

Written Copy: Philippians 3:8-11 “Finding Your Identity in Jesus”

Proper 22-18th Sunday @ Pentecost

Sunday, October 4th, 2020

Text: Philippians 3:8-11

⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith---¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Exegetical Statement

As this chapter opens Paul warns the Philippians to look out for those “Judiazers” who demand Gentiles be circumcised in order to join the Church. It seems that they’ve come, claiming to be a more authoritative witness than Paul, to be more in tune with what God has to say about faith in the Scriptures and what it means to be right with Him. As our reading opens Paul counters this charge by saying, ‘If you want to compare who better versed in OT knowledge and the Jewish faith look no further than me. I was circumcised as the law requires on the 8th day, can trace my ancestry back to the tribe of Benjamin—a full blooded Israelite. As far as knowing what the law says and doing it in an attempt to be right with God, I lived it. As to the zeal of faith and working to prevent heresy I was a persecutor of the Church when I thought that was God’s will. But all these things that I once saw as being of utmost importance in order to be right with God I have given up. They are no longer positive things but the kind of negative that causes detriment to one’s soul. Compared to what I have now they are like the filthiest trash worth only to be cast on the dung heap.’ He has given up all these things in order to have and hold Jesus Christ by faith as the only way to be right with God. By this faith he knows the power of the resurrection that declares Christ’s sacrifice on the cross to be the sufficient payment for the sins of all people. Blessed with this knowledge right now He also knows what it means to share in the suffering of Christ as the Spirit’s tool to conform us to be like Jesus in life now, just as we will be like Him in His resurrection. Paul confesses that this work by the Spirit is not yet complete in him, but he continues on grasping by faith to Christ with a repentant heart because Jesus first seized hold of him tightly in the Gospel. With the gift of a repentant heart he forgets the sins of the past and instead strains forward in his life of faith with his eye on the final prize, the resurrection to eternal life as one called by Jesus.

Focus Statement:

Our identity can only be found in our faith relationship with Jesus. He seized us through the Gospel and granted us faith- the power to grasp onto Him. He gives to us the power of the resurrection as the sure sign that His death atoned for all our sins. His Spirit works with us through the same kinds of sufferings Christ had to grow our faith and keep us looking forward to the eternal life to come

Function Statement:

Why it’s important to know:

Just like the world we can find our identity in who we are as “human doings”, putting weight on what we’ve accomplished or can accomplish in the world. But Paul describes the real value finding our identity and value in our earthly existence as being like filthy rubbish good only for being cast on the dung heap

What the hearer should do as a result:

See our worldly gifts, talents, and treasures as good gifts from God when used rightly, but we find our identity through our faith relationship with Christ, and work with the Spirit to keep our grasp of His hand strong and sure, knowing He supplies the power to hold on and holds us when we falter.

Subject Sentence: Find your identity in your faith relationship in Christ

Introduction: Who are You-Where do you find your identity?

What if I was to walk up to each one of you individually and ask you sincerely, “Who are you?” What would you do? What would you say? At first you might humor me. Some of you who are more forward might respond after I’d already asked the question several times, “Well, who the heck are you?!” But perhaps after a while, especially when I asked those of you who I certainly know by name, you might decide it was time to call the men in the little white coats to come and get me. But notice, I didn’t ask “What’s your name?”, but instead “Who are you?”

I began a new Bible Study this week on Thursday morning with our mowing crew. It’s the men’s Bible Study that I’d been wanting to start for a while, although the women who help out were invited too. One of the questions the study asked of us was, “Are you a human being? Or a human doing?” It gave us pause for a few moments. For those of us who believe in God, our identity as a human being means we were created by God in His own image and likeness, and still retain some of that image even though it’s been corrupted by our fall into sin. But what if at times we see ourselves as a “human doing”? That’s someone who finds His identity not in God, but in himself, or maybe more accurately in the work of his hands. Our Head Elder Ervin Glan told a story of being on a trip to another country. He was engaged in conversation with a native of this country and asked the question we Americans tend to us as our starting point, “What do you do for a living?” The local remarked, “Why is it you Americans put so much emphasis on your careers?”

And that carries some truth, doesn’t it? As Americans, one of the ways we tend to define ourselves is by our Vocations. Outside of Church, we may often introduce ourselves by whatever our job title is, or whatever it used to be before we retired, as in “I’m retired from GM”. Many people upon retiring find themselves in an identity crisis. They used to be a line worker at the factory, or an engineer, or a teacher, or a business owner. But upon retirement they wonder “What am I now? I used to be someone, but now it seems I’m nobody.”

But there are other answers that we give that describe what we see as our identity. They are things like “A Republican” or “A Democrat”. “A Trump supporter” or “A Biden supporter”. The problem with these is that right now they all carry divisive overtones. They describe not only who we are, but become descriptors not of the unity we have with our fellow human beings as creatures created by God, but of the disunity and separation that exists in this country among people, and can affect us here in the Church too.

Where Paul found his identity

In our Epistle reading Paul is looking back on how he used to identify himself. In **Philippians 3:2** he gives the Church in Philippi this warning: **“Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.”** He’s doing so because these men who he calls “the dogs”, “the evil doers”, and more specifically “those who mutilate the flesh” have been traveling around visiting the Churches he had planted now that he is under house arrest in Rome. They are introducing themselves as experts on what it takes to be right with God. And they believe these Gentile Churches are not doing what it takes. Jesus is the Messiah of the Jews, and this salvation they claim to have comes from the Jews. So, if these Gentiles really want to be part of the Church, if they really want to be saved, they need to change their identity. They need to become Jews. They need to be circumcised. And as for what Paul taught; well who is he? He is not the expert in the Jewish Old Testament Scriptures and the Laws like they are. They’re message is: “Don’t listen to Paul. Listen to us”.

But Paul played the game they are playing once upon a time. Paul, back when he was called Saul, used to find his identity in the same place they do. He argues that he had even more reason than they do to be confident with an identity as the perfect Jewish law keeper. He lays it out in **Philippians 3:5-6** **⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.**” You can’t get any more Jewish as far as nationality goes than Paul. You can’t be more of a dedicated law keeper than Paul the former Pharisee. He lived the life of seeking to be right with God by keeping the law. And as far as being zealous in the faith, when he thought God’s will was to end the heresy that was the Christian Church, he dedicated his life and energy to persecuting it. He was every bit the dedicated expert that they claim to be and even more so.

But where does he find his identity now? Not in his role in the world, or what he can do to please God and be right with him. Paul describes in **Philippians 3:7-8** how everything has changed. **“⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ”** All those things that were so important to him, his religious training, his law keeping, his zealous work for God, all of that amounts to rubbish, filthy dirty garbage only worth being cast on the dung heap. Because knowing Jesus Christ and having a relationship with Him by faith surpasses all else in worth. It makes everything else worse than dung by comparison.

What is important for Paul now, as he awaits his fate in Rome under house arrest? To **(Philippians 3:9) “be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith---”** His identity is not found in who he was or what he did. It’s not even found in what he does now. His identity is found in Christ. Everything changed for him on the road to Damascus. He was on his way fulfilling his role and identity as Chief Persecutor of the Church. And then he ran into Jesus, or maybe more accurately Jesus ran into him. Knocked him down. Blinded him. Three days later when he could open his eyes, he saw his life completely different, because Jesus Christ had changed it forever. He no longer believed he was made right with God by what he had done or could do. Those things, as far as who he is before God, were not only worthless, but counted to his detriment. To trust in those things would not earn him life now and eternal life to come, but instead life apart from God now and for eternity.

Through the gift of faith given him by Jesus in that encounter and confirmed in His baptism he now understood that the only way to be right before God was through what Jesus had already done for Him. Righteousness must come to us from the one who lived a righteous life, and yet died the death of the worst sinner, and in doing so earned for all men the right standing we could never have on our own. And that right standing, that declaration that God no longer holds our many sins against us but considers them paid in full by Jesus death on the cross, comes to us by His gift of faith.

What is Paul’s focus in life now? **(Philippians 3:10-11) “¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”** Paul wants to know the power of the resurrection. And what can Paul, as well as you and I know through faith in Jesus’ resurrection? We can know for certain that His death has completely atoned for all our sins. Just as Jesus rose again from death never to die again so will Paul, and you, and I rise from the grave, even though we have been long dead, and will live with Him forever.

What it means to find your identity in Jesus

And what does that mean for our lives now? Paul describes that as sharing in Jesus’ sufferings and becoming like him in His death. Because our identity is bound up intimately in Christ by faith we must share in His sufferings. We do so not in order to earn anything in the eyes of God, but because as our Lord and Savior suffered so shall we. When our identity does not conform to the world’s standards, the world turns against us. We stand for a life that the world cannot and will not tolerate. But it stands as a witness to their eventual destruction apart from God.

We also suffer because it has a purpose in confirming and conforming our identity to be in Jesus. In **Philippians 3:11** Paul states that his goal is to attain the resurrection from the dead. He continues on in **Philippians 3:12-14** ¹² **Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.** ¹³ **Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,** ¹⁴ **I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.** Paul admits that not only has he not reached that end goal of the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day, but the process that the Holy Spirit is working on in him of making him perfect like Jesus is not yet complete. The same can be said about you and me. That process of making us holy, also known in “Christianese” as Sanctification, will never be completed in our lives lived out on this earth. But the Spirit works through our suffering by showing us that a life lived apart from Christ and trusting in ourselves is worthless and totally inadequate for what we face in the world. But in our baptism Jesus has seized us and called us to Himself. He has made us His own. And by the gift of faith we cling to Him as His very own people, who sin, and yet are made right, declared righteous because our identity is found not in our sin but in our Savior.

So, we live out our lives here on earth not looking back and wallowing in our failures, not looking to who we are according to what we do or how the world likes to see itself. But by looking ahead, straining ahead for what we know by faith is to come. It’s that upward call on the Last Day when we will rise to meet Jesus in the air upon His return and then live out the prize that He has won for us, eternal life to come.

Conclusion

Where are you looking to find your identity? If I was to ask you here in a worship service, “Who are you?” most of you would give the Children’s Message answer, “I belong to Jesus!” But during the week what else encroaches upon that identity? Do you see yourself as a human being with life as a gift from God, or as a human doing? How often do you see yourself in light of what you do rather than what Jesus has done for you? How often do we get caught up with the world in identifying ourselves with divisive labels like Democrat or Republican? Like Trump supporter or Biden supporter? When we reach that goal that Paul mentions as the upward call to eternal life, how much will our works and these labels matter? They will be as worthless as garbage to be thrown on the dung pile. The only thing that will matter is the identity we have been given in Christ as one right with God, with all our past sins forgiven. What is the identity we need to promote among those in the world who are lost? Our identity in Christ Jesus who desires that we love them as human beings, who desires to use us call them, to seize hold of them by the Gospel Message just like He changed Paul’s identity on the road to Damascus. Just like He changed yours in your Baptism. That’s the identity He keeps you confirmed in and conformed to throughout your time on this earth, even as your strain forward to that upward call to come. Amen.