

May 14, 2017

I Peter 2:2-10: ***“You Are God’s People”***

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The beginning of the Christian life is kind of like an identity crisis. *Merriam-Webster* defines “identity crisis” in this way for English language learners: “a feeling of unhappiness and confusion caused by not being sure about what type of person you really are or what the true purpose of your life is.” Take Moses for example. It says in the book of Hebrews: “By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward (Hebrews 11:24-26).”

We might say that Moses had an “identity crisis.” But, after all of the unhappiness and confusion, the Lord made him into a new person, gave him a new identity, a new life, and he was given his true purpose. Again, the beginning of the Christian life is kind of like an identity crisis. The word “convert” means “to turn around.” In the words of Lyle W. Lange in *God So Loved The World A Study of Christian Doctrine*, “We by nature are on a course away from God. Through the gospel, the Holy Spirit turns us from reliance on self and service to sin and Satan to trust in the Savior.”

Paul writes in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And 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.” To be converted is to die to self and then live in Christ so that our identity is inextricably linked to the person of Jesus and all he has done. In him, our new name is “forgiven.” And, in the book of Romans, the apostle speaks in this way of Baptism:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Romans 6:3-6).

An author once said, and I am paraphrasing: “When we are baptized, we are given a new name. Names are curious things. We rarely choose them for ourselves; they are given to us by others. Yet names carry within themselves powerful markers of our identity . . . We become our name; our name becomes us.” Indeed! All of us have been baptized with water “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” and that means that our cleansing from sin is not our own work, but is of the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit. When the name of the only true God who saves us is placed upon us, a new identity is given and received by faith, so that we no longer think of ourselves apart from God. Rather, we not only believe that in him we live, and move, and have our being but furthermore, in the work of Redemption, our bad names and reputations are taken away. What a beautiful thing it is to have a new name, a new identity, and a new destiny! No longer is our name sin and death. Our new name is forgiven and eternal life!

In our epistle lesson for this morning, the apostle Peter says that **“You Are God’s People!”** Talk about having an identity! Verse ten states, “once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” As God’s people, we have God and all that this implies. You cannot have anything greater than the one who made us, redeemed us, and sanctifies us. Since he owns us, we possess him. As he is Holy, we are made holy. As he is King and ruler of all things, he makes us royal to rule all things with him and in accordance with love. As our Savior is the High Priest who sacrificed himself for our sins and has ripped open the curtain of hostility between us and God, so are we counted as priests who are able to freely enter into his presence with thanksgiving. And like living stones, we are put together to be the dwelling of God! As John writes,

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:1-3).

Now, as many of you know, identity theft is a huge problem in our society today. My identity was stolen years ago when I discovered that someone had filed taxes using my social security number in order to manipulate the system to receive a hefty tax refund. From there, various accounts were being opened in my name and purchases were being attempted. I am still dealing with it to this very day. It feels like a Citi Bank identity theft commercial where the middle-aged guy is sitting on his work-out-bench, working out, and he pauses and begins to speak in the voice of the girl who has stolen his identity: “Oh I stole his password online and hello . . . make over! I got hair extensions, plumped up the lips and snapped the hottest head shots. Hollywood here I come! Tell me what you think . . .” And, then he sings a song with the girl’s voice, and at the end gives a look into the camera that could kill.

Satan, this unbelieving world, and even our own sinful flesh would do everything to steal our identity. As the Scripture reminds us, it is Satan’s purpose to use everything at his disposal to steal, kill and destroy. He certainly would want us to feel that we are not God’s children, and that our conversion and new identity is a farce. How does he do this? He does everything he can to separate us from the means of grace, from Christ, and then he burdens us with accusations and guilt, and encourages us to soothe ourselves with what we think we can do, and then he brings us to death and hell. We need to hear these additional words from Lyle W. Lange:

A Christian’s life is a daily return to his baptism, through which he died to sin and was made alive in Christ . . . Believers can’t stop temptations from coming into their lives. They can, however, by the power of the gospel, stop sin from taking over their lives. Those who recognize the power of the enemy within each of us (our sinful nature) will not indulge their flesh. Rather, they will crucify it by daily repentance. This has also been called continued conversion.

As you can see, our identity can only be preserved in Christ and his cross and empty tomb. If Satan dared to go after the identity of Jesus, which he did by saying to him in the temptation, “if you are the Son of God,” will he not also try to take away the fact that we are God’s children and heirs of eternal life? Jesus of Nazareth did not fall for it because his name is above all other names. He imparts that name, that identity to us that we may overcome as he overcame! **“You are God’s People!”** In those moments when our identity is called into question, we need to ask the question: “Who am I really?” The answer: “I am a child of God!” As Paul writes in Galatians 3:26-27, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” It no longer matters who we were, what matters is who we are in Jesus’ name. May God forbid that we ever lose the name by which we are saved.

It’s a rather long quote, but it’s worth hearing at the close of our message today. Pastor Timothy Winterstein of Faith Lutheran Church in Wenatchee, Washington observes:

The fact is, each of our identities, whether self-made or imposed on us from outside, is as fragile as life. None of them will survive . . . [the only identity that] cannot be broken [is one that] doesn’t belong to us. It’s an identity that depends on one thing and one thing only: Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection for you. That identity is your baptismal identity, the holy *Name* that marks you for all eternity. “In the morning when you get up,” Luther says, “make the sign of the holy cross and say” the *Name*. Because no matter whether today will be good or bad, you belong to the God of the universe. “In the evening when you go to bed,” [say the *Name*]. Because no matter whether today was good or bad, your sins are forgiven and Christ remains your Savior and Lord. And He is always faithful, always righteous, always the Savior of every individual of every group in every place. People may hate you or love you; your mistakes may go viral; your friends may change because you bear Christ’s *Name*. [It doesn’t matter because] this is the only identity in the world that cannot fail or be changed, because it’s not yours. It’s Christ’s. And He gives it to you, marked as you are with His cross in the water by the Word. Indeed: “go joyfully to your work,” and “go to sleep...in good cheer.” You are Christ’s and He is yours.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott