

# **Jesus & the New Identity Politics**

## ***Port of Entry***

**April 24, 2016**

**PRELUDE – The Love of God**

**Worship Songs – Greater / Good, Good  
Father**

**Announcements – Video**

**Feature – How Far We've Come**

If you've been paying attention to the news these days, you can probably relate to the sentiment expressed in that song. Sometimes it really does feel like “the world is burning to the ground.” For all the progress we have made in so many ways ... for instance:

- We have more wealth than ever before (even the poorest among us would have been considered “well off” 75 years ago).
- We have more health than ever before (more of us survive cancer, more of us live to be 90 or older).
- We are more educated than ever before.
- We have more opportunities for more people (regardless of gender, race or <whatever>) than ever before.
- We are more technologically advanced than ever before.
- We are more interconnected than ever before.

For all the progress we’ve made in so many ways as human beings, we’ve not really come all that far. There is still so much

strife and hatred and division among us. And it's increasing.

Here in our own country we see it every day: factions forming, solidifying and growing; factions based on race, gender, age, ethnicity, political persuasion, sexual preference, religion (or lack thereof), economic status ... and the list could go on and on. More and more the public discourse and political energy in our culture is about *my* group; *my* tribe; *my* race; *my* culture; *my* political party; *my* rights and, specifically, why I and “my kind” should not only be protected but *prevail* over and against any other.

It doesn't take a genius to see that this is a prescription for disaster. It has the power to render all other forms of progress

irrelevant.

For what it's worth (which, I'll admit, may not be very much), my opinion is that the momentum behind this trend is too strong to be stopped. The fracturing and division is going to get even worse because "identity politics" is big business these days ... as demonstrated by the current political season. Candidates clearly understand that success and longevity come from dividing instead of uniting. (To be fair, entertainment personalities and media outlets have discovered the same thing. Conflict, not harmony, is what sells).

Unless something dramatic happens to change it, as a nation we're not coming back from this condition – at least not in what's left of my lifetime.

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I'm sure right now some of you are thinking "I am so glad I got up to come to church this morning. Do you have any other encouraging thoughts you'd like to share with us, Rick?"

Actually, I do, for we are not the first culture to become overly-obsessed with and divided on the basis of identity. It's happened before. And in the very middle of it, God did an amazing thing ... which is what I want to talk to you about this morning as we begin the series, *Jesus & The New Identity Politics*.

But before we get into that, Andrea and Nathan are going to do another song that

kind of sets the tone. And while they do, our ushers are going to receive the offering. This is a time when those of us who believe in an amazing God who can do amazing things in the lives of people regardless of who they are or where they're coming from ... this is a time when we get to financially invest in what He is doing through this church.

If you're not prepared to put anything in the basket this morning you can always do it through the North Heartland app or website. For those of you who are watching our livestream right now on your phone or tablet, there's a button for you to click to give as well.

So, here we go.

## Feature – Unpack Your Heart / Offering

If you've been here at any point over the past three weeks or have listened to our messages online, you know that we've spent quite a bit of time talking about the current political season and the presidential primaries.

Actually, that's not totally true. What we've spent a lot of time talking about is the *relative pointlessness* of political primaries and presidential elections in the overall scheme of things.

- For most of us, politics and presidents don't affect our everyday life all that much. The choices each of us freely make have far more impact on our well-being than what Washington or Jeff City does.

- Furthermore, though politics and presidents almost always promise to bring big changes, changing “the system” is almost impossible. Pretty much the only thing that changes because of a presidential election is the people who push the buttons of the system.
- Finally, political campaigns tempt us to focus on externals like “the system” and “the establishment” as being most important when what matters more – especially in a representative republic like ours – are the internals like character and morals.

And I don't mean just the character and morals of the leaders (though that is



obviously important).

In a representative republic where citizens are given a voice and a vote; where citizens are given the power to influence the future by choosing leaders and attempting to change the system, it matters that those citizens are guided by a vision greater than “what’s in it for me? How does this benefit *my* group; *my* tribe; *my* race; *my* culture; *my* political party?”

Otherwise, those citizens will use their power to demonize and silence their opponents. They will use their power to support candidates and policies which financially benefit themselves at the expense of everyone else. They will use their power to legislate increased allowances for their moral weaknesses and

temptations.

In a democracy, character matters not only in the leaders *but also in the citizens*.

This is why one of the founders of our nation, John Adams, wrote (and we read this last week):

“We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion ...

In other words, our system of government won't work unless people are internally restrained by a will they perceive to be higher than their own.

**He continued:**

Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”<sup>i</sup>

Over 200 years ago, Adams and others wisely understood that the true strength of a nation isn't in its laws or its military or its government. *It's in the character of its people.*

And people develop character – they become honest and fair and compassionate and concerned for others – not because the law or *the government compels* them but because *their hearts lead them.*

That's not to minimize the role of politicians and government and the people who serve in those institutions. Human beings *need* government even if it's bad

government. Government – even bad government – provides some level of structure and order ... which history teaches us is always better than anarchy.

That's why the Apostle Paul could tell first-century Christians to respect the authority of the Roman Empire, including its head, Caesar, who demanded to be worshipped as a god.

## **Jesus & Political Power**

It's also why Jesus had no interest in trying to change the political system of his day.

We talked about this several weeks ago and it's so important that I want to review it again. It has to be crystal clear in the mind of every person who considers themselves

to be a Christian.

Remember, the disciples of Jesus had spent 3½ years traveling all over Palestine watching Him do miracles, listening to him teach the multitudes about the Kingdom of God: how it isn't just "up there" but "down here" as well; how it's not "out there" where you can see it but "in here" where you can't; how it's not about "power over" but "power under" – humility and service.

Then, at the end of that 3½ years they saw Jesus unjustly accused, then crucified on a Roman cross, then amazingly, on Sunday morning, alive again, raised from the dead by the power of God.

And for 40 days after that, Jesus hangs out with those same disciples – his inner circle

– talking about ... surprise! The Kingdom of God ... going over everything *one more time* before returning to His Father.

And at the end all of that, right before Jesus is ready to leave, one of the disciples (we don't know who) says, “Umm ... just one more question, Jesus.”

*“Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”*

*Acts 1:6 (NIV)*

In other words “Jesus, are you going to get rid of these oppressors and establish a better political system which just so happens to put our group; our tribe; our race; our culture; our political perspective at the top of the heap ... with, of course, You as the Ultimate Head of State?”

And Jesus says, “No. I’m not going to assume that kind of power anytime soon.”

“However,” he continues, “I’m going to give you another kind of power; one that’s even better than political power because it has the ability to transform people *internally* which is far more important than transforming their *external* structures.”

*“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*  
Acts 1:8 (NIV)

“And that will be enough until I come back: power from the Spirit of God who will live in you and work through you as you go all over the world and people see what I’ve done for you.

“In fact, that’s your mission in this life. That’s what I want you to do. Remember what I told you? You’re the light of the world. So go and let your good life shine out for all to see so that others want to know your Heavenly Father like you do.”<sup>ii</sup>

And then, Luke tells us, Jesus vanishes into a cloud and He’s gone.

## **A New Identity**

And if you read the rest of the story as it’s told in the Book of Acts, that’s what the disciples do and that’s what happens. The Spirit comes to them on the Day of Pentecost. Then it comes to the multitudes who hear their story, see their example and also choose to believe in Jesus. Then it



comes to *even more* multitudes who hear *their* story, see *their* example and also choose to believe in Jesus.

And this power cycle – the Spirit’s presence and the example of Christians – runs again and again for decades and centuries until, eventually, the Roman world – a world *divided into factions* based on race, gender, age, ethnicity, social class, and economic status; a world in which those factions distrust one another and envy one another and plot against one another – the Roman world is turned upside down as people who believe in Jesus begin to form little communities called “church” all over the Empire. The culture begins to change from the inside out as these little communities grow and attract more and more followers.

They have no political power whatsoever. In fact, they are often the target of government opposition and even oppression. All they have going for them is what Jesus promised: the Spirit and their example ... which includes many countercultural characteristics but *none more significant than this one:*

*All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:27-28 (NIV)*

In other words, Paul was saying, “in coming to Christ, in becoming a Christian, all the externals by which the Roman world attempts to label and classify and define

people no longer matter. They've been superseded by something much more important: Jesus himself.”

That was a totally radical thought for them and, I think, for many of us as well ... that when you become a Christian, you're no longer first and foremost male or female; black or white; rich or poor; liberal or conservative; gay or straight; young or old; Mexican or Canadian or any other nationality. Obviously, those things are still characteristic of you but they are no longer your core identity.

Instead, because of your faith in Jesus, you are now first and foremost a child of God. It's who you are (as we sang a little while ago). When God looks at you, he sees Jesus. You are clothed in Him. That is your new

identity.

*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away—look, what is new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NET)*

Furthermore, the Apostles taught that whenever someone became a Christian, they also took on a new political identity. They became a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

**The Apostle Peter once described it like this to the believers under his leadership.**

*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into*

*his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

*1 Peter 2:9-10 (NIV)*

Now, the practical implication of all this (and what made it so countercultural) is how it impacted relationships across the natural divides within those little communities of believers called “church.” *In Christ, all those divisions faded into the background.*

Not perfectly, of course, but it was such a high value that the leaders of the movement hammered it again and again.

For example, Paul once wrote to a community of believers made up of Roman citizens and Jews – two groups that

naturally distrusted and even despised one another.

**He said ...**

*[Christ Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*

*Ephesians 2:14-16 (NIV)*

That's the theology of it. That's part of what God accomplished in Christ's death. The sin of class-based segregation was nailed to the cross along with every other sin.

**Now here's the practical implication of it:**

*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

*Ephesians 2:19-20,22 (NIV)*

That last part is amazing to me. Whenever unity replaces worldly factions in Christians, it's like a little temple of God has been built for everyone to see. It's the light shining because it takes the whole basis of power and turns it on its head. And that's

what happened in the Roman world.

**One commentator describes it like this:**

As the church matured over time, the egalitarian nature of Christian community became a beacon of hope throughout the Roman Empire.

While citizens of the empire thrived on inequality and hierarchy to manage power and prestige, the church gave everyone – regardless of socioeconomic stature, race, ethnicity or gender – a place at the table.<sup>iii</sup>

I love that imagery. In Christ – in the church (when the church works as it should) – *everyone gets a place at the table*. And that becomes a beacon of hope to



those around us who have had enough of the factionalized, me-first, identity-politics-driven world in which we live.

## **The Last Best Hope**

I don't know about you, but I long to see that once again become characteristic of Christians and churches all across this "Empire" known as the United States of America.

I long to see Christians everywhere shining this kind of light; with churches full of black and white and red and brown believers; believers who are rich and believers who are poor; believers who are politically liberal and believers who are politically conservative; believers who are young and believers who are old ... because

all of them have come to see themselves first and foremost as servants of Christ – as followers and representatives of Jesus – and not as followers and representatives of *my* group, *my* tribe, *my* race, *my* culture, *my* political party, *my* <whatever>.

What would happen in this country if Christians became noted for *that* characteristic instead of political power moves? (Not that there is anything wrong with individual Christians participating in our form of government and its processes).

What would happen *in churches* if the goal of everyone involved became learning how to live from our new identity in Christ instead of how the world defines us? To live first and foremost as representatives of Jesus?

After all, when Jesus told his original disciples to go spread “the good news” he did say to teach everyone what he had taught so that they could live the way he had lived. What if we took actually following Jesus and living his way more seriously?

I think that’s an important question for all of us who are Christians to consider because in far too many congregations (maybe even including this one), what “church” has become is little more than a spiritual oasis where people come to dip their fingers and toes whenever they need a shot of spiritual energy to pump them up for life in “the real world.” We don’t see ourselves as connected beyond that.

Now, I am not saying that God isn't interested in helping us face our "real world" but He wants so much more for us than that. He wants us to have the joy of collectively being the light. God wants us to experience the satisfaction that comes from collectively – as a community of believers – being His example of a better way to live.

A few days ago (and maybe you saw this), actor Leonardo DiCaprio gave a speech at the United Nations. The occasion was Earth Day. Many of the world's leaders had gathered to sign to the Paris climate change agreement. At the end of his speech (which I must say was very inspirational) ....

### **DiCaprio told them ...**

“All of you sitting in this very hall, the

world is now watching. You will either be lauded by future generations or vilified by them ... for you are the last best hope of Earth. We ask you to protect it or we and all living things we cherish are history.”<sup>iv</sup>

I like Leonardo as an actor and I hold him in high regard for thinking beyond his own personal universe, but I think he is wrong – and I’m not talking about his position on climate change. I think he is wrong when he says that political leaders and environmental agendas are the last best hope of Earth. After all, if we save the planet but strife and hatred and division continue to increase, what does that profit us?

At the risk of sounding overly dramatic, the

last best hope of Earth is *you and me and countless other believers* who are a part of those little countercultural communities called “church.”

That’s why I wrote in my blog last week that, in 20+ years of pastoring this church, I don’t think I have ever felt as strongly about the significance of an upcoming season for our church as I do right now. Over and over again in the past couple of months, I have felt an urgent impression that we are facing “make or break” time. The next few months truly will be decisive for our long-term future as a congregation in this community.

Are we going to be just an optional take-it-or-leave-it spiritual oasis for Christians? Or will we be a light – a force for the kind of

bottom-up heart change that transforms from the inside out?

Honestly, in my mind the verdict is still out on that. I can see it going either way. And I say that because of me not so much of you.

I hope and pray it goes the second way but, it won't be easy. It's going to require us to make some changes. And over the next several months, I suspect we're all going to be challenged in a way we haven't been in a long time about our individual and collective impact on our community. It might be uncomfortable at times but I promise you: *it will be so worth it.*

## **Unity in Christ**

And I'll have more to say about that next

week but, in the brief time I have left this morning, I want to chase down a question that might have occurred to you as we talked about the early Christians being able to have “a place at the table” regardless of social and economic status, race, ethnicity or gender.

The question is ... how did that happen, practically speaking? What made it possible?

“Well, duh, Rick. You *did* tell us that their identity in Christ became the main thing.”

Well, yes. But that’s just so much spiritual mumbo jumbo if we don’t understand *what* about being in Christ united them – and can also unite us.



So, let me tell you what about being “in Christ” united them: *two huge factors* – the first of which almost everyone sitting in this room or watching online has experienced even if you’re not a Christian; even if you’ve never been to church before today.

*How many of you here today are Royals fans at some level, even if it’s just a casual interest? Raise your hands and keep them up. Now, take a look around and see how many people here are Royals fans like you who aren’t like you. There’s a lot.*

What I want you to see by that is that there is unity in our fandom (so to speak) simply because we all love and follow the Royals. That love and commitment to the team transcends (at least temporarily) any

divisions we may have.

It worked the same way for the early Christians.

**1. Unity in Christ was a natural byproduct of loving and following Jesus.**

The early Christians were “Jesus fans” and their enthusiasm for Him and what He had done for them transcended their divisions. That was the first factor and it was huge.

But the second factor (I would argue) was even more important than that.

**2. Unity in Christ was a result of sharing (what I will call) a common “port of entry.”**

Now, you know what a “port of entry” is

right? It's a place where a person lawfully enters into a country that is not their own.

And when people become Christians – when they become part of what the Apostle Peter called “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” – no matter who we are in terms of our “worldly identity,” we all have to come in the same exact way. We all have to use the same port of entry.

What is that port of entry? Let me describe it for you in two ways, first by picking up the story of what happened after Jesus returned to Heaven and the disciples waited in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to be given to them.

*When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in*

*one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them.*

... which only means something important because of what's going on in Jerusalem at that point, which Luke goes on to explain.

*Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.*

*When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one*

*heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?”*

*Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Acts 2:1-11 (NIV)*

Ok, got the picture? Every tribe, every nation, every race, rich and poor, male and female are being told the news about Jesus in their own language. The barriers are

being broken down by the Holy Spirit of God.

At some point, Peter stands up and begins to explain to all of them what's going on: that God has poured out his Spirit. And then he goes on to explain what happened to Jesus in that city 40 days earlier; how, even though he had been killed, God had raised Him from the dead.

And then he says: All Israel should be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

Luke says that when the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

And this is the critical question because Peter is about to define the port of entry; he's about to describe what is probably the single most unifying factor among Christians (if we truly understand it).

**Peter says:**

*“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

*The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” Acts 2:38-39 (NIV)*

And I'll explain what Peter meant by all of that in just a minute but I think it's also

fascinating that Luke tells us that Peter didn't stop preaching.

*With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."  
Acts 2:40 (NIV)*

I don't think Peter was being judgmental and condemning at that point. I think he was saying "look, there's a way of relating and doing life in this world but it's a dead end. It's corrupted by sin and so it naturally produces strife, hatred and division. But you don't have to live that way. There's another way. There's another Kingdom. And you and your children – even those who are far from God – can be part of it."

*"So, repent and be baptized,  
every one of you, in the name of*



*Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

That’s the port of entry.

And the reason why this is so powerfully unifying across all worldly divisions is that you don’t get to come in unless you admit that you are – regardless of your age, race, gender, nationality, economic and financial status ... you don’t get to come in unless you admit that you are a sinner who needs to be forgiven.

**Or to say it another way: The qualification for entry includes admitting that you are not qualified to enter!**

Now, take a minute and look around the

room again. Assuming that most people here are Christians, no matter who you are and no matter who these folks are by worldly standards, your starting point with God is exactly the same.

- No one has any standing before God on their own.
- No one has any advantage.
- All have sinned.
- All have fallen short of the glorious life that God intends for them to live.

And when you understand that, when you understand exactly what it is that God has saved you from and you live out of that truth, it produces a level of humility and a level of kinship that just isn't possible in this world.

This is why Christianity – true Christianity – is so countercultural. As someone has said “the ground is level at the foot of the cross.” The love of God has to reach equally far for every single one of us.

It’s as if God is saying to all of us (and this is the second way to think of the port of entry):

Bring your secrets, bring your scars  
Bring your glory, all you are  
Bring your daylight, bring your dark

Lay it down when you walk through  
my door

Throw all of it out on the floor  
Your sorrow, your beauty, your war

So shed your shadow

And watch it rise  
Into your darkness  
I'll shine a light

I want it all, I want it all.<sup>v</sup>

And I know that's just a silly song but it's so true. It's the good news that all of us are messed up in some way but God receives us just as we are. That's the unifying experience we all share in as Christians.

## **Invitation**

Of course, Peter *did* add two other items when describing the port of entry into the Kingdom of God. He said “repent ... and be baptized.”

- Repent = change mind ... about what?

About Jesus; about living life apart from God. “Reject your unbelief” to them ... and to us. Don’t worry about trying to clean up your act. The Holy Spirit will do that in you over time. You just reject your unbelief and, instead, believe in Jesus (savior, risen).

- Then, be baptized as a sign that you *have* repented and believed because baptism illustrates what it means to be “in Christ.” <explain>

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Now, and this is the final thing I want to say this morning ... the reason I have told you all of this today ... and the reason we spent three weeks talking about the political season we are in ... is that I believe

our church (and every other church in this country) has an incredible opportunity to be light in our community as the corruption of this world (to use the Apostle Peter's phrase) increases. We have the opportunity to experience what Jesus promised us: the power that comes from the Holy Spirit who lives in us and works through us and uses us as examples to others of what God can do. That's where we're going – I hope – as a church.

But before that can happen we need to be sure – and I'm talking about everyone here who says "this is my church" – we need to be sure that we really do have the Holy Spirit in us; that we really have come through the port of entry.

A lot of people in churches think they are

Christians but are not. So, again, here's what the port of entry looks like.

1. We've admitted that we're sinners in need of a savior regardless of status.
2. We've changed our minds about Jesus and believed in Him.
3. Then, as a sign of that, we've been baptized.

Question – have you entered in to the Kingdom?

Baptism three weeks from today on May 15<sup>th</sup> ... how to sign up in the program and on the app.

Let's pray.

<prayer>

# Worship Song – The Love of God

## CLOSING COMMENTS

### Endnotes

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- i John Adams, To the Officers of the First Brigade of the Third Division of the Militia of Massachusetts, 11 October 1798.  
<http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/adams1798a11.htm>
- ii The last two sentences are actually from Matthew 5:14,16
- iii <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/how-can-the-church-bring-together-our-divided-world--cms-22303>
- iv <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/leonardo-dicaprio-delivers-passionate-speech-combating-climate-change-1556378>
- v Adapted from Phillip Phillips song Unpack Your Heart,  
<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/phillipphillips/unpackyourheart.html>