

I Was Just Wondering...How Do I Know My Faith is My Own?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Today's "I Was Just Wondering" question is a common one. "How do I know my faith is my own, and not just something that I inherited?" Great question. Lots of young people ask this question, maybe especially when they grow up in places like Grand Rapids where they are surrounded by Christian people and Christian institutions.

I'll get to addressing the substance of the question in a moment, but first let me say, if you are a young person and find yourself asking this question, please understand that everyone asks this question when they reach a certain stage in life. In some ways, if you are asking this question, it's a sign of healthy spiritual development. You don't ask this question when you are young because when you are raised as a Christian, you simply accept what your parents say, and what your pastor says and what the people around you say because they are all Christians and you trust them. But at some point you realize that there are lots of other people in the world who do not believe the way you do. They do not follow Jesus. And you meet these people, you work with them or play in an orchestra with them or play on a sports team with them, and you like them. They seem like good people. They seem kind and reasonable. You realize that they aren't Christians because they weren't raised that way, and you are a Christian because you were raised that way, so you wonder, is it just about how I was raised? This is a completely natural question. Every thoughtful Christian asks the question when they reach a certain point in their life.

Let me address this question by asking a larger question, a question that your question is under. I know it's a little different than your question, but it will help us answer your question more clearly. This bigger question is one of the big questions that theologians and thinkers and philosophers have thought about for centuries. That question is, "How do I become my true self? How do I become my authentic self, the person I am supposed to be?" "Who do I listen to? What do I do to find my happiness and my place in the world?"

There are different ways that cultures and religions have answered that question over the years, and those answers are on a spectrum between two poles. So for example, many cultures and many thinkers have said your true self, the person you are is something you inherit. It's something that's given you by your parents, by your community. You don't choose it; it's something you receive. It's chosen for you.

Tim Keller tells the story of his grandfather who was born in a small town just outside Naples, Italy in 1880. His father was a potter. His grandfather was a potter. His great grandfather was a potter. When he was a teenager he said to his dad, "I don't want to be a potter; I want to do something else." His dad said, "Well you have three choices, you can be a priest, you can go into the army, or you can be a potter. That's it." When he asked why, he was told, this is who he was. His family were potters. That was his place in the world, this was his inheritance. He shouldn't mess up the order of things, he should accept who he was. Keller's grandpa said, 'forget this,' and he emigrated to America, where he could choose his profession, where he had the freedom to make a new story a new future for himself.

That's a story of a lot of people who came to this country. If you could interview your great-great great grandparents when they emigrated, they'd probably tell a similar story. When a child in that little town outside of Naples asked the question, "How do I become my true self?" the answer was, "other people tell you who you are." The answer comes from your place in life, your class, your family's history. It was all inherited. You didn't choose; it was given to you and you received it. You didn't ask questions or get any fancy ideas.

That's one extreme of possible answers to the question. It is all inherited and you just accept it. You can also sense the other pole of this answer in the story I just told. When Tim Keller's grandpa emigrated, he was rejecting the idea that your true self was something you inherited from your community, and he was moving towards the other side of the way people answer this question. "Your true self isn't something you inherit," say many people, "your true self is something you choose, something you make!" That's a very American answer. How do you find your true self? That's up to you. You can be anything you want to be. Dream big. Dream it and do it. "Climb every mountain, ford every stream, follow every rainbow, till you reach your dream!" Sound of Music. That's how we roll today. Invictus poem: "I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul."

Today, in our society the pendulum has swung in completely the opposite direction. We choose who we want to be.

This starts very young. Let's talk about Frozen. Frozen is arguably the most popular Disney movie of the last ten years. It's still a huge hit, especially with young girls. I'm sure there are young people here who could sing every word of the songs from that movie. The signature song of the movie is, 'Let It Go.' Even if you haven't seen the movie, you probably know the song. It's sung by Elsa, one of the main characters. At the beginning of the movie, she's in a situation where she feels trapped by everyone's expectations and rules, but she breaks free from that and sings: "It's time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through. No right, no wrong, no rules for me, I'm free. Let it go, let it go." And then later: "I'm never going back. The past is in the past." You can hear the message; you can hear Elsa's answer to the question. How do you find your true self? You let it go. You let go of the past; you ignore other people's opinions, you throw off all constraints, and you plow your own path. (To be fair, within the context of the movie, Elsa's song isn't presented as an entirely good thing. Nevertheless, our culture has embraced the song as an anthem of freedom).

So if you are growing up in an American city today and you're trying to find your true self, you are NOT being trained in the message of Tim Keller's grandfather; you are being trained in the opposite message. You are being trained to listen to your own voice and make your own choices. Even the way you framed this morning's question shows that you've been shaped by Elsa's way of thinking. You asked, 'How do I know that my faith is my own and not just something I inherited?' That question shows a kind of bias. If something is inherited, it can't be truly and really mine. If something is really and truly me, it must be something I chose. It shows that you've been raised in 21st century America. You've been trained to value individual choice over what is given to you from the outside.

But now never mind what our present culture says and never mind what they said in the village of Tim Keller's Grandfather, what does the Bible say? What does the Bible say about finding your true self? Do you find it by following your heart, or is your true self something given to you from the outside? Does the Bible say that you choose your authentic self, or that you receive your authentic self? The best answer is both, but in the spectrum between choosing yourself and receiving yourself, the Bible comes down more on the receiving side. In the Bible, you do not choose yourself, you are chosen. You don't make yourself; you are made.

On the one hand the Bible does have strong things to say about the value of the individual and their choices. Right at the beginning, in Genesis 1, the Bible gives human beings an exalted place in creation and declares that each one of us are made in the image of God. Every individual person has value and dignity. God took the time and the care to put his image on every human person.

In his ministry Jesus underlines the importance of individuals by the way he does his ministry. Jesus cares about individuals, including and maybe especially individuals whom the rest of society thinks of as unimportant. He stops to bless the children. He stops to heal blind Bartimaeus. When a sick and desperate woman touches him in the middle of the crowd, even though he's in the middle of something important, he stops and talks to her. He stopped to listen to the pain to the Syro-Phoenecian woman, even though the disciples just wanted her to go away. Individuals matter to Jesus.

Furthermore, in the Bible, our individual choices do matter. They make a difference in the world. They shape who we are, they shape the people around us, they affect the natural world. That's why there is so much instruction in the Bible, calling us to pay attention to our choices. In both the Old Testament and New Testament there are all sorts of places where we are told, do this, don't do that. All the laws and commandments and words of Biblical advice show that our choices count.

But on balance, when considering the question, "How do I become who I am? How do I find my true self?" the Bible's answer is: you are a creation and your life is a gift that you receive. Yes, you are made in the image of God, but you are MADE in the image of God; you don't choose it or achieve it. Yes, you have individual dignity and each individual is really important; but you're not your own boss; as 1 Corinthians 6 says, 'you belong to God.' As the Catechism puts it: "you are not your own but belong, body and soul, in life and in death to your faithful savior Jesus Christ."

Think of Psalm 139, each individual is fearfully and wonderfully made, but the life of that individual is completely under the care and protection and rule of God. "Lord, before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely. If I should sink down to the bottom of the sea, even there you are with me and your right hand holds me fast."

Think of the call stories in the Bible. God comes to individuals and calls them. Moses, you will lead my people out of Egypt. Isaiah, I call you to be a prophet. Mary, you will give birth to a baby and you will call him Jesus. Paul, you will be my witness all over the world. Do these people have any choice in the matter? Not really. As they live out their call, their choices are critically important, but their true self and their purpose in the world is given, not chosen.

And finally think of baptism. We celebrated a baptism this morning. Is the message of baptism that you chose your life, or is it that your life is given? It's obviously the second one, right? Before you can do anything God puts his love on you, and calls you his child and puts you in a family. As you grow up you have lots of important choices to make, including the essential choice of making profession of faith in response to God's work in your life, but those choices take place within the embrace of the covenant, within the truth and the power of the fact that you have been baptized into Christ.

All this is a gentle (hopefully) way of saying to you that of course your faith is inherited. Of course it's something that's come from your parents and your church, but that's not something to question or fear. That's a blessing. Here's an analogy. If you are blessed enough to be born into a happy family, a family with parents who love you and with brothers and sisters who care about you, a family who is there for you in times of trouble, who celebrates with you in good times and who picks you up in bad times, would you ever ask the question, "Is this my real family? How do I know that this is my family, and not just a family I inherited?" Yes, you inherited it, but it's also yours! Lucky You!

You young people (and all the rest of you people) have been blessed to inherit a family of grace. You have been baptized into a community of a God who made you fearfully and wonderfully, a God who walks with you through your days. You belong to Jesus who loves you so much that he came to this world to share your life, who was willing to die for you so that you could be washed in a love that even death can't destroy. Through the Holy Spirit we belong to a church family who rejoices with you and weeps with you and prays for you, and who walks with you in hard times. You have an inheritance of grace, mercy and peace. "Lucky" you.

But even so, part of your question still remains. How do I choose this inheritance? How do I make it mine? Even if it's an inheritance, how does it become my chosen inheritance. Here's a thought about that. I always think that when a person asks the question, "How do I know my faith is my own and not just something I inherited?", that's a sign that they are ready to start doing something. It's a sign that they are ready to take on responsibilities in the church and in the Kingdom.

During our childhoods, we are pretty passive about our faith. Parents tell us about God and we sit and listen. Ministers talk about our faith and we sit and listen. Sunday School teachers talk about it and we sit and listen. But if your growth is healthy, at some point you change from sitting and listening, to speaking and doing. You become active in the loving work of Jesus. If you are asking the question, "How do I know that my faith is my own," that is a sure sign, that it's time to move from sitting and listening to speaking and doing. You've heard the message, now it's time for you to figure it out, "What's my place in the mission of Jesus and his love?"

Thankfully, within this mission there are all sorts of options to choose from, all sorts of ways to make this mission your own! There is a place where you with your unique gifts and personality can find joy and purpose. Maybe you love thinking and learning and you will find joy and purpose in studying theology with a bunch of women and men, wrestling with hard questions about God and life. Maybe you hate all that blah, blah, blah, you want something hands on. So you get involved in one of the local agencies serving the poor. Maybe children are your joy, so you become involved in education and formation and working with kids. Or maybe kids drive you crazy, but you love checking in with elderly members of your community and your congregation, listening to their stories, praying with them. Maybe you become a doctor or nurse and you spend a couple of weeks every year travelling to developing countries whose medical systems are strained. Maybe you love music, singing in a choir, playing your instrument with an ensemble blesses others and gives you joy.

Do you see how that works? Within the pleasant boundaries of this inheritance, within the spring-green pastures of God's love, the possibilities are endless, and the only way to know which one of these endless possibilities is yours is to get out there and do stuff, try things. Listen to the Spirit, and keep trying until you find some work that blesses others and makes your heart sing. And when that happens you will know that this faith is not just an inheritance; it's completely and wonderfully your own.

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