On Identification: Same Lake, Different Boat

By Stephanie O. Hubach

Identify: to associate or affiliate oneself closely with a person or group.

THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY

Bearing down on the pedals intently, I strained to maneuver my bike up one of the steepest hills in town, weaving back to the safety of our house. The weather was hot, hot, hot—one of those scorching summer days when the heat radiates off the pavement in waves, making cycling all the more arduous. Anyone watching from the outside would have thought I was simply riding a bicycle. But truth be known, on the inside I was running. Running away.

After moving to a rural Pennsylvania town from a fast-paced defense consulting job in Washington, DC, I had been trying to find a constructive way to fill my time until I found new employment. After working sixty-hour weeks while completing my master's degree, I was attempting to slow down and lead a more balanced life that included more time with my husband and other people and less time with data and spreadsheets.

On this particular day, I had decided to visit a local personal care home. In Pennsylvania, these provide housing for individuals who do not need intensive nursing care but cannot live unassisted for any number of reasons. This means that they often house people with a variety of disabilities, including cognitive disabilities, mental illness, or physical disabilities. However, I didn't know any of that. I had thought there would be a few neatly dressed and mentally alert elderly people sitting around watching TV—but secretly waiting for the chance to engage with me in a stimulating conversation or a rousing game of checkers.

Needless to say, I was shocked at what I saw…and what I smelled…and what I heard. Upon opening the front door, I was greeted by a long, dark, dingy hallway, the smell of soiled diapers, and the sounds of human woe. Sensing that perhaps I had underestimated what I was getting myself into, I still cheerfully marched into the administrator's office and offered to visit with anyone who was available. After looking at me curiously, the woman directed me to a room where people with various disabilities slumped in their recliners, in wheelchairs, and on couches.

I was seated with a man named Paul, whose wife had recently died. The staff thought perhaps my visit could help to cheer him up. I had no idea what to say to him. He dutifully answered my questions, but I couldn't wait to leave. After fifteen minutes elapsed, I had tortured poor Paul long enough with my persistent questioning and slipped outside. Trying to shake off how deeply disturbed I felt, I began pedaling home. I had attempted to identify with people outside my comfort zone and determined that it wasn't for me.

Fast-forward three and a half years to a very frosty January when the weather was cold, cold, cold. I'd thought this delivery would be like those depicted in the baby magazines, full of glowing anticipation,

where everyone is wearing white and everyone is happy. Instead, I found myself in the hospital with my newborn son for the third time in three weeks. Everything was indeed white, but everyone was *not* happy. That morning, Timmy had been diagnosed with a very serious heart condition not uncommon in babies with Down syndrome. According to his cardiologist, Timmy's case was a "worst-case scenario" for this particular cardiac anomaly. The hole was extremely large, about half the size of his heart.

Reeling from the news, we tried to settle into our assigned room that we were to share with three other families for the next five days. Needless to say, I was shocked at what I saw. . . and what I smelled . . . and what I heard. Amidst the constant blipping of monitors, babies cried incessantly—not simply because they were hungry, but because a nurse was trying to put in an intravenous line or draw blood for the afternoon lab report. The nine-month-old baby across the room had lived there for much of her short life. A little girl who wandered down the hallway was literally missing half her face. The sterile smells of hospital bedding replaced that gentle Ivory Snow scent I longed for at home. But this time, I couldn't walk out the door and hop on my bike and ride back to the safety of our house. This was my world now. The identification I had once ridden away from by choice was now mine by Providence.

Comfort and Identification

Most people are not immediately at ease with those who have disabilities—especially cognitive disabilities or mental illness. While today's generation of children has had greater exposure to individuals affected by disability, most adults still struggle with a fear factor when learning to relate to people with disabilities. At times the fear is based on a stereotype that must be overcome. Sometimes it stems from the awkward feeling of not knowing what to do or say. At times, we are confronted with the honest truth that we wrongly look at disability as an abnormal part of life in a normal world. In other instances, the discomfort comes from the realization that disability is a condition that any of us can (and many of us will) personally encounter at some point in our lives—and that uncomfortable thought makes us want to run away.

There is also a societal component. We live in a fragmented culture—one that is full of distinct lobbying groups. Typically, these groups communicate *at* each other but not *with* each other. To the degree that we passively absorb postmodern cultural constructs about the impossibility of communication across different groups of people, we fail even to attempt to connect with others whom we perceive to be different from us. When we do this, we implicitly accept society's view of "community"—which is not a group of people bonded by intentionality but a group of people defined entirely by their exclusivity. Notice how language has changed in the last generation. We no longer refer to the United States as a "melting pot" to represent the cohesive bonding of this nation. Instead, the word *community* is used to define separate and distinct power groups. Listen carefully. You hear it on the news every day: the Hispanic Community, the Black Community, the Muslim Community, the Disability Community.

When we focus on our differences, we tend to impart value—usually negative—to those differences. Instead of connecting with people affected by disability by choosing to stress our common humanity, we emphasize the differences to legitimize our desire to simply pursue our own agendas—those specific to our "community"—whatever they might be.

There is a common expression: We're all in the same boat. One doesn't have to experience much of life to recognize that this is an oversimplification of reality. A more accurate statement would be *same lake, different boat*. As human beings, we share a common story, but the details of our experiences and our life circumstances vary significantly. We are *essentially* the same but *experientially* different.

However, the current societal emphasis goes far beyond this. Instead of seeing ourselves in the same lake but in different boats, we tend to see ourselves in different lakes entirely. As a result, we end up feeling justified in simply seeking our own level of personal comfort in life—unaffected by the needs or desires of those around us.

We all like comfort. One could even say that twenty-first century Americans are obsessed with it. Our cars, our furniture, our clothes, our computer keyboards—even our coffee cups—are designed for ease of use, the right feel, the perfect fit. That's comfort in the material sense. Now, suppose someone says to you, "I love my friends. I really identify with them." Probably they are referring to a collection of people with whom their comfort level is high. To an outsider, the commonality of their group might be obvious across the individuals—consistent with society's version of community. But *The American Heritage Dictionary's* definition of *identify* is much broader than this. To identify with someone else is to "associate or affiliate oneself closely with a person or group." This definition does not necessarily imply comfort or identification that is *easy*—just identification that is *purposeful*.

Biblical Identification

The Bible is replete with rich teaching about and examples of genuine identification. From Genesis to Revelation, the Scriptures demonstrate God's intentional identification with us. Ponder the depth of the word *Emmanuel*, which means "God with us." From creation to the consummation of all things, God is committed to intentional identification with the creatures he designed in his image. According to Gerard Van Groningen, God's divine covenants constitute a "God-established, -maintained, and -implemented life-love bond."[1] God's covenants with his people throughout the ages are exemplary of the Emmanuel principle.

Consider the covenant of creation, which is God's implicit covenant with humankind made in the context of the design of humanity. The bond of life and love is deeply rooted in God's creation of men and women as his image-bearers. It is the relationship between God and humanity—not just in a simplistic sense but in the deeper sense of human beings' bearing the divine image within themselves—that binds humanity to God. Van Groningen continues, "This relationship is an essential aspect of God's covenant. The foundational idea of covenant is bond. God bound himself to mankind as he bound mankind to himself. It was a bond of life and love."[2]

Not only are we created for loving service to God in his kingdom, but we bear the image of the King himself within ourselves. Now *that's* identification! If God, who in all his splendor and transcendence can choose to be imminent to us, shouldn't we, who are not transcendent, strive for association with our fellow human beings?

How do we know this is possible? We can be confident of our calling to identification because Jesus himself demonstrated it throughout his life. One of my favorite examples is in John's gospel account of Jesus's healing of the man who was born blind.

> As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"
>
> "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." (John 9:1–3)

The disciples emphasize a sense of otherness in the way they refer to "this man" and in the way they ask, "Who sinned?" Notice, however, that Jesus turns their question on its head and responds with a statement that reflects God's purposeful identification with the man: "This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:3). Jesus then proceeds to heal the man, but Jesus does not disengage from the man born blind even though the man goes on his own way. The continuing account relays a subsequent squabble among the Pharisees, the man, and his family. Under a barrage of questioning, the healed man repeatedly recounts his miraculous encounter with the Christ but is increasingly berated by those who do not want to accept it. Finally, the conflict ends with the Pharisees shouting at him: "'You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!' And they threw him out" (John 9:34).

The best part of the story comes in the next verse: "Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him . . ." (v. 35). I love those words: *"when he found him."* Jesus went looking for the man. He was interested in more than his disability. He was invested in the man as a person. Jesus then moved the relationship to another level and introduced himself as the Son of Man—bringing the relationship full circle back to a connection with God himself—the one who identified with the man born blind even in his creation, when the image of God was stamped within. That's powerful!

Biblical Application

So, from the profound reality of God's identification with us in our image-bearing and from Jesus's practical example, how do we jump to our own application? What motivates us to connect with others intentionally as God requires of us? Romans 12 gives a clue:

> For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. (Rom. 12:3–6a)

The first thing that motivates us to identify with others is a proper perspective on ourselves. "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought" (Rom. 12:3). We must recognize that we all have needs—that is a normal part of life in an abnormal world. Our brokenness and vulnerability as humans is universal; how it manifests itself is variable. *Same lake, different boat.* Connecting to others in a condescending way is not an option. Intentionally associating with others because we can truly identify with their human condition is essential.

Second, we will be motivated to identify with others when we realize that we rely on each other. "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Rom. 12:4–5). An interdependent unity comes from diversity in the body of Christ. Everyone benefits when we choose intentional relationships with people of differing abilities. Notice that the model for mutual reliance in Christ's church is more intimate than *same lake, different boat.* It is *same body, different parts.*

Third, we need to celebrate the giftedness of those with whom we connect. "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us" (Rom. 12:6). Because we rely on each other to bring completeness to the body of Christ, everyone's contribution is a gift in its own right. Note that our differing abilities are seen as positive and purposeful. There is genuine joy in celebrating the unique qualities that express God-given individuality in the context of unity.

Finally, "the grace given us" is the ultimate basis for true person-to-person identification. In the covenant family, grace is the glue that binds us to each other—regardless of nationality, ability, gender, age, or any other defining characteristic. Those who have experienced God's grace firsthand know that our need for grace is universal. It is what allows us to relate to others, inside and outside the body of Christ, with humility and compassion. Of course, identification can be costly and sometimes uncomfortable on our part, but grace was exceedingly costly and excruciatingly painful on God's part. Remember: Emmanuel—*God with us.* Doesn't that say it all?

Summary

As our son Freddy entered second grade, we prepared to start Timmy in kindergarten at the same elementary school. Knowing that Timmy occasionally pulled embarrassing stunts in public, I was concerned that Freddy might feel self-conscious about sitting with Timmy on the school bus. So, one day I asked Freddy how he felt about the prospect of riding on the bus together. Looking at me in stunned amazement that I had even approached him with the question, Freddy replied indignantly, "I would be proud to sit with my brother."

How about you? Would you be proud to identify with your "brother" or "sister" who is disabled? Then follow Jesus's example—be intentional and go and find them.

Personal Application Questions

1. How do you usually think about the concept of "identification"? Do you typically consider identification to be related to comfort, commonality, or intentionality?
2. What fears do you have about relating to people who have disabilities?
3. How does God's example of identification with us help you to overcome those fears?
4. What does it mean to say "same lake, different boat—we are all essentially the same but experientially different"?
5. Who will you choose to identify with today?

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Notes

1. Gerard Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament*, vol. I (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), p. 59–60.
2. Ibid., 103.

About the Author

Stephanie Hubach is a Research Fellow in Disability Ministries and a Visiting Instructor in Educational Ministries in affiliation with Covenant Theological Seminary. From 2007–2016 she served as Mission to North America's Special Needs Ministries Founding Director. Mission to North America (MNA) is associated with the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Steph is the author of *Parenting & Disabilities: Abiding in Gods' Presence* (P&R Publishing, 2021), *Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability* (P&R Publishing, 2006; Revised and Expanded 2020), and director of a Christian Education DVD series based on Same Lake, Different Boat (available on YouTube.) Stephanie is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of McDaniel College, has an MA in Economics from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and a MATS from Covenant Theological Seminary. Steph and her husband Fred have two deeply loved sons: Fred and Tim, the younger of whom has Down syndrome. You can learn more about Stephanie Hubach and her work at www.stephaniehubach.com.