

“The Identity Question”

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Ephesians 2:8-22

CHILDREN’S TIME

Your name is very important to you, isn't it? Some say that the most beautiful sound we can hear is someone speaking our name. Doesn't it make you feel good when someone remembers your name?

Let's all make name tags while we listen.

God knows you really well, so do you think God knows your name? I am sure God does. Names are very important to God.

Every once in a while God calls out a person's name so they hear it with their ears like another person talking. Here are a few examples in the Bible...

One day, Moses saw a burning bush and went over to take a look. God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” And Moses answered, “Here I am.”

Another place in the Bible, Jesus walked down the streets of Jericho

and stopped because he saw a man up in a tree. Jesus called him by name “Zacchaeus, come down. I am going to your house today.” and Zacchaeus came down.

A long time ago, there was a woman named Hannah who wanted a child more than anything, so she prayed to God about it. If she had a son, she promised to help him serve God his whole life. God gave Hannah the son she wanted, named him Samuel, and she kept her promise, presenting him to Eli the priest, and Samuel served in the temple with Eli.

When he was still a boy, Samuel was sleeping one night and heard someone call his name. He got up and ran to Eli and said. “Here I am; you called me.”

“I didn't call you,” Eli answered, “go back to bed.” So Samuel went back to bed.

“Samuel!” he heard a bit later, so Samuel jumped out of bed and went to Eli again. “Here I am; you called me.”

“I didn't call you. Go back to bed,” he answered.

A third time Samuel heard his name called and he got up and went to Eli. He said again “Here I am; you called me.”

Finally, Eli realized that it was God who was calling Samuel. He told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if you hear your name called again say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

So, Samuel went back to bed and sure enough, he heard God calling, “Samuel! Samuel!” This time Samuel answered “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Some people think that God only wants grown-ups to do important things. That’s one reason I like the story of Samuel. Samuel was just a young boy when God called him. God knows your name just like God knew Samuel’s and today God still wants boys and girls like you to listen and follow as God leads you.

SERMON

Last week, we talked about being in a season of discernment as a congregation. Hopefully, you were able to give this some thought and begin thinking about your own personal devotion time as time to discern for you own life personally, as well as how God is leading this congregation — this community of people called First Baptist Church of Birmingham.

In this process of discernment, it is helpful to think about who we are

— to consider the identity question.

As a youth leader for a number of years, in addition to spending lots of time with middle and high school students, I did a fair amount of reading about the adolescent years. What I found, and what is so blatantly evident once I saw it, was that the main task of adolescence, is the exploration of identity.

Through the teenage years and into the early 20s, the goal of a human being is to sort out who they are as they mature into adults. This is marked by experimentation and exploration in just about every area of life.

This is why teenagers try out different ways to dress, different attitudes, different kinds of classes in school, different ways to talk and relate with other people. This is also why some kids rebel and engage in socially and sexually destructive behavior.

All of this happens as adolescents sort out their identity on the road to greater maturity.

If this sorting process is inhibited or blocked for an individual (and all variety of things can do this) then some would say those individuals would come back to explore the

issues of identity later in life as adults.

I have even heard some social scientists say that this has happened for the American society in many ways and as a culture we are now stuck in an adolescent stage of development — that as a society we are searching for our identity.

Now, we could take this conversation and go a lot of different directions including into politics and government, various issues related to foreign policy or local community organizing, or the education system, social welfare, or any number of directions. I'll leave those for another time.

Let's consider the identity question today inside a faith conversation — specifically identity as a faith community.

But, first who are we as individuals?

Let me remind you who you are as described in scripture. You are sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus. You were made in the image of God your Creator, and loved by God beyond what you could ever imagine. As you are, without doing a thing, you are enough. That is who you are as an individual.

Even though at times you may not feel special and loved, this is how scripture identifies you as a human being.

Let's look for a bit at how the Apostle Paul addresses our identity in the book of Ephesians.

READ EPHESIAN 2:8-22

Paul made a point about the place of grace in life and then expanded into talking about community identity.

People are not saved from death by their own effort. God is the one who does this work, so nobody can claim that they have done it on their own. It is only received as a gift from God.

Paul went on to explain that God made us who we are. There is an inner value that God has built into us with an identity and purpose inter-connected with Jesus. The new life we have is wrapped up in Jesus, and this means that we are called to live in a certain way.

Paul's point was that God gave us our identity, and it is not found in the various religious things that we do like going to worship on Sunday, praying for a certain amount of time each day, or studying the Bible, or even giving to the poor.

Doing these things don't give us our identity. God first gives us our identity and place in the family of God as a gift. Then that identity calls us to do all of those things and more because that is what it means to be a part of the living, breathing community of faith.

At the end of the passage, Paul mentions the Temple in Jerusalem and this is key to understand the identity of the community.

The Jewish Temple was not only the religious heart of the nation and the place where Jewish people from all over the known world would travel because it was holy, but it was also the political, social, and cultural heart of Jerusalem.

Why? Because the Temple was the place where Heaven and Earth met. This was the place that God had promised to live and where people could find God and this gave life meaning and purpose. People found their identity from their place in the Temple.

Paul was saying a very radical thing for the very first time, at which prophets of old had only hinted. He was saying that the living God is building a new Temple — not of stones, arches and pillars, but of human beings.

It was within the community of people that God was building the new Temple — this was God's new dwelling place.

What is our identity? According to Paul, we are, as a community, the very dwelling place where God has chosen to live.

In a way, you could say that like so many people in the world today, God has become a stranger, a refugee, an asylum-seeker in God's own world after leaving the Temple, in Jerusalem, where Jesus said God was no longer welcome. God went looking for a new home and found it in the hearts and lives and within the communities of people who have committed their lives to Jesus.

In this new Temple, Jesus, was the cornerstone, the part of the building that holds everything together.

Paul also gives us a hint about what makes up the rest of the Temple. It is built not only of Jewish followers of Jesus, but needs to include others who also respond to God's call to follow. This new Temple requires diverse building materials, different kinds of people, in order to be pleasing to God as God's dwelling place.

This is the vision for the new community of people who make up God's dwelling place.

This is our identity as people of faith in community. May we find the grace and wisdom to live into our identity.

At the end of the sermon here, let's come back to the process of community discernment. When we consider that our identity as a community is as the new Temple, the very dwelling place of God, we have to ask, What does this mean and what does it ask of us?

What it means is not divorced from our history, the talents, gifts and strengths that we as a people now possess. All of that makes a difference.

If we consider all of this, and recognize that together we are God's home, how do we best take care of this house?

How does knowing this impact how we live out our faith?

If as a community we are God's home, what kind of work are we called to do?