

(Proper 12) July 26, 2020
Deuteronomy 7:6-9
Romans 8:28-39
Matthew 13:44-52

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this age of nihilism, when there is no perceived meaning to existence, when morality has been subjectivized, when history has been distorted by agendas, when partisanship has overtaken real politics, and when the traditional institutions of our society are so badly degraded, people long for something to give them a sense of connection to a community with which they can identify and belong. It makes sense then, that the issue of identity would take up so much of our discussion. Since all significant sources of identity such as familial, cultural, religious, and communal identity have been eroded, people gravitate toward the superficial aspects of life to give them an identity. So, people identify themselves according to race, class, aberrational sexual and gender identities, political party, style of workout, or even grocery store preference.

I don't downplay the importance of identity. Who a person identifies as plays a critical role in how they see themselves in the world. A strong sense of identity can provide purpose, direction, meaning, and the courage to overcome the challenges of life. Identity matters. The problem is that we have cultivated an intense contempt for the meaningful contributors to identity, and given much too much substance to unimportant aspects of identity. There are four critical questions that we should be able to answer with a common response in this place. They are critical questions for us to answer similarly, no matter what our race, sex, or political party. We are all individuals to be sure, responsible for the decisions we make and the paths we pursue, but we are united in the most significant aspects of our lives, and those aspects are related to these four interrelated questions: Whose are we? Who are we? Where have we come from? And what has been done for us? These are the critical existential questions before us.

Whose are we? Is it enough for us to say that we are God's possession? Many people on earth believe they belong to God. In a sense, all of humanity does belong to God, since He is the Creator of all. We know that God does not show favoritism in His judgment of humanity, but does God have the prerogative to choose a specific group of people to serve Him according to His purposes? The God of Israel once declared that the Jews were His chosen people, His treasured possession. It would be easy to call this a blessing and leave it at that. It turns out that being chosen by God isn't exactly a life of ease. Not even close. Nor should we want it to be. For growth comes as a result of challenge.

The Jews of ancient Israel were enslaved under the oppression of tyrannical pharaohs. They were then held accountable to a higher moral standard than the rest of humanity since they had the Holy Torah revealed to them, and they were punished for idolatry while God left paganism unpunished in His forbearance. Being chosen by God carried with it a serious responsibility, a holy calling to live as God's ambassadors. If the people of Israel failed in this calling, then they would not be fulfilling the reason for their existence in the Promised Land. The One True God had revealed Himself in a unique way to this people. He revealed Himself as a God who cared for the world He created and expected people to live according to moral and ethical principles. God was also revealed as the author and source of concepts such as justice, love, mercy, and patience. God is the God of history, time, and space; He is not an abstract God. While

we take many of these concepts of God for granted, most people in the ancient world had very different concepts of the divine.

As Christians, we are the treasured possession of the same God who liberated the Jews from slavery, gave the Torah to Moses, established the Kingdom of Israel, and sent Jonah to the Gentiles in Nineveh. We belong to the God who created space and matter, interceded in history on behalf of Israel, sanctified time by creating rest on the seventh day, and ultimately, became man to redeem all of the cosmos by destroying the power of death in His death on the cross and His resurrection from the tomb. We belong to this God, who demonstrates His love, mercy, and patience with us each day, and He invites us to participate in His life, unified with Him in our life together. He has made us co-heirs of His Son, Christ our Lord, and adopted us as the ingrafted branches of Israel. So, the answer to the question of whose we are is that we are God's chosen treasured possession, the God who revealed Himself to humanity through His people, the Jews, and has brought us into His Kingdom by virtue of the universal redemptive work of His Son.

The next question is, who are we? The answer to this question is determined by the answer to the previous question. We are the Church, the very body of Christ. We belong to God through Christ, and He has made us one with Himself and with each other. We call ourselves Christians because we belong to Christ, and He paid the price for us with His own blood. Our identity is defined in light of Jesus and His life-giving Word. We are the people who have had the reality of recreation and reconciliation revealed to our own hearts and minds, and we are to speak this new reality to all of humanity. Just as God had the prerogative to give the people of ancient Israel a sacred purpose, He has the prerogative to give us the same purpose.

As those who have been made a part of Israel as the adopted children, we carry on the mission of revealing the glory of God in Christ to all of humanity in each generation. Our identity, our collective sense of self, who we are, is bound up with the One who has made us one, and that is Christ. His mission during His earthly pilgrimage continues as we live out the purpose and mission He gives us. The purpose is inherently meaningful since it is defined as such by the God who created and defined all of existence. If God has determined that we are treasured, then He has declared us to be meaningful and valuable. If humanity is declared to be meaningful, then work on behalf of humanity is inherently meaningful. As we live out our various vocations as those who are chosen by God, then we are made aware of the purpose of life, the meaning of life, and this gives shape to our identity, both as individuals and as the Church. What a blessing it is to know whose we are and who we are. It is an inoculation against the crushing consequences of nihilism.

Where have we come from? The good teacher is to be able to draw from the new things as well as the old. We run the risk of losing sight of who we are if we allow ourselves to forget where we came from. We are all children of Adam, which in Hebrew just means "man". Our historical identification with Adam is clear, for as he sinned, so too do we all sin. God gave Adam and Eve a choice, a choice that they made for the whole race. They could have lived a life, protected from the laws of entropy, protected from the unhappy trials, blissfully unaware of the totality of life. Instead, they chose to live life fully, the good and the bad; They wanted to live knowing what God knows. Not only were they deceived, their rebellion produced more than they bargained for. Even though Adam and Eve sinned, God allowed for them to live this life, a life in which they would intimately know joy and happiness because they would know intimately the contrasting experiences of pain and sadness.

God made the world in such a way that pain should not be considered a comprehensively bad thing, for through some painful experiences, good does come. Working out is painful, but it is

used to produce a physical good. A good diet might not be exceedingly pleasant, but the end is better health. Learning, reading difficult books, studying the scriptures, going through Leviticus with me, these can be unpleasant at the time, but we can see how such activities enrich our lives. Now, this might be a hard teaching to hear, but indulge me. We are the heirs of bold rebels. We come from a long line of people who rejected the status quo, sometimes with negative results, and sometimes with very good ones. Moses was bold when, in fulfilling God's call, he confronted Pharaoh to his face and demanded, "Let my people go!" It was absurdly rebellious. It was a slave revolt.

Jeremiah prophesied as one of the most profound social critics, speaking truth to power, and condemning the arrogant, comparing the idolaters in Israel to wild donkeys in heat.¹ Jesus, while far from being an irresponsible Zealot, unabashedly took on certain members of the dominant Pharisaical school of the time, challenging their authority. Now, I admit that presenting Jesus as a rebel has some problems, since He has authority over everything, but it is certainly the case that He opposed the oppressive interpretations of the law some religious leaders had. The rebellious spirit of Adam was reformed by Jesus into a great good, one that challenged the divinity of Caesar and the authority of the Pharisees. The martyrs who shed their blood did so as an act of rebellion against the political authorities, and as an act of obedience to God. Some forms of rebellion are good. And two founders of this country wanted the national seal to be an image of Moses leading the people out of Egypt, emblazoned with the words, "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."²

The Church comes from Christ, but Christ did not come into a vacuum. He came into history, became a part of man's experience, and righteously rebelled, sometimes violently against the injustices of political and religious leaders alike. He is our Lord, and we follow Him. Part of our identity as Christians is to be rebels for righteousness, rebels for the sake of the Gospel, and sometimes that leads to tension with political and religious leaders. Sometimes, our bold rebellious attitudes can be sinful. We need to be humble and repent when that happens, especially when it threatens to undermine Christ's reputation in the world. However, we can continue to responsibly fulfill the vocation we have been called to in light of whose we are and who we are. This defines where we have come from, and we are forged in the mold of Christ, walking the path of those who refused to sit idly by in the face of injustice, corruption, and an immoral soul-crushing tyranny.

Adam's rebellion against God brought on the tyranny of sin, but Jesus led a justified rebellion against the prince of this world. So, the time has come to answer the last question that shapes our identity: what has been done for us? Jesus compares Himself to a thief, who binds the strongman so that He can loot the house. Jesus is the one who looked upon the field of the world, found a treasure in the field, and gave up all that He had in order to possess us. Jesus is the merchant who finds a pearl of great value and sells all that He has so that He can possess us. The Son of Man, the Promised Seed of the first man, came into created space in real time, to act on our behalf. He became the friend of all mankind, laying down His life for His friends, making atonement for all of our rebellion against God. We have been spared the condemnation of final judgment, as we are those fish who are preserved from being thrown into the fiery furnace. We do

¹ Jeremiah 2:23-24

² The Founders referred to here are Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, both of whom were secular deists, but who also saw the escape from Egypt as providing the moral framework for the movement toward American independence.

not receive these gifts for the sake of our rebellion, but because of Christ's rebellion against that tyrant sin, which truly was done in obedience to God.

This remarkable display of love for humanity defines us. It tells us whose we are, who we are, where we have come from, and what He has done for us. We are God's treasured possession, purchased by the holy, innocent, and precious blood of Christ. We are Christians, those who have been called according to His purpose, to live an inherently meaningful life together in the Church. We have come from a deep tradition which includes the pillars of Jerusalem, Rome, and Athens, the ancient Jews and the ingrafted Gentiles, who were formed into the singular institution of the Church. We are those who have been reconciled to God by Christ, who while we were still sinners, loved us, died for us, and has renewed us in baptismal rebirth. This is the Church's deepest source of identity. The Triune God has defined us by making us His. May we always remember and not forget this most significant identity.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.