

About twelve years ago I was a victim of identity theft.

While the crime of identity theft nowadays is most often the theft of financial account information (as in my case) or some form of electronic identity (computer passwords), our identity as a person is not found here. As persons, our identity is that core of our being, defining who we are. As such, our identity is not something we create. Our identity is firmly and unavoidably rooted in our relationships. For example: one cannot be a father or mother without children, a teacher without students, a citizen without a country, etc. Today’s familiar stories of Adam and Eve from Genesis and the scene of Jesus in the desert, traditionally interpreted as “temptation stories” (for temptation there is), looked at from the perspective of “identity theft” can shed new light on them and on our lives as well.

Adam and Eve’s identity, as our own, lay in their being “created by God”, fashioned in God’s own “image and likeness.” The serpent plants doubt in both regarding their identity and God’s relationship to them, “Did God really say...?” Thus undermining their confidence in God, the serpent then invites Adam and Eve to craft their own identity independent of their relationship with God: “when you eat the fruit, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Who needs God, after all, when you can be “like God” all on your own? Falling for the serpent’s ploy, they do indeed attempt to define themselves apart from God resulting in not only an estrangement from God but from each other; a wound in our common identity into which all subsequent human beings are born known as Original Sin. We see this original identity theft continue to be played out in many ways and on many levels of human life down through the course of history.

Jesus in the Gospel faces the three temptations: to turn stones to bread, to call upon angels for safety, and the promise of power and dominion. At heart, each is about identity. The devil begins by trying to undermine Jesus’ fundamental identity, “*You are my beloved Son upon whom my favor rests*” proclaimed at his baptism in the previous scene of the gospel. The devil plies his deadly craft three times stating “*If you are the Son of God...*”

tempting Jesus to question his identity and relationship to the Father and replace it with an identity of his own manufacture.

Jesus resists the temptations not through brute force or sheer will, but by taking refuge in his identity founded and secured through his relationship with God, a relationship of absolute dependence on God. Jesus will be content to be hungry as others are hungry, to supply his “daily bread”, dependent on God’s Word and grace for all good things. He will be at risk and vulnerable like every human being, finding safety in the promises of God. Finally, he will refuse to define himself or seek power apart from his relationship with God, giving his worship and allegiance only to the Lord God who sustains him. Doing this Jesus offers us an example in how to navigate the many attempts to steal our identity as God’s children.

It’s not just the devil who seeks to steal our identity. Each day we are besieged by countless advertisements that seek to create in us a sense of lack, insecurity, and inadequacy, undermining our God-given identity with the promise that if we buy this car or use this deodorant or make our teeth brighter, follow this financial investment policy, support this political policy or candidate we will be acceptable, achieve security, wield influence and power, be the object of adulation become like Adam and Eve were enticed crafting an identity as “self-made gods.”

Through a personal commitment to a program of Lenten fasting, acts of charity and justice, and increased efforts at deepening our relationship to God through study and reflection on the Scriptures, more fervent and active participation in the sacraments especially here at weekly Mass and a sincere celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and daily prayer, we have the tools to engage the devil in his cunning as he continues to prowl the earth, as a traditional prayer speaks, “seeking the ruin of souls” to guard and defend ourselves against “identity theft.”

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