

Sunday, October 2, 2022

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SHAPING IDENTITY: A *Divine Dance*

Colossians 1:15-23

INTRODUCTION

(Following 27 confirmation bibles presented and the children's choir singing, Thy Word is Like a Lamp.)

Our reading this morning comes from a letter that an early follower of Jesus wrote to a new church he started up in the city of Colossae. His name was Paul and he is known as a leading framer of the Christian religion. This young group of believers in Colossae were wrestling with the idea of who exactly Jesus was. Can you relate? They had questions and doubts, a variety of ideas and philosophies about the nature and purpose of Christ and the audacious claim that he was one with God. In Paul's writings we find a brilliantly written articulate theology, explaining who Jesus Christ was and is and will always be. If we are honest, many of us still struggle with that claim today. I know you confirmants will! Paul wants to strengthen the faith of these early followers of Jesus. He begins with a remarkable claim about the true identity of Jesus Christ and what God's intention was for his life, sacrificial death and resurrection.

Hear this reading from first chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossian church, verses 15-23...

SCRIPTURE Colossians 1:15-23

The Son is the exact likeness of God, who can't be seen. The Son is first, and he is over all creation. ¹⁶ All things were created in him. He created everything in heaven and on earth. He created everything that can be seen and everything that can't be seen. He created kings, powers, rulers and authorities. All things have been created by him and for him. ¹⁷ Before anything was created, he was already there. He holds everything together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, which is the church. He is the beginning. He is the first to be raised from the dead. That happened so that he would be far above everything. ¹⁹ God was pleased to have his whole nature living in Christ. ²⁰ God was pleased to bring all things back to himself. That's because of what Christ has done. These things include everything on earth and in heaven. God made peace through Christ's blood, by his death on the cross.

²¹ At one time you were separated from God. You were enemies in your minds because of your evil ways. ²² But because Christ died, God has brought you back to himself. Christ's death has made you holy in God's sight. So now you don't have any flaw. You are free from blame. ²³ But you must keep your faith

steady and firm. You must not move away from the hope the good news holds out to you. This is the good news that you heard. It has been preached to every creature under heaven.

PRAYER

Holy holy holy God -
listen to the flow our hearts.
to the words of my mouth.
to the thoughts of all our minds.
Take away my limitations and
let YOUR voice be heard and felt
and experienced by all of us here today.
May our ears be opened to the music that heals.
May our courage be emboldened to take the risks of trust.

SERMON: *SHAPING IDENTITY: A Divine Dance*

You may not have noticed this thread, but if you have been with us for the last month or so I have been focusing our Sunday scriptures and sermons around the theme of identity. As we poke our heads out from the hibernation of quarantine and shake off the effects of our years in isolation, it is entirely necessary to re-examine who we are in this world and chose how we will reengage with one another again, or not. It was a difficult trial for everyone, and to a large degree, we are still reeling and wondering how we fit back in.

In our shaping of identity, we first considered our individual identity and found that, in God's view, we are all beautifully broken people in one way or another and yet completely accepted, entirely worthy of God's grace, just the way we are. We then moved on to discover how our identity as beautifully broken finds genuine compassion and union in relationship with other beautifully broken people. On *Hands on Mission Sunday*, we heard stories from the service and mission field about how their identity has been shaped, molded and strengthened though service and connection with others who have very different stories than their own. Last Sunday, I spoke about how God has intentionally designed us to be in community together. Human beings are hardwired to find a way to belong with other people. Our primal nature is to seek out relationships and connection because, whether or not we see it or believe it, each one of us is already intertwined and valued as a critical part of this astounding cosmos. In other words, you already belong. In fact, in God's

eyes, you are distinctly, uniquely wonderfully made and essential to the health and well-being of the whole thing! Imagine that. You belong!

Today, we look a bit deeper into our identity as a community. How does the individual identity merge into a collective identity that we call the church?

First off you have to understand that two-thousand years ago these early followers of Christ were just beginning to find their way around how to live in a radically new communal life. They had somehow encountered the story of Jesus and everything was changing. Each of them individually had been awakened to a new reality through the radically subversive understanding of God he taught us. Up to now, the commonly accepted perception of God, or gods, had been legalistic and transactional. God's favor was earned through acceptable behavior. There were very specific purification rituals, blood sacrifices offered in be strictly regulated ways, financial sacrifices were codified, cultural mandates rigidly followed and a slew of other explicit laws to be argued over and then religiously followed. Breaking the law was a dangerous and potentially lethal infraction. This was a God to be greatly feared; an angry, domineering judge who demanded righteous perfection.

Suddenly the story of Jesus totally flipped this around. Jesus taught that the God of all heaven and earth, the creator of all life, was not at all interested in your perfect adherence to the law, or what tribe you were born into, what race you belonged or even what religion you practiced. Jesus taught that God is solely interested in the softness of your heart. He insisted that the way you treat others is what matters to God. Love covers the whole law. He said that all God wants is your love and love your neighbor as yourself. Everything else is just commentary. So naturally, as Jesus' message caught on, his identity needed to find clearer definition. Exactly who was Jesus character and how are we to understand his relationship with one true God?

Paul, who wrote this letter to the Colossians (and many other letters that found their way into our Bible) had a remarkable gift of logically explaining who Jesus was and why he came to us only to wind up being killed by the Empire. In his letters, Paul articulates the astounding meaning and centrality of Jesus life, death and resurrection. Jesus, Paul asserts, is the very embodiment of God's very being. Jesus IS God with skin and bones. In Jesus we find the God of limitless forgiveness, loving kindness, mercy and grace. How different is that God from the God we think we know? Jesus shows us exactly how far authentic Godly love will go to reunite and restore our relationship to the Divine Spirit, that animating spark of life embedded in

every living thing. Through Jesus, God opens a door for us to reconnect into the Divine flow of all life.

This is the essential, liberating good news of the Gospel. No matter how you identify, where you find yourself on the social scale, or what you have done or failed to do, you are acceptable in God's sight. God begins with us exactly as we are. It's no wonder that those on the margins hear these words quicker than most. God's only desire is for us to live into the fullness of life, here and now, in kinship with our God and one another. Love can only be relational.

Through Jesus' death on the cross, all worthiness barriers are shattered. You are already redeemed! Paul explains it this way, "Because Christ died, God has brought you back to himself. Christ's death has made you holy in God's sight. So now you don't have any flaw. You are free from blame." What liberation! Hanging powerlessly from that cross of shame and in the inconceivable pain of innocent suffering, Jesus said, "It is finished." No more sacrifice rituals needed; no more blood spilled to atone for your misguided behavior, no more meritocracy to gain God's favor or fabricated division between the sacred and the profane. No more insiders against outsiders. We are all one, as God is one, unified by Love in this Divine Dance. In God's eyes, no one is identified by their mistakes. Our very core identity is only understood as redeemed in Christ and firmly rooted in the fact that you already belong in this beloved and beautifully-broken kinship of grace, in communion with God and one another. You just might not know it yet.

At the end of his memoir novel, *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean, wrote this.

"Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of those rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs."

Eventually, all things merge into one, and some of those words are yours. Every single one of us is a critical part of this great celestial flow. It is an eternal current, the endless movement of a pre-ordained, perfectly timed, divine dance. Our collective identity is why we are the church. At our best, the church reflects the flowing rhythm that beats out of God's very heart, pulsating out love, forgiveness, understanding, connection and compassion. Each distinctive person adds their one-of-a-kind, unique part.

This ever-flowing, interconnected ballet has always been and will always be. The reality is that we already exist in an undeniable, inextricable, relationship

to one another. We just have trouble seeing it through the thick fog created by a culture under the influence and illusion of individualistic exceptionalism.

Jesus taught us that not one soul has been forsaken or abandon. In fact, the cross teaches us that what seemed to be a gut-wrenching loss was not the end of the story. The cross was actually an unavoidable movement in the divine dance. The horror of the cross proves that God is in solidarity with all who suffer and that killing tree was transformed into tree of life. Only when we flow through it can we know the merging of all waters into the One Great River. This is the eternal flow that is the Divine Dance, the Church, where our beautifully-broken selves find acceptance and belonging. Together in Christ we find our place, discover our purpose and gladly find our true meaning in serving one another.

I truly hope and pray that you have or will awaken to the beat of this divine dance, one with another. The Church today is on the very edge of adapting to a renewed identity. We are being molded into a new way of organizing in unity. The beat is shifting, the current is quickening. This all signals an inevitable change that is taking us to something fresh, beautiful and entirely renewed. Are you ready to take your place with us in the flow of this interactive dance? Well, fasten your seatbelts and tighten your floatation device. You are in for a wild ride.

AMEN!