnificence.

Our magnificence actually requires that we let go of those lesser things for the glory and the truth of who God created each and every one of us to be. And again, that is not of the ego; that is of the Divine! Each and every one of us was created from the Divine.

Sometimes a poet best captures the needs and words and feelings of the heart, as in these words by Marianne Williamson:

*"Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate,
Our greatest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?"*

*Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that others won't feel insecure around you.*

You were born to manifest the glory of God that is within you.

*It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.*

*As we are liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates others."*

And from James 1, Verse 2-4:

"Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete and lacking in nothing."

And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete and lacking in nothing.

"I am whole and complete and lacking in nothing."

Together: [with congregation] *"I am whole and complete and lacking in nothing."*

Sometimes mythology allows us to see the truth of who we truly are. And we can see it in the story, in the metaphor, in the allegories. So I'm going to tell the story that Hans Christian Andersen wrote called *The Wild Swans*. And I'm going to kind of do it summation, because it's too long to read right now. But I want you just to lean back in your chair, pretend you're eight years old [congregation laughs], and listen to a fable, a story.

*"In a faraway kingdom, there lived a widowed king with his 12 children: 11 princes and one princess.
And one day, he decides to remarry, but married the wicked queen who was a witch."*

Now, don't email me. [Congregation laughs] Right? So before we go any further, I want you to see this story. So he's a widowed king, right? We got that. And how many kids does he have? [Congregation: "Twelve."] Twelve. And how many boys? [Congregation: "Eleven."] Eleven. How many girls? [Congregation: "One."] One. Okay? And the mom's gone.

And I want you to see that, as part of the story, that the source of unconditional motherly love is gone. Right? And when he does decide to marry, he marries wickedness. Right? Don't email me; it's a story, alright? He marries wickedness, right?

So how much love is being experienced in that family right now? Not much, right? Not much! Okay? Here we go:

"So out of spite, the queen turns her 11 stepsons into magnificent swans, who are allowed temporarily to become human only at night, and forces them to fly away."

Okay? So this is where the metaphysics of the story gets even more interesting, right? So these 11 young men all become swans. They can only be men at night. Now, what does night usually represent? Unconsciousness. It represents the unconscious. So these are men who only get to be men in their unconscious.

Now, have we all experienced men who were [laughs] a little unconscious? [Congregation laughs] Right? And during the daytime, they were pretty little swans, but at night they became just unconscious men. Right? [Laughs] Just email me; it's alright. [Congregation laughs] I feel if I take out both sides of the gender issue then everybody's even, right?

"When their sister, Elisa, reached the age of 15, the queen tries to bewitch her, but Elisa's goodness was too strong for this, so the queen has her banished after making her unrecognizable by dirtying her face."

Elisa finds her brothers, who carry Elisa safely to a foreign land where she is out of the reach of her evil stepmother."

Right? So let's look at this. So when she dirties her face, what does that symbolize? [Congregant: "Her identity."] Her identity! Right? She's trying to change her identity. She's trying to dirty her up. But her goodness -- and I want you to hear this! Her goodness was too great to be tarnished. So she banished her. Her brothers find her, and they lift her and they carry her to a distant land where she is safe. Right?

"There, Elisa is guided to the queen of the fairies ..."

Now [laughs], what does the queen of the fairies symbolize? Conscious, magical, loving goodness. Right? When you haven't been loved enough in your life, and somebody comes up to love you in the way that you've always wanted to be loved, that feels magical. It feels unworthy. It feels special.

"So Elisa is guided to the queen of the fairies and told to gather stinging nettles in the graveyards, and to knit them into shirts that will eventually help her brothers regain their human shape."

Okay? Just stay with me!

"Elisa endures painful, blistering hands from the nettle stings and must take a vow of silence during the duration of this task, for speaking one word will kill her brothers."

Right? So I want you to see that the 15-year-old girl is the hero of this story! Does everybody see that? Right? It's not her older 11 brothers; the hero -- the heroine -- of the story is Elisa.

"The handsome ..."

So of course!

"The handsome king of another faraway land happens to come across Elisa, who cannot talk, but he falls in love with her. He grants her a room in his castle where she continues to knit the shirts. Eventually he proposes and offers to crown her as his wife, and without words somehow she accepts."

The archbishop ..."

Okay. So we have unenlightened female figures, right? Now we have the unenlightened masculine figure representing the church!

"However, the archbishop is chagrined because he thinks Elisa is herself a witch, but the king will not believe it. One night Elisa runs out of nettles and is forced to collect more in the nearby church graveyard, where the archbishop is watching her. Ghoulish spirits come out to devour her in the courtyard, and the archbishop believes that she's in league with these evil spirits. He reports the incident to the king as proof of her witchcraft. The statues of the saints shake their heads in protest, and the archbishop then misinterprets the shaking of the saints' heads -- the statues -- as acknowledgement that she is a witch. And she is going to be burned at the stake."

Alright? Happy story! It's going to get better. [Congregation laughs] This is where the turn happens, right? There's going to be a turn.

"The brothers discover her plight and try to talk to the king but fail, because they're trying to do it at night when they're human. And the sun comes up and they're instantly reduced back to pretty, little swans. Elisa is taken away for execution, but she continues to knit, determined to finish her project before she is killed. This enrages the townspeople, who want to snatch and rip up the shirts into pieces, when the swans descend and rescue her. The people interpret this as a sign from heaven that she is innocent. And she finished the last shirt before the executioner can set the fire. Elisa then throws the shirts over the swans, and her brothers all turn back into human form. And the youngest has a swan's wing instead of an arm, as Elisa did not have time to finish one of the sleeves."

[Congregation laughs] A woman's work is never done, right? [Congregation laughs harder]

"So Elisa is now free to speak and tells the truth, but faints from exhaustion."

It's so hard to be the heroine!

"So her brothers explain. And as they do so, the firewood that they've laid all around her miraculously, magically begins to take root and burst into flowers. The king plucks the topmost flower and places it on Elisa's chest. She is revived by the white flower, and the king and Elisa are married that day."

And it all ends happily ... [Congregation: "Ever after."] Ever after!

Okay! So here's the story! I want you to see this. And I could have picked a hundred different stories that were probably shorter than that one. But there was a hundred different stories, and all the stories -- in one way or another -- talk about the transformation of self. That in mythology, one of the greatest themes is this transformation of being treated one way, but being another.

And every one of us -- no matter what our childhood or our life has been like -- in one way or another has been treated one way and our identity is something else. And the difficulty is: The longer that we believe that we are broken, the harder it is to be restored to the truth. The more that we believe that there's something wrong with us, the harder it is to come back to who we are.

So tonight, I want to challenge you to look -- without anger or upset -- at the people that have helped steal your identity. That have, in some way, taught you to be less than the magnificent child of God that you are.

And tonight, I want you to claim your rightful identity as magnificent. As holy. As sacred. As divine. Not as a statement of ego, but the truth that God has placed within your soul from the beginning of time.

That everywhere we look, in story after story, you're asked to remember who you are. Not as a distant, fleeting memory of lifetimes ago, but the truth of who you are today.

"I am magnificent."

Will you say that with me? [With congregation]: *"I am magnificent!"*

One more time: [with congregation]: *"I am magnificent."*

One more time and then I'll leave you alone: [with congregation] *"I am magnificent!"*

Let's take it into prayer.

And tonight I'm going to invite you to let go -- deeply, profoundly let go -- of all the stories; of all the drama; of all the identifications that you've had; all the roles; all the names that were anything less than a child of God. A holy, sacred, divine expression of all that God is. From the moment you were given life, you were a fully equipped expression of God. No less! No less than the most magnificent, the most sacred, the most holy of all of us! That same Spirit is in you! It's the truth of you! It's the power of you!

And tonight, we claim that. We allow that to be the way we see ourselves. That we claim our true identity and allow that to be so big, so bright, so fabulous that the world sees the truth in us.

Jesus said, *"Let your light so shine that others should see your good works and give glory to God."*

Tonight, we allow the truth to set us free. And so it is. Amen.

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