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National Presbyterian Church

Ephesians: The Best Life

Ephesians 1:1-14

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This morning we begin a new series of sermons looking at one of the great letters in the New Testament that we call *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*

[If you want to find out more about the background: I recommend a new commentary by Fuller Sem. Professor, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Ephesians*, by Dr. Mark Roberts,]

The only thing I want to say by way of introduction and setting the context is this: There are four parts to our New Testament

1. *At the beginning*: we have the story of Jesus in the four Gospels
2. *And then following*: we have the story of the early church in Acts of the Apostles
4. *At the end*: we have the Book of Revelation, the story of the apocalyptic struggle in the background of all of history: a struggle between good and evil; a struggle that God wins in the end
3. *And in the middle*: we have 21 much shorter letters (sometimes called epistles) written to Christians in the early church by Paul and others somewhere between 20-50 years or so -- after Jesus life, death, and resurrection.

These letters address specific issues of faith in Christ. They don't tell the story of Jesus, but assume the readers more or less know it (the stories were not written down in those days in the way we have them in the four gospels today, but would have been told orally, with perhaps some written sections). The focus of the letters was on

- What it means to believe in Jesus and follow Jesus
- How to live the Christian life in practical ways in a secular society

Many letters like these were written and have been lost forever.

Perhaps they were read a few times, then laid aside: forgotten and lost.

But some were kept and copied and passed on to other Christians and Churches, and in time found their way into what became our Bible. And they did so, because they stood the test of time and place.

In other words, as people continued to read these letters, it seemed to them as if their message was not just a message from a particular leader, to a particular church or individual, at a particular time, BUT far more: that these letters contained messages from God, to all Christians, at all times, including you and me!

And one of these letters is our letter today: Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

This is a letter in which there are

1. Great prayers – we can pray ourselves

2. Powerful Reminders that the spiritual life can be more like a battle than a stroll in the park!
3. Practical advice on marriage and the relationships of daily life
4. Strong challenges to keep growing in faith and character
5. Vivid descriptions of God's passion for our common life together in the church -- not just for your life and mine as individuals.
6. Clear Teaching that Christian faith is not first about something we do for God, but first about something God does for us, and says about us in and through Jesus.

And this is what I want us to think about TODAY and next Sunday

- What God has done for you and me
- What God says about you and me in and through Jesus Christ

And in particular, today, I want us to think about **the powerful Gift of Identity**:

What Ephesians teaches is that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus God has given us a new identity, a powerful gift, that helps us not only make it through life, but gives us a sense of value and belonging, so we can thrive.

This issue of identity is clearly an important one in our day and age.

The quest for it is a huge part of the human enterprise and consumes vast amounts of our time and energy as human beings -- and hits home hard most especially when our identity is lost or stolen!! Some of you have experienced that -- and would wish it on no one! But the quest for and the importance of identity begins way before we lose it or have it stolen. As infants, children begin to establish their identity by their relationship to their parents.

“Who are you?” someone asks a child. And they reply, “This is my mommy or daddy.” And, even when we're given names, the names we're given (whether our first names or last name) often explicitly connect us to previous generations.

So (perhaps obviously) if your name is

- Johnson -- well, originally it meant “son of John”
- And MacDonald meant “son of Donald”
- And O'Brian meant “from or of the family of Brian”
- Or in Slavic countries --Petrov, Petrovsky and Petrovich, all mean “from the family of Peter.”

So when someone asks us who we are and we respond with our names, whether intentionally or unintentionally, we are often connecting ourselves (and our identity) with families and tribes and clans and race -- or perhaps also, as with the names above, with our nation or national origin.

Who are you? Someone asks: and sometimes, depending on the context, we may well reply -- or somebody answers for, more by nation or region than by our name:

“American or French or Cameroonian, or British!”

And this can become quite touchy: here are the rules

- Don't call a Canadian an American!!
- Don't call a Scotsman “English”
- And don't call a Southerner a Yankee!!

It all can get very touchy!! But, of course this quest for identity often goes beyond family or race or national background.

“Who are you?” someone asks. And sometimes we respond with “what we do” – our profession: I’m a teacher, parent, baker, lawyer, contractor, professor. Or, in more recent years, identity has often been wrapped up as well with the issue of sexuality and sexual orientation:

Of course, this in itself is not new: thinking about our identity, and making distinctions in terms of gender – male or female; man or woman, boy or girl has always been part of life. But now we live in a world that expands that further and speaks of L,G,B,T, and Q (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer).

And this, if you were in any doubt, this contemporary quest points as clearly as anything to the massive amount of energy, expended in our society on seeking identity. For some, in fact, sexual identity has become their *primary identity marker* – the first thing to be said when asked “who we are?” AND like nationality, this can become highly personal and emotional.

Indeed: in every single one of us somewhere – either on the surface, or just buried below the surface – there’s a place of deep emotion in our lives centering on the issue of identity, and on “the first thing” that we want to say about ourselves.

- For some it’s Family
- for some it’s Race or Nation
- for some it’s Profession or Sexual Orientation
- and for some it’s Religion

In fact, religion as an identity marker has always been of huge importance in human history and especially, of course, in the past 20-30 years or so.

“Who are you?” someone asks. And the reply comes “I’m Jewish or Christian or Muslim or Hindu; Catholic or Protestant or Sunni or Shia; Liberal or Conservative or Fundamentalist.” Or (increasingly) “NONE of the above! I don’t want to identify with any of that stuff!”

In fact it can be popular to argue that religion itself, and identity based on religious affiliation in particular, is inherently dangerous and should be banned or avoided! Even though the statistics tell a different story.

Just in case we’re interested! the fact is that the secular and godless ideologies of the last 150 years have been far more devastating than religious ones – communism, fascism, nationalism, tribalism, plus capitalism-with-no-heart! There’s a great book on the subject by Oxford philosopher and professor emeritus, Keith Ward, called: Is Religion Dangerous? – in which (perhaps not surprisingly, since I’m quoting him!) Professor Ward answers “No! – religion is not inherently, or not necessarily, dangerous!”

But, Professor Ward doesn’t let religion completely off the hook. Rather, part of his argument is that all identities and ideologies can be dangerous; all can become divisive and destructive. Or (to put it into my own words) every allegiance can descend into primitive tribalism if we’re not careful. And every tribe is capable of doing great evil, especially when feel that our sense of identity – who we are and what we stand for at the core of our being is being mocked or threatened!

SO the question we need to ask is this:

- If all of us as humans, hunger for and need to have a sense of identity (and we do)
- If one of the saddest thing for a human beings to experience is to lose our identity or simply to have no clue about who we are (and I think it is it is)
- If the Beatles put their finger on the right button when they sang

*He's a real nowhere man Sitting in his nowhere land
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody
Doesn't have a point of view, Knows not where he's going to
Isn't he a bit like you and me?*

If this is one of the saddest things for human beings to experience --

Then the question to ask is this: Is there any ultimate sense of identity out there that

- can give me a sense of value and safety and joy? and that once I know it and embrace it, cannot be taken away from me?
- can come under attack and does not make me want to attack back?
- has such a ring of truth about it, that I do not have to, and indeed must not, force it on others, but let it speak, as it were, for itself?

To which questions, the Apostle Paul would reply as he does in Ephesians by saying: YES! Yes indeed! There is! God has done something for you and me in space and time, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the concrete reality of history, that changes for ever our understanding of our identity: of “WHO WE ARE” and “WHO WE WERE CREATED TO BE.”

Let me read our passage once again from Ephesians:1-14.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

This is part of Paul's identity: an “apostle” is someone with a purpose -- sent on a mission; someone with a message to share

To the saints (*this is who you are*) who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*(what follows is a 202 word sentence in the original Greek:
as if the words are pouring out of Paul's mouth)*

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

*(Who are we? We have been blessed in a 1000 ways by God,
who has touched us with the life of heaven right here and now)*

⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.

(Who are we? chosen before the foundation of the world -- for a purpose)

⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

(Who are we? children of God, chosen, adopted)

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood (*that is, his death on the cross*) the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us.

(Who are we? People for whom Jesus died on the cross! People whose past must not control or enslave us: People who have been loved and redeemed and forgiven lavishly)

With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

(Who are we? people w/ inside information, pulled into the center of God's plans and purposes)

¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.

(Who are we? People given an eternal future and purpose in life that no one can take away)

¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;

(Who are YOU? a person whom God has chosen to live inside, by his Spirit)

¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

(Who are YOU? a person with a promise that God will redeem and renew our lives completely in his good time!)

The language may be strange or foreign, or theologically difficult for us

BUT the message is clear: what Paul believes is that when Jesus came to earth and lived and suffered and died and rose again, He created the possibility of a new identity for everyone who puts their trust in him:

So, first of all we're never to see ourselves FIRST

- As teachers or lawyers, or parents or children
- Or black or white or heterosexual or homosexual
- Or American or Canadian or whatever!

BUT first of all -- through Christ -- we're to see ourselves and believe our identity is first of all as ***“Children of God, chosen by God and adopted by God, members of God's family, embraced by God: God's own people.”***

- No matter -- what our past
- No matter -- how dirty or messed up our lives
- No matter -- how much we've blown it

In Christ God has done something we cannot undo! In sending Jesus to live and die for us, God is telling us the truth -- that

- His grace is lavish
- that His forgiveness can cover any sin or weakness
- that His power to redeem can make the most use-less life use-ful
- that God wants to live inside us at every moment by His Spirit
- that God has a purpose, and a plan, and a future for us that is bigger than us, and that is more certain and much brighter than any of our past.

As Eugene Peterson puts it in “The Message,” -- his paraphrase of Ephesians:

“Long before God laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, he had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love.”

THIS IS WHO WE ARE!! This is THE IDENTITY FOR WHICH WE WERE CREATED by God, and that we have been called to embrace as a gift at the core of our being.

And to the extent that we listen and embrace it, we will find peace and joy and value. And to the extent that do not listen and embrace it, and seek our primary identity elsewhere than in Christ, to that extent life will become out of order -- disordered, confused, painful -- and some of that inner pain will tend to spill out from us until we inflict pain on others

The issue of establishing and becoming comfortable with our identity can be a life-long struggle.

- Some people never get there: they cannot stop finding their identity, for example, in being their parents' child
- Some people find it – but are so wrapped up in an identity that has limited validity, that when it is gone – for example, when they retire, they wither away! They don't know how to be anything other than their profession or job: a doctor or lawyer or pastor.
- Some people are so Christian or Muslim, so wrapped up in the culture of their faith instead of the center of their faith that they do horrible things in the name of their God.

To Be Sure – all these sources of identity are important, and few people do not struggle, often painfully with these issues,

BUT first, what Paul says in Ephesians 1, is that it's what Christ has done for us, given us, and says about us that must be the source of our primary identity if we want the best that life can bring! Read it again.

And allow the truth of who you are in the eyes of God, your God-given identity, to sink in until it brings you a joy and peace that you've never known, transforming your life for ever

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