

January 27, 2019

New Identity

Prayer

May the words of my mouth be meditations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

We are traveling through the season of Epiphany. It is the season that is the time when Jesus is making himself known. Revealing himself to the chosen people of God. And of course, he begins this through his baptism by John. Going out into the wilderness to be tested. To begin to establish this new identity of who he is and what he is to be about. To understand fully what it means to be the Christ, the Messiah, and to be the son of God.

He begins to travel back through Israel. He starts to gather disciples around him so that they can hear the teaching about the kingdom of God. So that they can know and understand what he is about. And what they will soon be about. And we hear that as he goes, he stops and teaches in the synagogues. He begins to spread the message that he has for the chosen people of God.

And he comes up into Galilee, the place, the area where he was raised. And eventually comes to his home city of Nazareth. And that's what we hear this morning in the gospel reading as he comes to his own synagogue where they know him. They know him as Joseph and Mary's baby boy Jesus. They know him as Jesus the carpenter. They know that he has been away. He has gone down the big city of Jerusalem or somewhere down there. He's been gone for some time. And now he comes back to the synagogue. And what we hear is that he begins to establish for them his new identity. Who he is now? Because he's not the same person he was when he left. Now he has a different identity to share with them. Now he has a message to share with them. And the two are linked.

And for them to be able to hear the message of the kingdom of God in a way that is powerful and acceptable. He needs to establish who he is because they know him as something else. And so, he reads those verses from the prophet Isaiah. About the Christ that is to come. The spirit of God is upon me. I've come to say, to share the good news with the poor. Freedom to the oppressed. He is reestablishing who he is so that people can hear the message.

Now as we know from reading the rest of the gospel. The most trouble he had establishing that identity as the Christ was in his home town of Nazareth. They thought he was crazy. They thought he had gone down and been brainwashed by John, the baptizer guy. They don't understand how he has come upon this new identity of being the Christ, the Messiah. And he did less in his own town of Nazareth than he did anywhere else. It's all about the establishing of that identity. And people's willingness to accept that new identity. Of who Jesus is and what he is called to do.

I thought it was an interesting parallel. That the Epistle reading is Paul's letter to the Corinthians. This newly established church. They are a group of people that have come from very different lifestyles, very different lives in faith. There are some Jews who have been Jews all their life. They are the chosen people, yet heard Paul preach the gospel. They have been convinced that Jesus truly is the Messiah, the Christ. They are beginning to change their identity and establish their identity from being Jews to Christ followers, Christians. Along with that there are some Gentiles who had already been drawn to the Jews. And yet now they have heard this gospel message. They too are in the process of establishing that identity of Christian, Christ follower. And trying to understand how that is different from the Jews who have converted. There are Gentile Pagans who have not practiced anything like the Jewish faith. That have come from either no faith or different faiths. And they have heard the message and they have been drawn to it. This good news of Jesus Christ. Of a God who created and now redeems and calls all people to come and be a part. To establish a new identity, not as slave or free. Greek or Jewish but to be a follower of Jesus Christ in the good news. To become children of God.

And they struggle with this identity, this new identity. Establishing it for themselves. The problem of establishing in their community this new identity of being the church. A church that is different from anything that they have experienced in that city before. Experience the identity of being loving and caring to the least of those in society. To take care of the poor, the widowed, the children. And as the church struggles with its own identity and establishing that identity into the city, they ask Paul for some help.

What is it that we are supposed to be about? How do we see ourselves? We have so many different things going on. We have some who seem to be called to be apostles and others who are teachers. Some are speaking in tongues but not everybody. And some are performing healings and such but not everybody. What is this about? How are we to see ourselves? And how are we to have an identity in the city that is wondering what this new religion is all about? How do we become the community that you have called us to be when we are so diverse?

Paul writes and he tells them you must have this new identity. You must establish this new identity within yourself as an individual. And accept the gift that the spirit gives you. Every gift is important. Whatever you have, that's important. And it's important to the whole. Every person has their place. And whereas we may in our humanity try to assign importance. That this gift is more important than that. Within this community itself and within God each has its purpose. And each has its place, and each is important in its own way. He calls them to see themselves as the body where each part plays its part. Works for the common good so that the church be an entity that comes into the community to show the love of God. To work for justice. To show compassion to all people, whether they are a part of the group or not. To establish an identity as a place where people can come, however it shows itself is accepted. Has a place in the body and has a place in the community.

Establishing identity is something that we all go through throughout our lives. We begin as young children establishing who we are as an individual. Apart from siblings, apart from just the family. Who am I? What gifts do I have? What interests me? What course of study do I want to follow, to become what I think I am called to be? Each of us as we grow older, as we've gone through the education process establish that identity. But it changes as we move forward, as we mature.

The same thing happens as we are part of the church. We begin to establish our identity as a Christ follower, as a Christian. Not unlike the first century church as they are trying to establish who they are and how they fit. Whatever gifts they have. How am I important to this body? How am I important to this community? How do I make this community stronger, this body stronger? How do we fulfill our purpose, our common purpose of being the church? Of being that voice that cries out that God who created all, sustains all, redeems all. How do we live out as individuals and as that body? That voice that calls for justice and mercy. For compassion among all people because we are called to reflect the love of God and the forgiveness of God that we have received and offer it to the world.

Each of us are called to establish that identity of Christ follower. And then offer. Offer to the community of which we are a part. This congregation that we call St. Jude's. This denomination that we call the Episcopal church. This religion that we call Christianity. We are all connected. We maintain our individuality, yes. We each are called to understand the call from God that I have received. And the gifts that I have received. And then to find a way to offer it in such a way that it is for the common good. That it is for the good of this community and the good of the mission and the ministry of the church. Not all are called to be ordained ministers. Not all are called to be Eucharistic ministers, or acolytes, or lectors. Or choir members or Sunday school teachers. But each

of these ministries is important to the whole. Is important to the raising up of our children. Is important to the raising up of our worship as we identify as Christ's children. As Christ's brothers and sisters. As God's children.

We are called to identify ourselves and to honor the identity of the other. Not based on what we thought we knew before as Jesus was trying to establish his new identity to those people in Nazareth. But giving each other the room to grow, to change, to offer more as God calls us deeper and deeper into that relationship. And opens us up more and more to some of the greater gifts of the Spirit.

Whatever gifts those are, that we develop through our study. That we develop through our worship. That we develop through being the body of Christ together. We are called then to share with one another. Honoring one another. Supporting one another. Encouraging one another. To continue to travel along that path to know more clearly who God is calling us to be. And how we offer that to this congregation. To this community. To make the ministry and mission of this community more viable and more important in our community. To go outside of these walls with that identity and share with the world the good news of God in Christ. To share with others the justice, the mercy, the forgiveness that we have experienced ourselves. To allow them to hear that good news. And to become a part. To know that they are invited to play a part. And to be honored for who they are, whoever they are.

We spend a lifetime I believe establishing our identity as it changes throughout our life. But the call of the church is to honor that identity whatever it may be. To accept the ministry that is offered through that identity whatever it may be. To know that it is for the common good. That it strengthens the body. It strengthens the message to the world. You are invited to be a part of the kingdom of God. You are invited to be children of God. You are invited to come together so that we can share the message together. To a broken world that needs to hear that there is hope and there is salvation.