

'Toy Story' and the Search for Identity

Good Morning! For those of you who have not met me yet, my name is Luke and I am the new Youth Pastor here at Leith Valley. My family and I moved here 2 1/2 weeks ago from Aurora, Colorado. I say I am originally from Kentucky, because that is where the roots of my family are, but being a minister's son, I was born in Tennessee and lived in Florida for awhile before my family made its way back to the commonwealth of Kentucky. I have one sister, Whitney, who lives in Oklahoma. My parents divorced after 30 years of marriage and are both remarried to wonderful people. My dad is a Pastor in Lexington, Kentucky and my mom lives in Port Orange, Florida.

Growing up in the church, if the doors were open, I was there. I came to know and started to understand what a relationship with Christ is when I was 8 years old. Through the years I have continued to grow learn more and more about that relationship. At age 10 I joined the church and followed Jesus' example and was baptized. At age 17 I began to realize that God was calling me to minister for Him. A trip to Australia when I was 16 got me thinking about

more than the world I saw out my front door. When I told God I wanted to give my life to ministry I told him I would go wherever he sent me. After 15 years of different ministry in North America here I stand giving my testimony and preaching in New Zealand! How amazing it is to see what God can do when you begin to understand your true identity. I have learned in my short time here that the youth have been studying about identity. They have looked at what a youth group is and what it looks like, they have looked at the body of Christ, and most recently the identity of people in the bible. One person they recently looked at is Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Daniel and his friends knew their identity. The 21 verses Kesia read for us are an introduction to the book of Daniel. We learn Daniel's' identity, his circumstances, his character, and how he came to his position of power in the kingdom of Babylon. Knowing their identity allowed them to faithfully honor God while coming face to face with life and death circumstances.

So what can we as youth, as adults, and as a church take away the story of Daniel? What can Daniel and

the movie "Toy Story" teach us about our search for identity? Let's see.

Strange things are happening to Woody the cowboy doll. He used to be Andy's favorite toy, but not anymore. Ever since the sudden birthday party appearance of the space toy Buzz Lightyear, Woody feels out of place and somewhat jealous. Woody, however, isn't the only one with problems. Waking up one morning in a toy box, rather than his usual spot on Andy's bed, Woody has had enough of Buzz.

"All right," says an exasperated Woody, "That's it!" He stomps over to Buzz, who is busily working on repairing his spaceship (the cardboard box he came in). After warning Buzz to stay away from Andy, Woody adds, "Stop with this space man thing. It's getting on my nerves!"

When Woody pushes Buzz and the space toy's helmet opens, Buzz falls to the floor, gasping for air, surprised the air isn't toxic.

"You actually think," says Woody, "you're *the* Buzz Lightyear?" It will take more than this encounter for Buzz to accept his true identity.

The concept of identity is significant. Who we are shapes what we do, but what we do also shapes who we are. If we lack a healthy understanding of the concept of identity, we will wander through life uncertain about what to do with ourselves.

As in the case of Buzz Lightyear, the lack of

understanding of one's identity actually can be a form of deception. Knowing the truth about who we are and what we were made for is important. What, in general, is identity? What, specifically, is a Christian concept of identity? Does identity relate to wisdom and virtue? How can computer-generated films help us with our concept of identity? These are the questions we will seek to answer.

Who Am I?

Identity is a simple and complex concept. On a rudimentary level, identity has to do with who we are. As such, it addresses a fundamental philosophical question: "Who am I?"

Identity is also complex and multifaceted. Numerous influences contribute to shaping our identity, including our family background, ethnicity, cultural environment, vocational inclinations, religious adherence, moral choices and more. If we are unable to establish a healthy identity, confusion and unhappiness usually result.

While one can approach the question of identity in a variety of ways, the Christian position on the matter is unique. Identity for the Christian is first and foremost found in God. This is the case because we are made in God's image.

Genesis 1:26-27 Then God said, “Let us make human beings[a] in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth,[b] and the small animals that scurry along the ground.”

So God created human beings[c] in his own image.

In the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them..

The image of God in us is key to understanding our identity and purpose, as well as to restoring our relationship with God. In the New Testament, Christ is representative of the image of God.

2 Corinthians 4:4 Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.

Colossians 1:15 Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.

Jesus provides us with an example of what God's image looks like. Although much more could be said on the topic, its relevance here is on identity in relation to virtue. The image of God encompasses the moral realm, which is why we are moral creatures. If our worldview has a proper foundation in God, then so should our identity. Consequently, our moral choices will reflect this fact.

Identity is relevant to the Christian in an individual sense and in relation to the church as a whole. Individually, our identity in Christ relates to the concept of calling. As Christians, we are called to serve God in this world and in the afterlife. Identity also relates to the church as a whole: God's people as represented throughout the world in various expressions of worship. If the church is not so different in its behavior than the negative aspects of culture around it, then God's people are having an identity crisis.

The Wisdom of *Toy Story*

The *Toy Story* films are intended primarily as entertainment, but like other films from Pixar, they address concepts of identity.

When Helen (aka Elastigirl) in *The Incredibles* tells her daughter, "Your identity is your most valuable possession; protect it," is it a stretch (pun intended) to apply these words beyond the immediate context? As a superhero, Helen knows it's important to keep her true identity secret, and she is imparting this wisdom to her daughter. On another level, identity is indeed a valuable possession, establishing who we are and what our purpose is in this world.

The Pixar film *Ratatouille* also addresses issues regarding identity through the central character

Remy, a rat who happens to enjoy cooking. Buzz Lightyear's identity crisis comes from the fact that he doesn't realize he is a toy. Instead, he thinks he is a real Space Ranger, charged with protecting and saving the galaxy.

Two additional scenes from *Toy Story* will serve to demonstrate the concept of identity.

The first involves Woody and Buzz when they are lost at a Dinoco gas station. Woody immediately realizes the seriousness of the situation, crying out, "I'm a lost toy!" Buzz, however, is still deluded, believing he is a Space Ranger on an important mission. When Buzz goes on about the "security of this entire universe" being in jeopardy because of Woody, the cowboy doll has had enough. Unable to contain himself, Woody yells at Buzz, "You are a toy! You aren't the real Buzz Lightyear...You're an action figure! You are a child's plaything!" Buzz will have none of it, though, and remains convinced he's a Space Ranger. "You are a sad, strange, little man," Buzz replies to Woody, "and you have my pity." It will take another more jarring encounter for Buzz to realize the truth about his identity.

Buzz is further stunned when he notices the phrase "Made in Taiwan" on the inside cover of a compartment on his arm. Randy Newman's song, "I Will Go Sailing No More," begins to play, underscoring Buzz's realization that he is, in fact, just a toy. Buzz still can't accept his true identity. Grasping for his

identity as a Space Ranger, Buzz decides to attempt to fly. Crashing to the floor, Buzz breaks an arm and lies on the floor defeated, helpless and confused. "I'm just a toy—a stupid little insignificant toy," says Buzz. Fortunately, Buzz isn't left in despair. He gives up hope for a time, but Woody explains to the Space Ranger how important it is to be a toy. Woody encourages Buzz to be what he was made to be: a great toy that can make a child happy.

Identity and the Meaning of Life

Identity is important, but knowing who we are is not enough. Within the framework of God's calling, we need to act on our identity in order to make a meaningful moral difference in our lives, as well as the lives of others. When Buzz Lightyear realizes he is a toy, rather than being encouraged and spurred to positive action, he becomes dejected and loses hope. In *Toy Story 2*, Woody already knows his identity is that of a toy, but for a time he acts in a manner that goes against his purpose and identity. In *Ratatouille*, Remy has to struggle with his identity and with those who oppose his desire to get along with humans. His confidence and desire to cook overcome his natural identity as a rat; he hopes that despite his identity as a rat, he also can "add something to this world."

Understanding our true identity is foundational to

living within God's calling. We can, of course, push back and decide to go our own way rather than God's way. Some do. The unfortunate consequences may not be readily apparent, but such a choice can disfigure the soul and neutralize our ability to make an eternal difference in God's kingdom. How do we avoid this potential pitfall? By continuously seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Each of us will get off track at times. The good news is that by God's grace and with Christ's help, we always can get back on track.

Identity relates to the meaning of life. As Christians, our purpose is rooted in God and His nature. Christ is our example to follow. No, we won't be exactly like Him, but we can try to emulate His virtues and strive to become who God would like us to be. In John 8:14, Jesus offered an example of the power of identity in relation to a life filled with purpose: "I know where I came from and where I am going," He said to the hypocritical leaders questioning Him. His purpose and identity were perfectly clear to Him. As a result, His calling fell into place. This was true even though Christ's calling was not all pleasant and had a large share of pain and suffering. When given a firm foundation in Christ, identity helps us grow in relation to virtues such as friendship, courage, love and justice.

With the Christian life comes meaning, purpose and real identity. Knowing who we are as individuals and

in Christ will help us along as we face challenges, but we actively must seek to grow in Christ. The world is full of pretense—false concepts of identity that mask reality—which obscures truth. We will face these pretenses internally (our thoughts) and externally by in the way the world around us functions. In such instances, a firm Christian identity is required. Only then can we follow the advice of Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:5 and “take every thought captive to obey Christ”.

So what is the point of looking at identity? Why is this topic so important?

It does not matter if you are a junior, a senior youth, a University student. It does not matter if you are a child or an adult. The thing is we are all apart of one body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:12, 27

The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ.

All of you together are Christ’s body, and each of you is a part of it.

We all have a part to play. When you decide it is better to sleep in on a Sunday morning you are deciding that your part is not needed or is not important.

1 Corinthians 12:22

In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary.

When you are not here, the body of Christ suffers. When you decide not to come to church, Leith Valley suffers. We all have a part to play. I cannot play your part and you cannot play mine. All parts are significant and necessary. My challenge to you today is to remember no matter who you are, you are a significant and necessary part of our body, the body of Christ. Let's pray.