

Untitled Sermon
Colossians 1:15-29
Rev. Meredith Loftis
July 7, 2019

Let us pray.

We continue with our sermon series on Colossians today, completing the first chapter of this small book. Paul is writing from prison to this congregation in Colossae, a town on the Lycus River in the Roman province of Asia. We begin in verse 15, where Paul reminds us of Christ's identity and then moves to remind us of our own identity in Christ.

15 He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

21 And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— 23 provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

*24 I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. 25 I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, 26 the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. 27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, **which is Christ in you**, the hope of glory. 28 It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.*

The Word of the Lord.

What is essential about you? What makes you, you? Fred Rogers, the TV host of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, liked to pose this question to children and adults alike: "What is essential about you?"¹

A champion of children, immensely kindhearted and soft spoken, this Presbyterian minister and children's TV show star helped shape children's identities and character for over 30 years, and continues to influence our kids today. Though he never overtly preached about faith, in his calm and loving demeanor, he showed us how to be neighbors, to embrace ourselves and each other; that the essential ingredient to life was found in love and kindness. And it starts first with yourself.

What is essential about you? What makes you, you?

It's a question that we ponder throughout our lives; a question that we get fixated on and struggle to define. It's a question, that as people of faith, we learn to answer from the very beginning. In Ms. Sharon's and Ms. Marie's 3rd to 5th grade Sunday school class, one of the first things they learn is how to state their identity. Similar to the *Shorter Catechism* of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, they use a catechism called *Belonging to God: A First Catechism*. A catechism is simply

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/06/21/if-im-not-trash-what-am-i-what-forky-toy-story-has-teach-about-identity-self-worth/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0f65937f6299

a confessional document in question and answer form and is used to help us find the words to express faith. Ms. Sharon and Ms. Marie ask the questions and teach the children the responses.

Question 1 states: “Who are you?” For a moment, think about that. A very short question, but for most of us, words often elude us when trying to answer. Or we come up with a whole list of descriptions and adjectives.

The answer is just six words: “I am a child of God.” It is a simple answer, with immense meaning behind it.

Question 2 asks: “What does it mean to be a child of God?” Answer: “That I belong to God, who loves me.”

How often do we remind ourselves of this? How often do we remember that the deepest and most essential part of ourselves is defined and claimed by God? That is our identity, given to us by God through Christ. I think it is one that many of us forget or don’t believe, including myself. We can say the words, but do we live into them? When we are asked, who are you, what is essential about you, do we say we are in Christ and we belong to God?

The apostle Paul, writing to this congregation in Colossae, is trying to remind the Colossians of this identity in Christ, in a time of competing spiritualities and pagan culture. It is suspected that they were incorporating pagan rituals into their practices, and Paul is trying to get them to refocus; and in the meantime, trying to survive jail time and claiming for himself that suffering is part of his identity now. He endures suffering in order to make the word of God fully known. So he calls them to remain steadfast in the truth they have received—that God has revealed God’s mystery to all people, including Gentiles. He writes in Colossians:

*The mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generation...has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is **Christ in you**, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*

Christ in you. Christ in us. This is what defines us. Christ is no longer a mystery, but is bound up in our own identity.

This past weekend, I went to see a deeply theological movie called *Toy Story 4*. In 1995, in the first ever *Toy Story*, we learned that when we leave the room, our toys come to life and have lives of their own. Teddy bears and Barbies, race cars and those tiny green army men awaken in Andy’s room. (Andy is the human child who cherishes them.) Sheriff Woody, a 50’s era pull-string cowboy doll, and Buzz Lightyear, a glitzy modern day space ranger, find themselves and their fellow toy companions on daring adventures of rescue and discovery. In the first installment, Buzz Lightyear struggles with an identity crisis after learning he’s simply an earthbound toy. Woody, jealous of Buzz, seeks to get rid of him, and then instantly regrets it and goes on a dangerous mission to rescue him with help from Slinky Dog, Mr. Potato Head, Rex the T-rex toy, and Hamm, Andy’s piggy bank.

In this most recent tale of this toy saga, we see a struggling Sheriff Woody coming to grips with the reality that he is no longer the favorite toy after his new owner, Bonnie, prefers her new friend, Forky, who is a spork. That’s right, one of those disposable eating utensils that is part spoon, part fork. During kindergarten orientation, all alone and without any other kids joining her at her table, Bonnie gets the sinking feeling that kindergarten is going to be hard. Woody, having stolen away in her backpack, comes to the rescue, stealing art supplies and secretly setting them before her, after another kid grabs Bonnie’s supplies away. Among the art supplies is a spork, and with a little glue, googly eyes, popsicle sticks for feet, and a pipe cleaner for arms, Forky is born. Bonnie is in love.

But Forky is convinced he is just trash, simply a disposable piece of cutlery, and attempts to leap into the nearest garbage can at every chance he finds. He’s not down on himself, he simply believes that he belongs with the other trash. We see hilarious scenes of Forky stealing away and

jumping into bins, only to have Woody rescue him again and again. He's trash, that's where he belongs! That's where a spork is meant to go!

Or so he believes. However, Bonnie envisions him as something else, a comforting presence, a friend, a new creation that he has yet to come to understand and embrace. He doesn't understand his new found role, so Woody makes it his mission to help him discover this and "tries to convince Forky that Bonnie's love has *changed* his identity and given him a purpose beyond that of an eating utensil."²

When we proclaim Christ as Lord, we too have changed identities. When we proclaim Christ as Lord, we join with other changed identities to form Christ's body.

We too, must embrace our changed identities from people of the world, broken and often trashed, into new creations that are in Christ. Christ gives us our identity and together we unite in Christ to be the body, or the church. This is what is essential about us. Our identities should not be defined by worldly or divisive labels. Instead, "In the body of Christ we belong to a worldwide community that trumps all divisions based on ethnicity, gender, social class, or nationality. [Yet] This community is not grounded in the notion of human 'oneness,' because such a triumph over ancient and powerful divisions is not humanly possible. Rather, it is true of creation and particularly of the church, in Christ alone 'all things hold together.'"³

It is Christ that holds us together, the glue that binds us together. It is in Christ that our world is reordered from what was broken and dark, into something new. We learn that we aren't meant for what we thought, but instead we are meant for the eternal love of God.

We see this in plain sight, this miracle of identity-shifting, reality-changing, God-claiming in the author of this letter. Paul, the one who now suffers for Christ, was formerly the one who made others suffer, persecuting and killing them because of Christ. Paul, a Jewish Pharisee and authority on the law, who only ate with the clean and worshipped in the Temple, was claimed by Christ, shaken of his old identity, and put on this new one "in Christ." And now he finds himself embracing those that once he would have called "trash" and claiming that they too are "in Christ." They too are welcome into the body. And so are we.

That is our invitation every day we awaken. How will we put on Christ and be "in Christ?" How will we keep from aiming for the things that break us, and instead aim for the life-giving, redeeming, and creative acts that we are now defined by?

As creatures that are "in Christ," that have been given the mystery of the ages and generations, how do we live into this identity that was given to us? How do we turn away from trashing ourselves, thinking that we are only worthless, to embracing the resurrection identity of the one who redeems us?

So how do we discover our identity? By looking at Christ first and foremost, who is among us, who is reflected through us.

Paul tells us who Christ is in the beginning of this scripture.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Christ was at the beginning of creation and continues to create.

He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

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³ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, page 259.

Christ is our redeemer and continues to redeem all of creation. Therefore if Christ is our identity, then we too are creators and redeemers, to go into this world claiming our identities and inviting others to be healed and reconciled as we are in Christ.

As agents of creation and redemption, we have the ability to help others see what is essential in them, to see that they too are children of God. Like Woody, we actively chase and seek out those who feel as though they are only seen as trash, thrown away into the gutters and forgotten. Like the apostle Paul, we testify to the life we have gained in Christ, how Christ heals us, accompanies us, and how we seek to bring others in to the church with us.

Who are we? We are children of God—in Christ—ready to proclaim that the mystery has been revealed.