We’re Asking the Wrong Question

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” Doctor. Lawyer. Writer. It wasn’t until my senior year of high school that I answered, “teacher”. From a very early age, we tie children’s identity to what they do. We shouldn’t be surprised then, when our students assign their value or worth to their grades, achievements, friends, awards, etc. We’ve taught them to do that. And quite frankly, it’s not Biblical. Yahweh never links His people’s identity to what they do, but rather to who they are. Yahweh did not call the Israelites His slaves, but rather His chosen people. David was not a king to Yahweh, but a “man after God’s own heart”. Moses served as leader, but was always primarily identified with the community of Israel as His covenant people. Thank goodness their identity wasn’t defined by what they did because they were grumbling, rebellious, murderers, adulterers, terrible fathers, distracted leaders, no good, very bad people. No, their identity was found in being delivered by Yahweh according to His gracious covenant. (Ex 2:23-25).

What is your identity? If we fall prey to the same temptation as our students, by linking our identity to what we do, we also will measure our value based on how well our students like us, what their parents say about us, our enrollment, our test scores, our awards, etc. No, Scripture tells us our identity is not found in what we do, but what has been done for us. In Christ, you are a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), a child of God (1 John 3:1), saved by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-9), received in the waters of Baptism because of His mercy and not your works (Titus 3:5) whose robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14). Just like the Israelites, your identity is found in being delivered by Yahweh according to His gracious covenant (1 Peter 2:9-10).

We need to stop asking our students, “What do you want to be?” and instead ask, “What do you want to do?” Even better, “As a redeemed child of God, in what vocation do you want to serve?” As teachers and church workers, it is easy to link our identity to our role in the church. This leads to doubt, guilt, frustration, anger, exhaustion, self-deprecation, burn-out, etc. The reality is we want to be free, forgiven, loved, delivered, supported, encouraged, and cared for, and that is what we already are in the shadow of the cross. With the cross, there is freedom in our vocations as church workers; there is also an understanding that in our sinfulness, we will screw up. We’re in good company with Moses, David, all the Israelites and the church. The truth is our identity is linked to the forgiveness given to us daily in Word and Sacraments.

So, what do you want to be? A loved, redeemed, forgiven, child of God washed in the blood of the Lamb. It is finished (John 19:30).

Dear Yahweh, thank You for the sources of encouragement You give us, especially your Word and Sacraments. Alleviate the fear we have in teaching and prepare me for the calling You have given us. Most importantly, thank You for our identity being founded in Christ and His work on the cross, and for calling us to teach in response to that act of grace. In Christ’s name, Amen.