

Finding My Identity

Ephesians 1:3-14, Mark 1:9-11

We've come through another year. 2017 is past and a new year has begun. When we look back at 2017, there were so many news stories that caught our attention. Earthquakes, wildfires, hurricane, wars and threats of war, violence, hatred, protests, scandals.

And one kind of story that we continue to hear more and more about. Identity theft. It is a crime that continues to be on the increase. We hear about computer hackers, companies like Equifax, and banks and others industries and companies whose information is compromised by those who seek to steal vital and personal information. I read that the average time it can take to resolve the issue of identity theft is something like 600 hours. I hope none of you has ever been a victim.

Having an identity and securing that identity seems to be more important than ever. And isn't interesting that more and more people are exploring their personal identity by trying to determine their ancestry. One of my Christmas gifts to Joanna this year was that 23 and Me kit which through DNA testing gives you background on your ancestry. I think we already know that it will come up Irish, English, and German. But who knows, maybe there'll be some surprises.

Of course, we all identify ourselves by name, or by a description of who we are: like teacher, musician, mom, dad, grandma. Or we are prone to think of our identity in terms of what we have accomplished, what titles or degrees we have. We feel like that gives credence to who we are. It some way it validates us. But this morning I want to talk about our identity on a deeper level.

Finding our identity is part of our quest in this life. Sometimes we use the expression. You need to find yourself, find out who you really are. What makes you tick, what are your passions, what are your gifts and strengths? And for most of us that is a lifetime journey. Really trying to understand who we are.

I believe that finding that identity is part of a bigger question related to who we are as part of God's creation. That my understanding of who I am personally cannot be fully understood apart from my relationship with God. We can go through this life, learning all kinds of things, collect all kinds of degrees, accumulate as many material things as we can, seeking to make sense out of who I am in this world, but without a connection to the God who made us, and we find that all of our searching leaves us empty and troubled.

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I think that is why the apostle Paul stresses this point over and over. That the basis for discovering who I am is found in my relationship with God made possible through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul had preached in the great city of Ephesus for over two years leading people who were in the midst of a pagan culture to find new life in Christ. But then he departed that city, and in time some of those early believers were drifting back to their old practices and their former way of life. And now in a gracious and powerful way Paul offers these words in this letter to the Ephesian church. Basically his message is this: “Remember who you are, remember how your lives were changed in Jesus Christ, remember the new life God has given you.

So over and over again he uses this phrase “in Christ.” That Paul could not think of himself apart from his relationship with God in Jesus Christ. It is said that the expression “in Christ”, “in the Lord”, and “in him” occur over 160 times in the letters of the apostle Paul. John Stott in his writings for the C.S. Lewis Institute describes it like this: “To be “in Christ” does not mean to be inside Christ, as tools are in a box or our clothes in a closet, but to be organically united to Christ, as a limb is in the body or a branch is in the tree. It is this personal relationship with Christ that is the distinctive mark of his authentic followers. What distinguishes the true followers of Jesus is neither their creed, nor their code of ethics, nor their ceremonies, nor their culture, but Christ. What is often mistakenly called “Christianity” is, in essence, neither a religion nor a system, but a person, Jesus of Nazareth.” Our Scripture reading from Ephesians powerfully expresses this truth: God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ...” Children in the city of Ephesus would often be abandoned in the streets or market places if they were not wanted. Like it still happens today in many parts of the world, children left to fend for themselves, living on the streets. These children in Ephesus would often grow up to be slaves or prostitutes. They were treated as having no worth. Unless someone took you in and adopted you as their own child. Paul shares the glorious news that coming to Jesus is becoming God’s loved and adopted child. Your true worth and identity is realized.

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This becomes our source for knowing our true identity. Our relationship with the Lord where we can let go of false suppositions about who I am and discover who I have been created to be because of my being “in Christ”. Jesus’ identity was announced at his baptism: This is my Son in whom I am well pleased. The Gospel of John tells us that when we come to Christ we become children of God. It is as though there is this spiritual DNA that is imparted to me when I find Christ. We discover that our identity is found not just in who we are, but in whose we are. As we submit our lives to the Lord Jesus, as we cultivate and nurture this relationship, we become aware of our value and worth in the sight of God. We begin to see our potential, what we were created to be, how we are to live.

When I can find my true identity in Christ it impacts me in several ways: First “in Christ, I have a new standing before God. I realize that I am on a new pathway. II Corinthians 5:17 says it plainly. For if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation, the old is gone, the new has begun. I don’t have to be bound by my past, those things that were part of my old identity, because my life has been changed. I love the powerful statement we often cite in the book of Romans: “There is now, therefore, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. In Christ the old is past, I can experience God’s forgiveness and grace. I have a new standing. My true fulfillment is found in this relationship. God gives us a new meaning and purpose to my life.

The second aspect of this new identity is the way it impacts who I am as part of the family of God. Like Pastor Hey Young preached about a few weeks ago how we are those broken pieces of Christ’s body, but as a person in Christ, I know that I am part of the larger body. We are the family of God and our strength comes from the way we show our unity, by the way we relate to one another, by the way we support and encourage one another, by the way we do ministry together. We are “in Christ” and we need each other as we serve as the body of Christ.

And that’s the third part of this new identity. We have been give the calling to live out our identity by the way we serve others, by the way we allow others to see what we have been created to be. It is allowing this “in Christ” relationship to be shown in how we live everyday.

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Letting the light of Christ to shine in us. This Epiphany Sunday reminds us that Christ was the manifestation of God's light and as the Magi carried the light to their worlds, so we are to be that manifestation of God's light in our personal worlds. Listen again to Paul's words to the Ephesian church: "In Christ, we have also obtained an inheritance...so that we who...set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory." Might live for the praise of his glory. When I find my identity in Christ, I have a new purpose and that is to give God praise and glory through the way I live. The way I serve, the way I share God's love, the way I can bring the light of God into a world seeking for light in darkness. I like how one writer put it: "To be in Christ means you're learning to do all that you do with and for Jesus in the Kingdom of God. It means that you're being formed into the image of the Lord and you want other people to see Jesus when they look at you."

I'm reminded of the story of a man walking through the forest one day, who found a young eagle who had fallen out of his nest. He took it home and put it in his barnyard where it soon learned to eat and behave like the chickens. One day a naturalist passed by the farm and asked why it was that the king of all birds should be confined to live in the barnyard with the chickens. The farmer replied that since he had given it chicken feed and trained it to be a chicken, it had never learned to fly. Since it now behaved as the chickens, it was no longer an eagle.

"Still it has the heart of an eagle," replied the naturalist, "and can surely be taught to fly." He lifted the eagle toward the sky and said, "You belong to the sky and not to the earth. Stretch forth your wings and fly." The eagle, however, was confused. He did not know who he was, and seeing the chickens eating their food, he jumped down to be with them again.

The naturalist took the bird to the roof of the house and urged him again, saying, "You are an eagle. Stretch forth your wings and fly." But the eagle was afraid of his unknown self and world and jumped down once more for the chicken food. Finally the naturalist took the eagle out of the barnyard to a high mountain. There he held the king of the birds high above him and encouraged him again, saying, "You are an eagle. You belong to the sky. Stretch forth your wings and fly." The eagle looked around, back towards the barnyard and up to the sky. Then the naturalist lifted him straight towards the sun and it happened that the eagle began to tremble. Slowly he stretched his wings, and with a

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triumphant cry, soared away into the heavens. Just a simple story, but it powerfully illustrates who we are created to be in Christ Jesus. To know our true identity as children of God.

Yes, from a human point of view, we can determine our identity with our fingerprint or by voice recognition. Even our smart phones are using that for determining our identity. But when we have found new life in Jesus Christ, as baptized believers marked as Christ's disciples, we share in the wonderful blessings of discovering our real identity, the joy of being "in Christ"; to know who we were created to be and how we are to live and serve. Come to the Lord's table today, to celebrate your identity and be ready to share the love and light of Christ with others.