

EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH

SUNDAY, JANUARY 24, 2020

SERMON: "Who are YOU?"

TEXT: PHILIPPIANS 1:27-2:4

"Who are you?" What a loaded question! It is a question that, if not answered, can cause much chaos and turmoil in the human world. We face the pressure of rising to the world's expectations that we often forget who God made us to be.

My own personal experience with identity is not particularly serious. I was raised as a PK (pastor's kid) and for many of my years I was Rev. Smith's son. I received my undergraduate and master's degree from the same institution that my father was a professor and was the academic dean, I was often known as Dr. Smith's son. I must say that I have used that connection a few times. In my own career as a pastor, I have made connections with colleagues and leaders in our denomination with the following phrase "...you might know my father..." The most humorous form of identity was when my oldest child started school. He was possibly 5-years old and he and I went to the post office. As we were going in, a man with his young daughter were coming out. Our two children said hi to each other and several other words. I heard the father ask his daughter if she knew me. Her response was "oh, that's Jonny's dad..." I thought, "Great! Here we go again!" True confession time! I do have a bit of triumphant glee when my father has visited me and is introduced as "Pastor Richard's dad" (sorry Dad!).

"Who are you?" also applied to the gathered believers/followers of Jesus Christ known as the Church. It has been an identity struggle, that when missed, derails our intended purpose on earth for Jesus.

Paul talks about identity in today's passage: Philippians 1:27-2:4. Let's read it...

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

2 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

WHO IS THE CHURCH?

When we scour the records of church history, we very quickly see that church identity is something that has been a struggle. Often the struggle seems to hinge on our relationship to the secular world. The church has always faced hostility from within and without. In the first 300 years of church history, you see the struggle often highlighted by persecution. Jesus was crucified by the religious authorities. All the disciples, except for John, were martyred. Early Christians often lost their community status, jobs, families, and friends for following Christ. The Roman rulers demanded that Christians worship them as gods. Christians were fed to lions, burned alive, and tortured many ways, often for the pleasure of the masses. Churches were destroyed along with religious writings and scriptures. It seemed their identity threatened powerful people and ways of life. It was during this time that we learned about how we are actually “strangers in a strange land” (John 17:16) and the fact that this world is “not our home” (Hebrews 13:14-16). Christians were to be citizens of a heavenly kingdom. The

Church found themselves displaced from the two major groups...they weren't Jews, they weren't Gentiles...they were now the "Church."

The next part of church history is highlighted by the end of persecution around the fourth century! Great! Or was it? Constantine the Great made Christianity the official religion of the empire. You might think that this was a good thing, and we are blessed that God uses good and bad events for his purposes, but very rarely has the church handled political power well.

As history teaches us, the persecuted became the persecutors often. We harassed, tortured, and even martyred those who did not believe what we believed. Case-in-point...those who left Europe known as Puritans, as well as Pilgrims, set up colonies within the "new world" and promptly persecuted opposing religious beliefs or practices including those held by Catholics, Quakers, and non-puritans.

In our modern times, the church took their identity from a desire to be the ethical/social police of the world. The church has often cherry-picked the ills of society and went into battle-mode. We fought the evils of rock and roll, movies, dancing, arcades, gambling, tobacco...whatever was deemed evil by one religious group or another...rather than chasing after the righteousness of God and fulfilling Jesus' command to "go and make disciples, baptize, and teach..."

I challenge you to show me in scripture where Jesus ever told the disciples to go against the government of the day! Where did Jesus say, "fight for your Christian rights"? Just the opposite. Jesus told us the world would hate us. He told us to take up a "cross" and follow Him. He told us in John 15:12-14:

¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command.

The Philippian Church endured intense persecution which we, in the North American church could never truly understand. There are brothers and sisters in Christ who currently face this type of persecution. We pay lip service to it and we pray for the persecuted church, but most of us have never lived through it.

Paul's words to these persecuted still have meaning for us, regardless of our experiences. We are reminded of our identity in verses Philippians 1:27-30:

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.

Much of our problems stem from the fact that our identity has ceased being one spirit because we have diverted from a true understanding of what it means to "strive together as one for the faith of the gospel."

Have we lost the understanding of being citizens and believers in the kingdom of God? Have we forgotten that we are playing a waiting game, looking forward to a time when God will separate believers from those who would persecute us? We have forgotten the faith we show when we face those who would persecute us and make fun of us. I doubt Paul would have approved of a "Christian" anti-defamation league or, and many will not like this idea, a "Christian political party" whose sole purpose is to fight for our "rights" and to put the name-callers in their place.

Karl Barth, the German theologian, commented about Paul's words by saying ***"Christians do not strive 'against' anybody (nor for anybody either!), but for the faith.*** (Barth, *Philippians*, 47).

Some of my listeners may be taking exception to what I am saying, because battling for our Christian rights has become so ingrained in our identity DNA. We fail to remember that as we are called to love our neighbours, a good chunk of our neighbours are those who are non-believers and those who would persecute us. Going to war with our "enemies" is in direct conflict with Jesus' teachings on loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, and being peace makers. If we see our persecutors as part of the "field that is ripe for harvest" we will start fulfilling our identities once more.

May we reclaim our church identity as those who seek to serve Jesus first. May we fulfill Paul's teaching to the Philippians:

³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

May we realize that we, as Paul was, are slaves to Christ Jesus, trusting Jesus with our very well being. Our identity is to serve, is to love, is to represent Jesus to a world that is looking for truth. To do our part through the power of the Holy Spirit to reconcile a fallen world to its creator. Jesus taught that the road to greatness begins with service to others:

“Whoever wants to be first must be slave to all” (Mark 10:43-44).

This is “WHO WE ARE!”

Let’s pray...