

God Defines You

“... for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” Philippians 2:13.

A couple of years ago, Emmanuel crossed paths with a community partner in Fort Wayne, called Inasmuch Ministry. Many of you might recognize this organization's name. It's located on the campus of Broadway Christian and has really worked hard to impact the struggles found in the Fort Wayne community. Recently this connection has been more intentionally pursued with Emmanuel's current visioning process. From those intentional conversations a potential opportunity has developed called Circles. You may have seen this opportunity in the weekly email newsletter.

Circles is a unique chance in the community to engage and walk alongside individuals who are dealing with persistent financial struggles and are seeking help to break out of the cycle of poverty they've been experiencing. This program partners an individual in need with a couple of volunteers with the goal of building a regular connection and working toward sustainable practices that seek to address the recurring financial challenges at the core issues and not merely the issues on the surface. Across the nation, this program has had success in addressing poverty.

The reason I highlight this program isn't just because it's a newer opportunity for us at Emmanuel. Underneath all the information you can find on this program is this chance to help those in need no longer be defined by past or present financial challenges. The hope that a program like Circles can provide is what caught my eye. This redefining that can happen between neighbors reminds me a lot of the redefining that God has done for us. Our readings this weekend speak to this work of God.

God defines you. That's the key takeaway for each of us this weekend. God defines you. However, this takeaway gets covered by other things that we often believe permanently define us. Many times, we convince ourselves that our history defines us instead of God. No matter how much distance we put between us and the past, sometimes it's hard for us to shake. Other times, we believe that our current circumstances and the consequences of our sins dictate who we are instead of God. The choices we've made trap us into thinking God could never take us back. Our God doesn't desire that we be defined by our past or present. Instead, He calls and leads us to repentance, to confess our sins, receive His forgiveness, and by the Holy Spirit's help cause us to walk in the works He has prepared for us to do. Or in fewer words, God defines you.

Let's dig a little deeper into that first challenge that instead of God defining us, we're defined by our history. Our struggle with this comes because we wrestle with this with other people. Living in the shadow of an older sibling at school. Having to answer family and friends for a spouse's poor choice. Defending personal qualifications considering family's past challenges. We know well how our history can define us with others which makes us believe that our relationship with God works the same way. It's the same concept that the Israelites believed in Ezekiel's day.

The proverb that the Lord addresses through Ezekiel in our first reading speaks to this faulty notion that God wants to deal with us according to our history. Listen again to the proverb, **“The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge ...”** (Ezekiel 18:2b) In other words, the Israelites felt that previous generations, a.k.a. their past, were the reason that the Lord was punishing them with exile. To them, God enjoyed inflicting pain and punishment so much that He was taking out His vengeance on them for something their ancestors did in the past. Through Ezekiel, the Lord put an end to this proverb and addressed their misunderstanding right away.

The Lord's ways aren't unfair and unjust as the Israelites claimed. Very clearly the Lord shared that every person is responsible for their own sin before Him not someone else's sin. While God rightfully punishes sin and delivers consequences of sin, this isn't something He enjoys or desires for anyone. He's not out to get the Israelites. But rather moving their focus away from seeing Him as vindictive, He calls them to repent and into a relationship that knows His mercy and forgiveness. **“For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.”** (Ezekiel 18:32) History doesn't define God's people, He does.

Still today, the Lord desires to interact with you in the same way. He's not out to get you because that's what He finds fun. The history you have isn't what dictates your relationship with God. His pleasure is for you to know Him by His mercy, grace, and forgiveness for you for your own individual sins and not anyone else's sins. He has made sure these words from Ezekiel are available to you now so that you also might hear His call to

repentance and be assured that He has no pleasure in the death of anyone, including you. Your history doesn't define you; God does.

Now I know that the relationship struggles we have with God aren't only because our history. The struggles also come because of our current circumstances and consequences of sin. This is the other challenge we need to work through in our reflection this weekend. Again, our experiences from our relationships with other people demonstrate to us how our present situations so often seem to permanently define. Struggles with coveting, pride, greed, lust, pre-marital sex, an affair, divorce, sexual orientation, any and every lifestyle that is contrary to God's Word can be challenging for sinful human beings to work through even when there is repentance. The temptation is to lead people returning from these struggles to think that in God's eyes they are forever branded by the sins they commit.

To be clear, pride, coveting, greed, lust, pre-marital sex, affairs, divorce, rejecting God's design for sexuality, any lifestyle that is contrary to God's Word is sin. And we are called to repent of these sins – to confess and turn away from these sins. But as sin, these things also sadly have consequences that deeply and even permanently impact relationships with our neighbors this side of heaven. Yet these sad circumstances and consequences aren't what define our relationship with God neither do they have to be the ways we continue to interact with our neighbors. In repentance, our Lord calls us to receive His forgiveness, leave our former ways behind us, and walk in the merciful deeds that He has prepared for us in Christ Jesus. Our current circumstances and the consequences of our sin don't define us, God does.

This is the blessed reality that Jesus shares in His parable about the two sons from our Gospel reading. Addressing the chief priests and elders lack of repentance, Jesus describes two sons. The first son ignores his father's request but then has a change of heart and listens. The second son hears his father's requests, says he'll listen but never does. Jesus has the chief priests and elders convict themselves by having them determine which son did the father's will. When they answered the first son, Jesus explained to them that the first son paralleled the tax collectors and prostitutes who repented of their sins and believed God's Word unlike them.

Jesus' parable demonstrated what was happening in His ministry. Whether it was the woman caught in adultery, Matthew, or Zacchaeus, tax collectors and prostitutes were repenting from their sinful ways because of Jesus' presence in their lives. Despite the religious leaders of that day not being able to recognize these sinners' change of hearts nor their own need for repentance, God didn't let that forever brand these repentant sinners in His eyes. Their current circumstances and consequences of their sin for these repentant tax collectors and prostitutes didn't define their relationship with Jesus; He did. What Jesus did for those repentant sinners then, He does for you repentant sinners now. Your current circumstances and the consequences of your sin don't define you; God does.

God defines you. Not your history. Not your present situation. As repentant and forgiven sinners, we have an entirely new outlook on life. God isn't out to get us. He doesn't want to let our sin eternally define us. He died and rose to make sure that our eternity is defined by His victory over our sin, death, and the devil. We don't have to be consumed by trying to prove ourselves and make up for our past or present, instead in repentance and faith we cling to Jesus and His work that He's done to cover our past and present. Through Jesus' humble service, the Holy Spirit leads us to humbly serve our neighbors until Jesus returns or calls us home. For, dear repentant and forgiven sinners **"... it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."** (*Philippians 2:13*) You are His and He defines you.

As the Lord continues to show you how He has defined your life, He'll continue to lead you to repent and return to His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. His merciful gifts will deliver to you the pardon and peace that assures you that your Savior Jesus Christ has not forsaken you but seeks to enable you by His Holy Spirit to constantly serve Him. By His grace, you'll reflect to family, friends, co-workers, strangers, maybe even an individual at Emmanuel's foodbank, or in the PALS program, or even the Circles program through Inasmuch Ministry, that God is working in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure, that He defines you. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan