Sunday, March 8, 1998
**WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?**
Luke 13:31-35; John 14:23-29

The gift of life is a sacred adventure. When we are born, life opens to us like a 360-degree vista, waiting to be explored. As we grow and mature, much of what we encounter tends to shrink this sacred circle into a tight little system that we call ourselves. For some of us, as we grow older, this circle tightens and tightens until it seems that we are at the center of a very small world, one that we can to some degree control and rule.

We shrink our identities by giving ourselves and others names and labels: minister, parent, homeowner, student, teacher, nurse, lawyer, bricklayer, carpenter, black, white, German, Irish — more than likely a combination of things — and after a time, we don't venture past the limits of whatever we think our identity is. And so, for some of us as we grow older, we shrink our identity instead of enlarging it.

Fortunately, there are forces and possibilities that present themselves along the way for enlarging our self-understanding and identities, so that instead of limiting and shrinking ourselves, we open ourselves to new possibilities and opportunities.

For some of us, it takes cataclysmic events such as illness, change, or loss before we ask ourselves, "Who do I think I am?" and then begin to redefine ourselves. This new self-understanding can cause us to shrink further, or hopefully, open us to new and more exciting ways of understanding who we are.

Not only do we narrow our own identity, but we also tend to shrink others and put borders around them. One way we do this is with the use of labels. He's a liberal. She's a conservative. He's Jewish. She's Catholic. He's rich. She's poor. He's an African-American. She's a European-American.

It was a major part of the ministry of Jesus to call people to reexamine their self-identity and invite them to enlarge it, and to help us see others as more than the labels we give them.

Jesus always saw people as being more than they thought they were and more than we think they are. He also wants us to continue to widen our circle of understanding of who he is and to enlarge our understanding of God. In this way, we connect more frequently and intimately with the sacred.

When Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well, he saw more than a Samaritan woman. Their conversation resulted in her seeing herself as more than a Samaritan, as more than a woman who had several husbands. She gained a new self-identity and came to understand herself as a human being created in the image of God, with unlimited possibilities. In doing this, he also caused his disciples to enlarge their perception of her as being more than a Samaritan and more than a woman. They came to see her as a valuable human being created in the image of God.

Jesus helped Peter see that he was more than a fisherman. He caused Zacchaeus to understand that he was more than a sinner and a hated tax collector. He gave these individuals and countless others a new vision of who they were and a new vision of who he was, and in doing that, gave them also a new understanding of God.

Jesus could do this because of his own healthy self-identity. Although others tried to shrink him into what they wanted or hoped he would be, they were not successful. He knew that he was more than the “carpenter’s son,” as the people of Nazareth tried to define him. He knew he was much more than a political messiah and much more than a healer or miracle worker.

He knew that God had a purpose for his life and death that could not be contained in any one label or box. The story read earlier from Luke’s gospel shows he knew who he was and what God wanted him to do. He knew that he had to finally end up in Jerusalem and that he would be rejected by that city, but he had to go there anyway. He knew who he was and what he had to do.

Who do you think you are? What can we learn from the life of Jesus that helps us to know who we are and helps us to experience the sacred within us and within others?

I said earlier that most of us as we grow and mature tend to define ourselves too narrowly. We shrink instead of enlarging our self-identity. What causes us to do this? Why do we habitually resist what we truly are?

When we are born into this world, we are created in the image of God. Since God is love, our basic impulse as newborns is to love and be loved.

As we look around us for reflections of this unconditional love, most of us, however, find something else. We might find ourselves looking into the eyes of mothers and fathers or other caregivers who have long ago forgotten who they truly are. They have lost touch with their own divine connection to God, the source of all love. Without the ability to see themselves in this way, it is difficult for them to see us in this light.

When, as children, we are always looking into the faces of those who have forgotten their connection to the Divine Source of Love, we begin to believe that who we are is not acceptable. We notice that we are loved only if we behave in a particular way — when we are quiet, when we do what our parents tell us, when we are amusing, or when we don’t exercise our natural desire for exploration and curiosity. Based on the feedback we are given, we decide that we are not valued as ourselves, not worthy of unconditional love.

Because giving and receiving love is our primary motivation, we soon set out to discover ways by which we can become “worthy” of love or earn love. As children, even very young children, we learn to assess each situation and then make decisions about who we need to be in order to find acceptance, love, and a sense of belonging. Our basic motivation is to be who we need to be in order to get the love we need. Being who we think the world wants us to be becomes a habitual pattern.

This is the basis of conditional love: “You be who I want, and I will love you.” It’s the opposite of God’s unconditional love.

In the process, we shrink. We forget who we are in the largest possible terms. What can also happen is that the layers around our essential being become thicker and difficult to penetrate. Our hearts begin to close. We forget our conscious connection with the natural flow of “Divine Love.” We forget we are created in the image of God. We forget the inner peace, wisdom, and wholeness at the center of our existence.

We learn to look outside for these things as we become more and more identified with the crusty layers that enclose us — the personality we developed based on who we thought we needed to be in order to be loved. All too soon, we regard these layers of crust — our self-image — as “us,” and we forget the larger picture.

Our self-image has then been manufactured from limitations and restrictions. We draw these boundaries tightly around ourselves in a fortress that we learn to call “me.”

To make matters worse, having invested so much energy resisting the natural urge of the heart to stay open, and having invested so much energy in drawing our boundaries, we now attempt to control our world. We let in only what will reinforce our fortress. We try to keep out anything that would cause us to question what we have so carefully built.

It takes a great deal of energy to shrink our world to a manageable, defendable size.

In the same way, I know some pastors who have only served small churches, and when called to a larger church, begin over a period of time to shrink the church to a smaller one because they are more at home with that size, and it’s less work.

We have a tendency to retreat into habitual patterns because they seem solid, comforting, and manageable. To put it another way, we identify with our small habitual patterns instead of the greater space that we are. When we restrict our perception in this way, true relationship — from which health, peace, and healing energy spring — cannot take place. Instead of being open, we wind ourselves tighter.

To make matters worse, culturally, there is little incentive to practice living from our essential nature as individuals created in the image of God. Indeed, there is heavy pressure to be “someone,” to achieve something that has a label on it. These are temporary identities. No wonder we forget who we are.

We make an intellectual judgment about everything that enters our field and stay with it. This is the definition of “normality.” In fact, one of my favorite definitions of normality is “arrested development.”

Lest you misunderstand, the so-called materialism of the small world is necessary. Someone has to make the money, take care of the children, plant the crops, and cook the food. All these activities require careful tending.

To put it another way, we all adopt and maintain temporary identities, taking on different ones at different times in our lives, even at different times in our days. There is nothing wrong with this. It is necessary action to survive in our everyday life. Temporary identities become a problem when we solidify them, become too attached to them, and our self-esteem depends on them, or when we believe that’s all there is, or when we come to believe that one or more of these temporary identities constitutes our whole self and we become stuck in it.

A psychiatrist told me about a woman who came into his office with an anxious, disheveled look. She had been referred to him by another doctor. “How can I help you?” he asked. With hardly a pause, the woman breathlessly replied, “I’m a paranoid-schizophrenic alcoholic.” He looked at her in amazement and asked, “But aren’t you still a human being?” “Still?” she pondered for a moment. Then she said, “You’re right. I guess I’d forgotten that.”

Labels such as “paranoid-schizophrenic,” “addict,” or even “upwardly mobile,” are useful in defining a complex set of motivations and behaviors. Sometimes, however, we identify ourselves or others so strongly with the label that we don’t allow for change or growth.

One reason I appreciated the book The Color of Water so much is that when one of the twelve children would ask their mother, who was white, what she was, all she would say is: “I’m light-skinned,” and when they asked what they were, knowing they had a Black father, she would say, “You’re a human being.” She refused to allow any of her children to be limited in their self-identity by the use of a label or boundary.

She knew that Jesus was forever calling into question labels, boundaries, and borders. He was always enlarging and even crossing them. His ministry was to call all people into relationship with God and each other as a “hen gathers her brood under her wings.”

Here, then, are several steps we can take so that we no longer shrink our own identities and those of others around us. These come from the life and teachings of Jesus.

First, pay attention to the storylines you repeat to yourself. They are frequently made of misperceptions, fear, self-doubt, opinion, past conditioning, prejudices, and assumptions. They are conclusions you have drawn about yourself, others, and the world at large. Storylines can have underlying themes of fear, anxiety, judgment, depression, arrogance, or complaining. They tend to be self-fulfilling. Here are some examples of stories that you might be telling yourself over and over again:

“I’m not good enough; there’s something wrong with me; I’m unworthy and undeserving.”
“Life is painful; it is not meant to be fun.”
“Dad was right. I can’t do anything well. I’ll never amount to anything.”
“I don’t have any control over what happens to me; I’m powerless to do anything about my life or the state of the world.”
When you identify with storylines like these, you are likely to associate your inner life with a steady stream of self-absorbed limitations, which will keep you from knowing your true self as God created you.

Second, ask yourself, what are some of the other borders that define your life? Do they need to be enlarged? What are some of the limiting borders you find yourself putting around others? Are they large enough to truly know that person? What about the borders you put around your dreams? Are they large enough? What are the borders you put around God? Do they need to be changed?

The good news is that God crosses all the borders you put around yourself and around others. Amen.