

You Are Loved

*“... nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”
Romans 8:39*

January 2020. While there's no doubt that this year lives on with infamy in our minds today, at the start of this year, things we're still unfolding and it would be a couple of months still before things really began to change for many of us in this part of the world. The reason I remember the start to this year was because my world had already changed a lot even before COVID took over. Madeline and I had just gotten married and had recently returned from our honeymoon.

Very quickly after we returned from our trip, I had a seminar that I was attending in Fort Wayne called, Emergent Leaders. This seminar was brought to Fort Wayne by the Lutheran Foundation and was designed to help leaders discover and grow into roles they had as leaders in the settings where they were working. So early in January a group of twenty or thirty of us from various organizations of Fort Wayne were gathered together to learn and interact on the topic of leadership.

The introduction to this seminar began with an opening plug from a former alumnus of the seminar, Dr. Kevin Brockberg. Dr. Brockberg had been recently called to serve with the Indiana District and was available to kickoff this seminar. As we sat in a circle and Dr. Brockberg began to speak, I remember noticing a small, portable speaker in the middle of the room and I wondered why is that there. Shortly after I noticed the portable speaker, Dr. Brockberg began playing a song that asked a question that would be a major focus of this training. “Who Are You?” by the Who was the song that he played and it served as a creative way to help us realize that we would be discovering a lot about ourselves in this seminar.

Who are you? It's a question that drives or maybe even haunts us throughout our lives. Some seasons of life our answer to this question is clear and in other seasons of life the answer is challenging. In answering this question, we often take great comfort and security in things like our skillsets and abilities, our reputation and successes, our intelligence and experience; we define who we are by our works and achievements. We attach our identity to the things that we do and this common practice works well until it doesn't.

Having who we are anchored only in what we do can become really problematic and troubling. If our skills and abilities fall short, if our reputation and successes evaporate, if our intelligence and experience aren't enough for a given circumstance, then we're headed for some sort of identity crisis. When sinners, like you and me, place who we are completely in the things that we do, we've built our identity on fleeting deeds, fatally marred by sin. And this leaves us on a never-ending cycle of trying to find a lasting answer to the question, who are we?

This weekend, our Scripture readings break this cycle. What we hear from God's Word is the answer to this question, “Who are you?” that isn't attached to what we do. If we take the readings in chronological order of the events described – our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, followed by our Gospel reading from Matthew and then our Second Reading from Romans – there is a clear and consistent answer that rests on God's Word and work for us. And the answer we hear from these readings can be summed up in this way: You are a holy, valuable and loved child of God!

The words we heard from Deuteronomy were spoken in a very specific time and place to the people of Israel. A new generation of Israelites had grown up in the wilderness outside the Promised Land because their forefathers had rebelled against the Lord and were denied entrance into this Promised Land. Now with that rebellious generation behind them, this new generation was ready to enter and so God was preparing them for this moment through the prophet Moses.

Pointing them back to the all the work that He had done in leading them out of Egypt and to this very moment, the Lord reminded this people that they were holy, chosen and treasured because of His work and not their own work. God set Israel apart to be His witness to the whole world because of His faithfulness and love and not because of any quality or quantity they possessed. He had promised to do this and He was going to keep His word. Now as they were on the verge of entering the Promised Land, this people needed to know

clearly who they were. They were the Lord's and their lives would look drastically different from the other peoples they would encounter.

However, as you may know, it didn't take long for this generation of Israel or any of the generations to come to create an identity dilemma. They forgot the words and works of the Lord and instead they identified themselves by their fleeting deeds, fatally marred by sin. They kept falling into this sinful cycle until finally they were removed from the land promised to them. Israel consistently refused the identity God had made for them so He eventually let them have the identity they so frequently chose as sinful, rejected and reviled people.

Despite His people's regular refusal, the Lord didn't abandon His people. Our Gospel reading reveals His consistent and ongoing desire to value His people as He intended them to be. Jesus' two parables about the hidden treasure in the field and the pearl of great value powerfully demonstrate what God was willing to do for His people. He valued them so much, He was willing to give up everything for them. And what these parables portrayed, Jesus did. He gave up heaven's throne, took on flesh, took on the world's sin, died and rose to purchase His people from the debt they had acquired. Jesus guaranteed that God's people would be holy, valuable and loved because of His powerful work for them. Jesus' work created a lasting identity for them.

This powerful work of Jesus is exactly what Paul captured in our Romans reading. Paul shares with his audience that they have been set apart by God's work. In a very similar way to what He had done with Israel in our Deuteronomy, He was doing for all people on account of Jesus' work. But now, instead of pointing to the Red Sea crossing, He pointed to Jesus' death and resurrection as the critical work for His people. In Jesus, God had redeemed His people to be holy, valuable and loved in such a way that nothing could erase or remove the love that God had revealed for His people in Jesus Christ. God's people had a permanent and lasting answer to who they were! In Christ, they were holy, valuable and loved!

This lasting identity goes for us too! We also are included among God's people because of what Jesus has done. We are holy, valuable and loved because Jesus died and rose for us. This is what our service is all about from beginning to end. The confession and absolution, the creed, the prayers, the sacraments, the blessings, all of these things and more link us to this lasting identity we have in Christ Jesus. We are united here in this place because of God's deeds. He's the One who made us. He's the One who forgives us. He's the One who continues to remind us who we are because of what He has done!

It's this lasting identity that we hold onto this side of heaven. It is our anchor in seasons of life when our own deeds leave us wondering who we really are. It is even our anchor in the seasons of life when our deeds make us feel confident of who we are. The work God has done to make us His own is far more powerful than our failures and struggles that make us question who we are. The work God has done to make us His own is far more secure than the works and achievements we often only consider when defining who we are. We are His because of Jesus. We are holy, valuable and loved children of God because of Jesus.

Who are you? Well, let me leave you with one last reminder from a children's book based on our reading from Romans: "God's love doesn't change with the words that you say or the things that you do. It will not go away! You are loved and forgiven. What a wonderful thing! You're adopted as God's own. You're a child of the King! See nothing can separate you from God's love. Nothing on earth, or below, or above. There is nothing so powerful, nothing so strong – God's love is too high and too deep and too long!"¹ Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan

¹ Quoted from the children's book, *Nothing*, by Natalee Creech.