

Who Am I? What is my nature? Can you answer this about yourself with only a few nouns or adjectives. What do you value? Aren't our whole lives a search to define who we are within our relationships and our communities? Sometimes we focus on our outer layers that society sees and values: job, wealth, possessions, family. Eventually we feel a tug to something deeper, something more important to our identity. Scripture tells us that we share a core identity with God, Jesus and each other. Residing in each soul this divine spark or light is the energy field of Love that connects us to all that God has created including animals, nature around us and even those who have passed on before us.

Because Jesus was fully human I can imagine that he went through the same process we do to answer the Who Am I question. In John's gospel today Jesus says "I am the bread of life." Jesus's answer to the question Who Am I? is "I am" in a strong, loud voice with great authority. John records at least seven "I am" statements by Jesus: I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the door; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way the truth and the life; I am the true vine. The Jews of Jesus's time were upset by Jesus's teachings because to grow spiritually the Pharisees suggested reading the word of God as recorded in the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah. Jesus declares, "no, I am the very words of God in human flesh and blood. You do not have to read the Old Testament. Listen to me." In addition Jesus's "I am" was a problem for the Jewish Rabbis because the phrase "I AM" translated to Yahweh, the name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. No one was to speak the name of God let alone claim an intimate connection!

Being fully human Jesus arguably did not have a solid sense of who he was right from infancy. Like us his sense of self possibly developed throughout his childhood, guided by the Holy Spirit through his parents' values and community's influence. Scholars surmise that Jesus wasn't born with the full knowledge of being God's Son. Certainly, by age 12, when he's teaching in the temple, he probably had an inkling that he was more advanced than the other Nazarene youth. The next influence on the shaping of his identity that we know of is his baptism by John in the Jordan R. It's a big "A ha" moment when he literally hears God say "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." More identity formation happens while warding off the devil for 40 days in the wilderness. Talk about intense. Trial by fire intense. When he returns from the desert he's ready for his next three years of changing people's perceptions about God's identity and his expectations of humans. Surely, Jesus had his moments of doubt when he questioned not Who Am I, but rather What am I to do?, How do I do it? For guidance with these questions he relied on prayer, conversations with God and then quiet intervals of listening for His Father's answers.

If, by our faith & creeds we believe we have been created by God in his image and all living things have a spark of the divine inside, then our core identity is "I am a child of God." We may profess this intellectually, but how do we practice living this in our hearts? The Franciscan priest Richard Rohr has popularized Thomas Merton's concept of the True Self and False Self. He suggests that we have both within us. The true self is what religion often calls the soul—our eternal essence. The false self is the persona we create for ourselves. Think of our identity as a Russian nesting doll. The last tiniest baby is our soul, nestled in, cushioned and nurtured by our heart. The outer dolls represent different layers of our false self — how we identify with our jobs or possessions or level of education or relationships or

moral values. Father Richard believes our goal in life is to find and reveal our true self. Jesus teaches “I am the Way and Truth” to identifying our true selves.

This finding of true self, or soul, or essence, or inner light is a life long process. Our sense of identity changes many times during our lifetime depending on experiences, influences, intentions and relationships. Our outer false self layers have changed several times; I’m not the same person I was back in my 20s! But I am aware and perhaps you are too of a tug toward the center of my heart, the soul’s resting place. The Holy Spirit is guiding each of us closer every day when we listen. How do we move closer to our true identity, to our soul’s connection to the Divine? What clues do today’s readings give us?

Psalm 130 says “I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him; in his word is my hope.” First we have patience. How many times have we heard “in God’s time!” We study scripture for guidance and insights. Paul’s dos and don’ts to the Ephesians give guidance of ways to peel away layers of the false self—no lying, stealing, swearing, no angry revenge or hate; don’t grieve God by taking his gifts for granted. Then focus on connecting to our the soul’s inner spark—do realize that the Holy Spirit is moving and breathing in us; do be gentle and loving; do forgive each other as God in Christ forgives us.

Most importantly we can follow Jesus’s example. His strong “I am” identity was nurtured mainly by his extensive prayer life and his extended quiet listening times with God his Father. The Holy Spirit uses our need for a relationship with God to draw us closer to the truth of Who We Are. Rohr believes we are being guided to see that God is first found “in here” within ourselves, not “out there” in the weeds of our false self’s outer layers. Ideally the identity that we present to the outer world will reflect our ongoing loving relationship with our creator who identifies with Jesus. Then we will almost naturally see God in others and in all of creation too. The search for God and the search for our True Self are the same search.

The nesting dolls reassemble—the inner tiny baby imitates the example of how Jesus lived his life. With this true foundation our added outer layers are no longer false. We reflect our connection to God by spreading truth, Love, mercy, and justice throughout our communities.

Who Am I? With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, through studying scripture, and maintaining a consistent prayer practice I can say with certainty that I Am a child of God; I am Love personified. When our core identities are grounded in Christ we are connected to each other and all of creation.

This prayer chant may be one way to open an awareness of our core identity:

Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am

Be still and know

Be still

Be

Be Loved    Be Loving            Be who you are in Christ.