

Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany – 2022

Genesis 45:3-15

1 Corinthians 15:21-26, 30-42

Luke 6:27-38

I identify as a sinner. It's a curious expression, isn't it? It certainly wasn't a part of our cultural lexicon when I was growing up. You know what I'm talking about, right? People saying: "I *identify* as this" or "I *identify* as that." Typically, it is used by someone who is totally not thing "x" telling everyone: "I am totally thing 'x'." A few years back, a white young lass decided that she "identified" as black. Presently, a young lad is swimming as a young lass for the University of Pennsylvania because he identifies as a female. People who cherish reality have been thrown for a loop.

A mother is walking around the block with her three-year-old son, Bobby. Bobby is learning about neighborhood creatures and mom is enjoying teaching her rather perceptive boy. The family doesn't have any animals at home so this is kind of new for Bobby. He sees a gentleman walking his small dog and he asks his mom: "what's that?" Mom says: "that's a dog." Can you say "dog"? Dog! Then Bobby sees a cat run across the street and he points and says: "Dog!" What does mom do? I'll tell you what mom does; she says: "No Bobby, that creature is not a dog, it is a cat. Can you say 'cat'?" What can we derive from this interaction? Bobby has been assisted in learning about reality, the subtle but real advancement of society has taken place, and the child grows in his ability to act positively and purposefully toward reality. The veracity of this principle we all hold to be self-evident. As Christians, we are rather fond of reality.

Reality is defined as the way the cosmos is ordered, the objective and quantifiable state of affairs that remains true regardless of politics, philosophy or various trends in the culture. There is a clear advantage to you being able to understand reality – the environment in which you live, the physical principles that govern our environment and those things that are fundamentally true. The reality is that I am a sinner. I identify as a sinner because that is precisely what I am. There is no subterfuge going on here, no theological sleight-of-hand, no smoke and politically correct mirrors – I am a sinner. When Jesus says: "If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them" (Luke 6:32), do you know what my conscience tells me? It tells me that I, too often, don't love those who don't love me. I am that schlub who loves only those who love me. That's a petty life, isn't it – loving only those who love you?

The old man in us, the old, sinful nature isn't sacrificial, isn't altruistic, isn't virtuous or Christlike in any way. You are like me. You've got this old, crusty, self-centered nature that wants to keep you captive to a petty life. So, what should you do with this old man? Crucify it! It is to die. By daily contrition and repentance, the old man, the old woman is to be drowned that it may die with all sins and evil desires. You can't reform your sinful nature. It is to be put to death. That is why you were baptized. St. Paul wrote this: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). When you were baptized you were buried with Christ and then raised a new creation (Romans 6). His life is in you. Believe it!

Now, when Jesus says that we are to love our enemies what do you suppose He is going to give you? He will give you enemies – but that is not all. He will give to you the love with which to love your enemies. What separates us? What separates us Christians from the rest of the world, the rest of the unbelieving world? Certainly, that we alone confess Christ as Lord. That we hearken to His word, that we know that Jesus has paid for our sins on the holy cross, that He rose again, triumphing over death, that with Him and Him alone there is forgiveness, life, salvation – heaven. Does our faith produce any ethical fruit? Do we operate according to a unique model, a unique calling? Is love *different* with us? Oh, yes! Love is different with us! What separates us from others is precisely Christ's love. It is unique. It is dynamic and inspiring and it is noticeable. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Two things are in view, two recipients of our love are in view. We love Him because He first loved us... and also this: we love others because He first loved us.

You were His enemy and He loved you. Not with a maudlin, temporary love did He love you but with a full and grace-laden love. He gave you what you didn't deserve. And He gave it not to make Himself feel good but to bless you, to shower you with His divine favor. You are now more, having received His love, more than you could ever hope to be on your own. You are to identify yourself as beloved of God. You are to identify yourself as a saint, a child of the Most High, a new creation. It is reality that defines you. You bear the highest name that anyone could ever bear – you bear Christ's name. I identify as a Christian. His love is in me and that is the thing that separates us from the unbelieving world. But ironically, that love is what is to unite us to the unbelieving world. We give it to them just as Christ has given it to us. Freely we have received, freely we give (Matthew 10:8).

People who hurt your feelings – love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. People who gossip about you – love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. People who try to turn others against you – love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. What is the alternative? Holding a grudge? Harboring hate in your heart? Comforting yourself with thoughts of vengeance? That is the old man in you, striving for control of your spirit, following the empty precepts of this fallen world. The old man will not help you find love, humility, contentment, peace or joy.

In Christ, the sweetest fruit of the spirit is radically abundant. You know it. His love will never disappoint you, never abandon you, never make you sing for your supper. Jesus said this: "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master" (Matthew 10:24-25). That is what God is doing in this life – conforming you to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). You identify with Him – Christ the crucified. You *get* to love others as He has loved you. You are *empowered*, by His Spirit, to love others as He has loved you. You *demonstrate who you are* by loving others as He has loved you.

We love reality in this place. That is why we identify with Christ the King. He is the Lord of all creation. "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3). We identify ourselves as Christians because we love reality. "[Jesus] is the

radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3). We identify with Christ’s love for it has washed us and made us holy. He was judged by wicked men who couldn’t identify justice if it smashed them in the nose. But God was giving Himself to us, identifying with us, sinners, taking our place, saving us. He loved us to the very end. Expecting nothing in return, Jesus died. On Easter, reality sprang from the tomb. On Easter, love sprang from the tomb. Christ is reality. The risen King is love and that love invades the lives of sinners. Christ is Lord of this church and His love tells us who we are. We follow Him. We laud and praise Him. We identify with Him.