

## **“Illuminating Identity: Why You Are”**

*A sermon preached on Luke 4:14-21 by Emily Hull McGee  
on January 27, 2019 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

I don't claim to know Paul Baxley like John and Nancy do, but it seems to me like Paul got a healthy dose of his mama's pragmatism and common sense and his daddy's thoughtful intellect. John and Nancy, does that sound right to you?

John and I were talking just this week in the Wednesday night supper line, and in perhaps the most John Baxley way, he asks me: “Emily, have you read much of the 19th century French Catholic existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel?” (I appreciate that he thought I might have!) When I told him that no, Marcel had not appeared on my reading list, John tells me a bit about him, following up with a couple of emails that explain more about his appreciation for this thinker and writer. One choice quote is one I want to share with you today.

Gabriel Marcel once said: “The notion of human life cannot be reduced to that of the harmonious functioning of a certain number of organs, though that purely biological functioning is, of course, presupposed in the notion of human life. For instance a prisoner who has no hope of getting out of jail may say without exaggeration -- although he continues to breathe, to eat, to perform all his natural functions -- that his existence is not really a life. The mother of an airman might say in wartime, “While my son is risking his life, I am not really living”. All this is enough to make it clear that a human life has always its centre outside itself; though it can be centred on a very wide and

diverse range of outside interests. It may be centred on a loved one, and with the disappearance of the loved one be reduced to a sad caricature of itself; it may be centred on something trivial, a sport like hunting, a vice like gambling; it can be centred on some high activity, like research or creation. But each one of us can ask himself, as a character in one of my plays does, “What do I live by?”<sup>1</sup>

## II.

*What do I live by?* It’s the question posed to us with every new day, every new demand of our attention, every new ad that tries to sell us whatever will make it all complete, every new leader that claims to know the answer. So often we answer without even realizing it, our explanation needing none because we’ve decided what we live by by simply living — without stopping to wonder what propels it all, without examining our rhythms, priorities, budgets, calendars, yearnings, behaviors, motivations, influences, and days to see if there is an underlying reason behind it all. And somehow, in the midst of this blithe existence — blithe out of intentional or unintentional ignorance of the question, our identity is shaped by our answer to the question: *why*.

Marcel would wonder: “what do I live by?,” while contemporary thinker Simon Sinek would ask: “what’s your why?”<sup>2</sup> I’ve shared with you before about Sinek’s work, his wondering about that central ‘why’ for any individual, community, or organization. To answer the question of ‘why’, we ask

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<sup>1</sup> Email from John Baxley, 1/24/19

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to Simon Sinek’s work, a great place to start would be his widely-viewed 2009 TED Talk called “How Great Leaders Inspire Action.” It can be found here: [https://www.ted.com/talks/simon\\_sinek\\_how\\_great\\_leaders\\_inspire\\_action?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en)

ourselves: What's my mission, what's my central purpose, what's at the very core of who I am. For when you distill down all your energies to their very essence, there you discover not just who you are, but *why* you are. Why you exist. Why you do what you do. Why you arrange your time this way, why you prioritize your spending that way, why you make decisions like this, why you organize your life like that.

For whether we know it or not, everyone has a 'why' that guides their living. That 'why' could be as simple and unconscious as 'because I'm alive,' or 'just because.' Your 'why' could be entirely relational — 'because they need me — kids, parents, partner, friends, work' — or fully vocational — 'because I want to succeed in my field,' 'because I want to make a difference.' But this Epiphany season when we explore our identity and Jesus's identity, it seems we ought to ask ourselves: *what's my why?*

### III.

According to today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, this first sermon gives us a window into Jesus's 'why.' It's his first sermon! His inaugural address. The hometown boy who's getting some Galilean buzz is coming back to his home synagogue to lead them, and the people have packed the pews to hear what he has to say. You can just see the sweet Jewish grandmothers leaning into one another, chuckling as they remembered young Jesus who used to stumble over his readings. You can imagine the key religious leaders who stole a quick glance at one another as Jesus stepped up to the scroll, nodding in appreciation for Joseph's boy who had shaken the wood shavings off his carpenter's apron and gotten on with God's work.<sup>3</sup> I wonder — could

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<sup>3</sup> This lovely image of Jesus shaking off the wood shavings and hanging up his tools came from Fred Craddock, I'm nearly sure.

they see the effects of the forty-day sojourn in the wilderness on his face, in his body, throughout his spirit? Did they notice that he's changed a bit, that boy they remember from years ago? What were they expecting to hear?

The room leaned in to hear him read the familiar scripture, probably not also imagining that they'd hear his 'why'. And what does he say? "I'm here to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, liberation to the oppressed, and God's favor, God's jubilee to all the land." But for Jesus, this was no arbitrary first sermon back in the hometown synagogue, nor was it a random reading of scripture.

Because the gospel tells us that when the scroll was given to Jesus, he found the place where it was written. *He found his place!* For there with the prophet Isaiah, there with a declaration from Isaiah 61 and a dash of Isaiah 58, Jesus found his place. He found his place with the poor and the captive, he found his place with the bound and broken-hearted, he found his place with all who needed to hear of God's joyful jubilee. He found his place within God's place. As Kayla McClurg says, "[Jesus] turns everyone's attention to God's goals, and says his goals are the same. He's not heading out on his own path to make a difference and to save the world. He is returning to God's instructions day by day and moment by moment, seeking alignment with God's purposes. He turns and returns to the source of his being, laying down his own agenda to take up God's."<sup>4</sup> Jesus found his place, and in so doing, he found his *why*.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus reminded his Sabbath School teachers and synagogue committee members that day. "The Spirit of the

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<sup>4</sup> Kayla McClurg, *Passage by Passage: A Gospel Journey Year C*, quote shared by dear friend Rev. Courtney Allen.

Lord is upon **me.**” Yes, Isaiah says it, but when Jesus reads it, claims it, finds his place there, we can’t help but to remember that Spirit of the Lord throughout the Gospel of Luke: the Spirit of the Lord who came upon Mary to conceive; the Spirit of the Lord who gave Mary a song, a vision of bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly; the Spirit of the Lord who infused Zechariah’s prophetic imagination with reminders of the One who guides our feet in the way of peace; the Spirit of the Lord who beckoned Simeon to call Jesus a light for revelation and a sign of opposition; the Spirit of the Lord who descended on Jesus in the waters of baptism with reminders of who and whose he was; the Spirit of the Lord who has just led Jesus into the wilderness and strengthened him to turn away from temptation; the Spirit of the Lord who filled Jesus with power in his 30th year as his ministry began; the Spirit of the Lord who will guide him to preach and teach, heal and free, call and send, bless, break, and give, die and rise again.

Fred Craddock reminds us that, “Luke places the Nazareth visit first because it is first, not chronologically but programmatically. That is to say that this event announces who Jesus is, of what his ministry consists, what his church will be and do, and what will be the response to both Jesus and the church.”<sup>5</sup> This hometown sermon is his first, the space in which he outlines his why, giving hearers throughout the centuries a picture of *who he is* by telling us *why he is*.

It’s no surprise that, as Luke says, ‘the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him,’ that you could hear a proverbial pin drop in the room. For after Jesus finishes his reading, rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant,

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<sup>5</sup> Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, p61.

and sits down — suspense thick in the air — his one sentence sermon is clear: “Today — **today** — this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!” Today, I’m putting together all I’ve been taught with the movement of God’s Spirit in my life. Today, you hear my why. Today, I’m finding my place. Today, God’s promises for all time and space are made complete.

#### IV.

Grace Thomas was a gentle Southern Baptist woman, the second of five children born in Birmingham to a dad who was a streetcar conductor and a mom who kept the household. In the 1930s, Grace married and moved to Atlanta, working as a clerk in the Georgia state government which sparked her imagination for law and politics. That interest led Grace to night school at the local law school, where she painstakingly completed her degree over years of study. Her family wondered aloud: “Grace, what are you going to do with that degree?” and were shocked when she announced that she’d like to run in the 1954 Governor’s race for the governorship of Georgia.

Grace was the one of the nine candidates that year — the only woman, of course — and among all the contentious issues that captured the electorate’s attention, one was loudest: that of the famous case of Brown v. Board of Education, where earlier that year, the Supreme Court had declared that racially ‘separate but equal’ schools were unconstitutional, a decision which paved the way for integration in the public schools. All eight men spent the campaign proclaiming angrily against the ruling; only Grace said that the decision was just and fair, one that ought to be embraced by the good people of Georgia. Even with a catchy slogan — “Say Grace at the Polls”

– Grace came in dead last in that race, her family grateful and relieved that she'd scratched her political itch and gotten it out of her system.

She hadn't, though. The 1962 governor's race came around, and Grace ran again. By this point, the civil rights movement was growing, and voices like hers were increasingly mainstream. She still endured a barrage of threats – folks loudly resisting her calls for racial harmony. Again, she finished last, but her campaign stood as a testimony to goodwill and broadening space.

But along the way, Grace made a campaign stop in the small town of Louisville, Georgia. There in the center of town was the old slave market, the tragic place where innocent lives were held captive, prisoners of a system that evilly exploited some for others' gain. Grace decided to give her speech from that very spot, proclaiming to a hostile crowd around her: “the old has passed away, and the new has come. This place,” she said, “represents all about our past over which we must repent. A new day is here, a day when Georgians white na black can join hands to work together.”

From out in the crowd came an angry shout, “Are you a communist?” And in mid-sentence, Grace paused. “No,” she said softly. “I'm not.”

“Well then,” the heckler continued, “where'd you get those gall-durned ideas?”

Grace pondered for a moment, raised her eyes, and pointed over their heads to the steeple of a nearby church. “I got them over there,” she said, “in Sunday School.”<sup>6</sup>

## V.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus said, as he found his place.

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<sup>6</sup> This beautiful story told by Tom Long in his book, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian*, p133-135.

“I got them over there in Sunday School,” Grace said, as she found her place.

“What do I live by?” asks Marcel.

“What’s your why?” asks Simon Sinek.

Friends, where is *your* place? What is *your* why? “For today – today! – this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

May it be so! Amen.