

I've told you the story of my coming back to the faith after being away from the ages of 18 – 25, but I want to start there again today. During the autumn of 1985, while living with three other guys in a house up on Finn Hill I studied the faith in the books of C.S. Lewis, Ronald Knox, and others. I've told you about that Wednesday afternoon, lying on the couch, when I suddenly realized that I had gone from being a curious non-believer to being a Believer. That realization was strong enough to get me to look up where the closest Catholic church was, and to attend mass the next Sunday.

I snuck out of my house early that Sunday morning so I wouldn't wake up my house-mates. I wasn't concerned about them getting their sleep. I just didn't want anyone knowing where I was going. I snuck into the back row at St. John Vianney (then meeting in the old seminary chapel). I didn't talk to anyone, and hurried out as soon as mass was over. I didn't even want to be identified as a Catholic. I was a Believer, but I was not yet a Disciple.

A Disciple of Christ is not just someone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah. Disciples are people who allow their identities to be formed primarily by their relationship with Jesus. Our lives consist of many relationships. The human person never exists in isolation, but only in relationships of some kind. That's how we know who we are.

Let me give you an example of such a relationship. Nine months after sneaking into church that Sunday morning I began my graduate studies in history at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. When you apply to graduate school you are not just applying to a university. You are applying to study under a particular professor. He or she will spend five-plus years working with you, reading your papers, helping you get a job, etc. That relationship becomes central to your life.

When I got to Johns Hopkins I realized that I had a new primary identity. Within my intense little world of the history department I was now known as a "Greene Student." Jack Greene, a colonial American historian, was my advisor. My friends were Pocock students, Walters

students, Forester students, etc. We were each bound up with the scholar from whom we were learning, for whom we were often working as TAs. In that small, but all-consuming, world we lived in this was our primary relationship – it defined who we were.

I thought of that experience when I read in our Gospel today how John the Baptist answered the question put to him by the priests and Levites. “Who are you?” Are you the Prophet, Elijah, the Messiah himself? John denies all those identities. Instead, he says, “I am the voice of one crying out in the desert.” John identifies himself as one announcing the coming of Someone else: Jesus. His life and actions make sense only in relationship to Jesus.

That is also meant to be true for us. Advent is a time when the Church calls on us to examine our identity as Christians. Who are we? Are we merely believers, as I was when I first went back to mass so long ago? Or are we true Disciples -- someone whose every relationship flows from, and is ordered by, his or her connection to Jesus? We all

have those multiple relationships that help define who we are. But which relationship is first, and forms the basis for the others? When I first arrived at graduate school I continued to go to mass. I was growing in the faith. But I would have to say that, if you looked at my life, where I spent my time and energy, where I put my hope and thoughts, I was more a Greene Student than I was a Catholic. That academic role was my first relationship. A sign to me of my growing conversion to the Faith during those years, and my coming to decide to not seek a job as a professor, but to enter the seminary, was noticing how those two relationships traded places in my heart.

What about you? Most of you are believers in Christ, I suppose, or you wouldn't be here. But what is your first relationship? Besides being Catholic, many of you are married. You have children, grandchildren. Many of you have engaging work and careers. What primarily defines you in your own mind? Do you think of yourself first of all as the wife or husband of X. Are you Y's Father or Mother? Are you first of all the

group leader, or the co-founder of the company, the owner of the corvette and the lakeside home? None of those are bad things to be. But none of those self-defining relationships with persons or things can be first for a Disciple of Christ. If any person or thing is more important to us than God then we have made him, her, it, into an idol. A way to test this is to ask ourselves: Would the way I lead my life still make any sense if my Faith in Jesus as Messiah turned out not to be true – as John the Baptist's wouldn't have? If my life wouldn't be turned upside-down without Jesus, then it isn't founded on Jesus.

Those are hard words for us to digest all at once. But they make perfect sense to someone who not only knows about Jesus, but knows Him. This relationship doesn't happen all at once. Becoming a true Disciple of Christ takes time, as we re-order our relationships, as was the case when I first returned to the Church so many years ago. It can take years before the relationship with Jesus becomes the most real of our lives. But that is where we're meant to be heading. That's where

the saints have discovered the ultimate happiness, because when all our other relationships in life are rightly ordered on the central relationship with God, then they all make so much more sense.

Am I a Disciple, or just a believer? This Advent let us examine, and honestly admit, as John the Baptist did, who we are, and what our defining relationship is. If it isn't with Christ, then we know that there's still more life and happiness that God wants to share with us if we will only pursue Him with all our hearts.