

Jesus & The New Identity Politics

Melting Pot

May 1, 2016

**PRELUDE – Called Me Higher
Worship Songs – Rejoice / My Worth Is
Not In What I Own**

**Announcements – Shannon
Feature – “Those Crazy Christians” /
Offering**

Good morning everyone.

As Shannon said, today we are concluding our brief two-week series “Jesus & The New Identity Politics.” If you’ve been around for the past month or so you know that this series is in great measure motivated by what we are seeing these days in our political process: a presidential campaign season unlike we have ever witnessed in

our lifetimes. Candidates who would not have even received a second look a short four years ago have gained an overwhelming level of support from the public, much to the dismay of both the Republican and Democratic “establishments” and, quite frankly, to the dismay of many evangelical Christians.

And as crazy as the whole process might be, I’m not as interested in *that* as I am in *why* it’s happening (what it says about our culture) and, more importantly, what it means for Christians (those who know and follow Jesus) and The Church (our church and churches everywhere).

And the reason it’s happening, as I said last week, is that our country has become increasingly divided into factions based on

gender, age, ethnicity, race, political persuasion, sexual preference, religion, economic status ... and the list could go on and on. These days, it's all about *my* group; *my* tribe; *my* race; *my* preferences; *my* political party; *my* rights.

And what we are seeing in our current political environment is merely a reflection of that because politicians understand that “identity politics” is big business. It's the key to success and longevity. If I can convince you that I am looking out for you and your tribe and your <whatever> over and against everyone else, then you'll vote for me. So, it's to my benefit to continually remind you how bad you have it and how bad other groups are because they want to take from you what is rightfully yours.

And that strategy is working on both the political left and right.

- Donald Trump has convinced a large percentage of predominantly white America that it's illegal immigrants who are the problem.
- Hillary has convinced a large percentage of women and people of color that it's white men who are the problem.
- Bernie has convinced a large percentage of young people that it's the corporations owned and operated by old rich people (like Donald Trump) that are the problem.
- Ted has convinced a large percentage of conservatives that it's progressives (like Hillary and Bernie) and populists (like Donald) who ignore the

Constitution that are the problem.

“Vote for me,” they all say, “and I’ll put *them* in their place and, of course, you in yours.”

That’s not to say that there aren’t real problems caused by illegal immigration and the Old Boys’ Network and crony capitalism and the ever-expanding intrusion of the Federal Government. All of those issues *have* to be addressed. But what’s so destructive is that it’s become personalized. The other side of whatever issue is constantly villainized and demonized. And if you pay attention to it for too long, it’s very discouraging. And it’s also very easy to be caught up in the spirit of divisiveness and, even, hatred.

An Unlikely Plan

Now, as I said a few minutes ago, my primary concern in all of this is what it means for individual Christians and The Church. And what I see is a lot of Christians, on the one hand, getting caught up in that spirit of divisiveness and hatred. “It’s those godless liberals! It’s those heartless conservatives!” ... even though some of those liberals and conservatives, in fact, are actually their brothers and sisters in Christ. They know Jesus, they love Jesus, and they follow Jesus. They just see things differently than we do.

On the other hand, I see a lot of Christians who are discouraged and who have decided they just don’t want to have anything else to do with what’s going on out there. “I’m

just going to keep my head down and take care of my own.”

And I'm not being the least bit critical of either of those reactions because, from time to time, *I feel those same things myself*. Quite frankly, I *do* think that godless liberals and heartless conservatives are responsible for a lot of the mess in this country. And, some days, I just want to smack them all. And, some days, I just want to sit on my back porch and enjoy the view and just forget everybody else.

But Jesus says to me (and to anyone else who knows Him as savior and follows Him as teacher and Lord) that neither of those responses are acceptable.

As the Apostle Paul put it (which we read last week) ...

*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)

Translation: “Sorry, Rick, you can’t get sucked into the game of identity politics because, in Jesus, all the externals by which the world attempts to label and classify and define and divide people no longer matter.”

And Jesus himself said ...

*“You are the light of the world—
like a city on a hilltop that
cannot be hidden. No one lights
a lamp and then puts it under a
basket. Instead, a lamp is placed
on a stand, where it gives light
to everyone in the house.”*

Matthew 5:14-15 (NLT)

Translation: “Sorry, Rick, you’re not allowed to withdraw from this godless world. I have a part for you to play in it.”

So, if we can’t take either of those routes, what is left for us?

Something incredibly challenging and exciting and motivating and fulfilling. Something that God has intended from the very beginning.

His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two [referring to Jews and non-Jews], 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 “one body” to which Paul refers is The Church globally, universally ... little communities of believers-in-Jesus all over the world, melting pots of diversity, where *all* people are welcome and *all* who belong endeavor 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 style, my political party, my <whatever>

... little communities of believers-in-Jesus – churches – who are called to change the world around them through the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through them and their testimony – the evidence they present to that world around them. That has been God’s plan from the very

beginning.

- It's not withdrawal from the world ... though that is sometimes necessary and helpful for a season so that we can reenter and be effective.
- And it's not political or military power over the world ... though both are necessary and often helpful, and there is nothing wrong Christians with being involved in either of those *with the right perspective*.

God's plan to change the world is little communities of believers-in-Jesus who *live* differently from everyone else and who *welcome* everyone else ...

- no matter who they are or are not ...

- no matter what they have or what do not have ...
- no matter what they've done or what they have not done ...
- no matter how they are living or how they are not living right now ...

God's plan is for his little communities of faith – churches – to invite *everyone* to come and join them in knowing and following Jesus.

It sounds like a glorious mess, doesn't it? *And it is ... because the ground is level at the foot of the cross.*

Everyone becomes a member – everyone one gets “in Christ” – in the same exact way, which we talked about last week. Everyone comes in as a sinner in need of a

savior. The first and main qualification to be a Christian is the admission that you're *not* qualified; that regardless of whatever group or tribe or race or gender or class or political party you come from or anything else, there is nothing about you that merits admission.

I don't know if you noticed it or not but we actually sang about that earlier in the service. "Two wonders here that I confess." Remember what they were? "My worth and my unworthiness."

In other words, "I matter to God so much that Jesus died for me. But the reason Jesus had to give His life for me is because I am a sinner and someone has to pay for my sin. And as a sinner, I don't deserve anything from God. I am unworthy. But He is

gracious and loving.”

No one gets in without that admission. Otherwise, there’s no need for Jesus and His cross and resurrection.

So, everyone gets in the exact same way: by admitting their need for a savior and expressing belief that Jesus is that savior; that his death on the cross was for *their* sin and that he rose again so *they* personally could have life and that he will one day return for *them*.

The Value of Baptism

By the way, this “same port of entry” concept is a major reason why baptism is so important. And I’ll be honest, even though I have been a pastor for a long time, I

personally did not understand that until just recently.

I mean, I've always believed it was important for Christians to be baptized – after all, Jesus told his first followers to not only teach new believers to learn from Him and follow Him, He also said to baptize them when they made that decision to believe in and follow Him.

And I've always understood the symbolism of it ...

- That when we stand in the water (or under it for those who are poured or sprinkled), we are representing ourselves as we were before and without Jesus,
- That when the water covers us we are

visualizing what it means for that old life without Him to be buried and for our sin to be covered and washed away by his blood.

- That when we come out of the water we are symbolizing the new life we have because of Jesus.

I believe that picture is so important which is why, for 25 years in vocational ministry, I've encouraged every person who comes to that point of believing in Jesus to begin with baptism as the first step in a life of following Him.

I have always told people, “even if you were baptized as a baby (as I was), even if you accepted Jesus as your savior many years ago and were not baptized, even though the act of baptism itself is not what saves

us, it's so important for your own spiritual health and well-being to make that decision to be baptized *for yourself.*"

"By doing so, you are not denigrating what happened earlier in your life – be it a christening or a confirmation. Instead, you're affirming it. And it's so important for you to experience baptism of your own volition because you will forever have that day, that picture in your mind to remind you of the decision you made to believe in and follow Jesus and what has happened to you – what God has done for you – because of it."

It's kind of like a wedding. You may not remember all the events leading up to it or following it. You may not remember any of the words that were spoken. But you do

remember the church, the pastor, the ceremony, and saying “I do.” That wedding is an outward expression that reflects an inward reality that already exists. “In heart and mind, we are already one. This ceremony confirms and proclaims it.” (And, by the way, in spite of what the world tells us and movies and TV shows model for us, getting married still matters for that reason and more).

Anyway ... baptism has the same kind of effect which is why we do baptisms here twice a year and why, when we do them, we make a big deal out of them. It’s why we decided several years ago to have towels and clothes that people can change into on the spot – if they decide on the spot to be baptized.

And it's why *two weeks from today, on May 15th* we're doing another baptism. And it's a big deal. And if you've been a believer for a long time and have never been baptized of your own volition, you ought to be *simply because Jesus said to do it*. And if you've recently made the decision (maybe in one of our services) to accept Christ as your savior, wow! What an opportunity you have to start out on the right foot!

Of course, a few minutes ago I said that I've always understood baptism in that way and, obviously, I still do. But it's also become clear to me how baptism reflects the melting pot idea; the idea that everyone regardless of their background or gender or race or whatever comes in the same way.

And to show you what I mean I want to go back to that scene we looked at last week from the second chapter of Acts.

Remember, Jesus has just spent six weeks with his disciples following His resurrection, reminding them of everything He has taught them about the Kingdom of God and how it can transform everyone and everything. So, when they ask him if he's going to do something dramatic to kick out the Romans and restore the Kingdom to Israel – if he's going to exert political power – he sort of does a face palm and says ...

**“No, that’s not the plan. The plan is ...
when I leave to return to my Father ...**

“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 I know I've told that part of the story a lot in recent weeks (and I'll probably tell it again) but I'm doing it because it is so important to how we (I'm speaking to Christians) think about what's going on in our culture and what our role is.

So, Jesus disappears into the clouds. The disciples go back to Jerusalem which just happens to be full of thousands and thousands of Jewish pilgrims from all over the world who have come to celebrate of the Feast of Pentecost – the day on which God had long ago given the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

And suddenly the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples in a most unusual way. They go out into the streets and begin talking about Jesus and the Kingdom of God to anyone who will listen. But they aren't speaking Aramaic or Greek. They are speaking in languages they themselves don't know and have never heard. And all of those pilgrims – men and women of differing ages, ethnicities, races, political persuasions, economic statuses are amazed to hear the story of Jesus being told in their native tongues!

And they don't understand what's going on so Peter – that same guy who denied Jesus three times on the night before his death – gets up in front of everyone and explains (probably in Greek since that was the

universal language at that time). He begins by telling them what had happened in that city six weeks earlier and how even though Jesus was the long-promised Messiah he was killed by the authorities but that God had raised him from the dead.

At the end of his message, the crowd realizes what he is saying they begin crying out ... “If this is true, what should we do?”

And 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.” Acts 2:38 (NIV)

... which means you’ll be part of us because that’s what Jesus said he was going to do.

He said he would give us the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit, along with our testimony, is going to have a big impact in this world.”

Apparently that message was very effective because ...

Luke tells us that ...

Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all. Acts 2:41 (NIV)

As I wrote this message, I tried to imagine what that must've been like.

You've got about 120 men and women (the 12 apostles and other disciples) who have been with Jesus from the beginning. And you've got three thousand others, some of

who are residents of Jerusalem and many who are visitors from all over the world. It's a huge melting pot; a conglomeration of humanity who now have one characteristic that unites them above all else: *the recognition of their need for a savior and faith in Jesus as that savior who died for their sins and rose again on the third day following.*

And all of them are baptized that very day by the apostles. How did that work?

I tried to do that math on it. If you assume that each apostle baptized an even number of people (which is 250 per apostle) ... and if you assume that it takes about one minute per person to get them into the water and dunked and out before the next person, it would take at least four hours – maybe more. Of course, that doesn't take into

account getting everyone organized and moved to a place somewhere in Jerusalem where the baptism could be performed.

Luke also tells us that Peter preached his sermon at around 9 o'clock in the morning. Assuming that the baptisms started at around 10 or so, that means that for pretty much the rest of the morning and much of the afternoon, all of these people from all over the world are standing there looking at each other, talking with each other, watching each other go into the water to be baptized.

Now what does that accomplish? *A whole lot.*

Because if I'm standing there in that crowd next to you, when I look at you what I see is things like your age, your gender, your

race, and maybe even your economic status. What I *can't* see merely by looking at you is that you have reconsidered how you should live your life and where Jesus fits in. And I *can't* see by looking at you that the Holy Spirit has come to live in you because you have believed.

But what I *can* see is you getting into the same water that I'm getting into and *literally* experiencing the same thing I'm experiencing which, of course, symbolizes the way that all of us, no matter who we are, enter into Jesus' family – into Jesus' community – *by humbling ourselves as sinners in need of a savior and trusting that Jesus is that savior.*

And that common experience of baptism we share visually represents the

connection we have in Jesus which now transcends everything else about us, including all of those things that naturally divide us.

It's genius on the part of Jesus to tell his followers to do that.

It's exactly what Paul was getting at when he wrote ...

All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

... which is why he can say in the very next sentence:

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)

Practically speaking, for those of us who are Christians in this day and age, every time we see someone get baptized, it's a reminder that we're equals; we're brothers and sisters regardless of anything else.

Even more practically speaking, as a baptized-into-Jesus old, white, traditionally-conservative, male Christian, whenever I see, for example, a 30-something African-American woman get baptized or a Hispanic young man get baptized in this church, I am reminded *through our common experience in the waters of baptism* that she is my sister and he is my brother in spite of all the other differences and the things our world plays up to divide us. Even when I see someone *who looks like me* getting baptized, it reminds me that our

bond in Christ runs deeper than anything else we share.

That's why baptism matters. That's why, if you're a believer in Jesus and you haven't been baptized, you ought to be. It's good for you. And it's good for the unity of the Body of Christ – the church – especially in a world that is divided as ours. And, in two weeks, you'll have your chance.

Here's what you need to do: Pick up a packet at the Welcome Center on the way out this morning and sign up. Call your family and friends and tell them what you're going to do on May 15th and ask them to come watch. We'll let them stand up with you even and take pictures. If they want to admit they are a sinner in need of a savior and that Jesus is that savior, we'll

baptize them, too!

A Grander Vision

But that's not the main thing I wanted to talk to you about this morning ... even though it's very important.

What I wanted to talk to you about (and I know I don't have much time left) ...

What I wanted to talk to you about was the glorious mess called "the church" – those little communities of believers-in-Jesus all over the world who endeavor to live as followers and representatives of Jesus – and who welcome everyone else (no matter who they are, what they have, what they've done or how they are currently living) to come join them ...

What I wanted to talk to you about was that *through* the glorious mess called “the church,” God intends to change the world.

That’s the plan. The Holy Spirit working in us and through us, and our testimony – a light to the world around us that says “you’re welcome to join us, too, *because if God can do a work in people like us, He can do it in you, too.*”

And just so you’ll know, this isn’t some theoretical or theological ideal. It’s actually happened again and again throughout history, beginning with that group of 3,000 we read about on the Day of Pentecost.

Right after Luke tells us of the massive baptismal scene, in the very next verse he

writes that this very diverse group of people stuck together.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

*And the Lord added to their
number daily those who were
being saved. Acts
2:42-47 (NIV)*

And this went on for months as many of the pilgrims stayed in Jerusalem. And then they left and took the good news back home with them.

And Luke tells us in Acts (and it's also recorded in the New Testament writings of the Apostles) how the church continued to spread all over the Roman world and things began to change in that culture from the bottom up. Same thing began to happen in Western Europe hundreds of years later. Same thing began to happen in Africa and South America after that and continues to this day. Same thing is happening in China right now as we speak.

God has used, is using and intends to use the church to change the world *not through political or any other kind of power* but through – one more time – the power of the Spirit and the testimony of those who belong to it.

Unfortunately, most people in our country today (including a lot of Christians) don't think of the church that way. Most people (including a lot of Christians) think of church as a “religious services provider” – a take-it-or-leave-it form of life support for the spiritually-sensitive that's ready and waiting for them whenever they need it. Not that there is anything wrong with needing support and finding support because that *is* what a relationship with God and other believers is meant to

provide. But Jesus had a much grander vision for the church than that.

Jesus did not create his church – this church or any other – to be merely a religious services provider. We do not exist – North Heartland Community Church does not exist – for that purpose. We do not exist simply to create good programs that can be pleasant experiences for us. We do not exist so that people who live the same kind of insane, money-addicted, success-driven lifestyle as everybody else in our culture can come once a week to hear a comforting message.

We exist because Jesus' plan was to create an alternative community of Spirit-empowered people who would follow in His way and would devote themselves to praying and living in such a way that ... don't miss this ...

“up there” can come “down here.”

That is why we exist. That is what we are called to be and do if we are Christians.ⁱ

What do you mean by that, Rick? What do you mean by “up there coming down here?”

Well, remember what Jesus talked about to his disciples during those six weeks after his resurrection? The same thing he had talked to them about during the 3½ years before that time: *the Kingdom of God* (or the *Kingdom of Heaven*, which is the same thing because Heaven is wherever God is or, as many of us think of it, “up there.”

And, what’s surprising to many people (including a lot of Christians) is that at no time did Jesus talk about or give a set of

minimal requirements for *how to get from “down here” to “up there”* (or to the place where God is). In fact, Jesus’ primary message – the good news He came to proclaim – was *not* about how to get out of this sorry world and into a better world when we die. Jesus never taught his followers to pray the Star Trek prayer. You remember Star Trek, right? Whenever Captain Kirk was in trouble down on a planet somewhere, he would look to the sky and say “Beam me up, Scotty.”

That wasn’t the prayer Jesus taught. The prayer He taught was “thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.”

Where? On Earth as it is in Heaven.

The prayer – the vision – of Jesus isn’t “God, get us out of this sorry world and take us up

there.” It’s “O God, if you can do anything at all, would You make up there come down here? Would you make how You live become how we live? Would you make how Heaven operates become how we operate?”

And God has said yes to that prayer and he continues to say yes because the Good News, the Gospel that Jesus proclaimed and embodied was that “up there” was coming “down here.”

“All the preliminaries have been taken care of, and the Kingdom of God is now accessible to everyone,” he said. “Revise your plans for living and base your life on this remarkable opportunity.”ⁱⁱ

Or if you prefer the more biblical language ...

*“The time has come,” he said.
“The kingdom of God has come
near. Repent and believe the
good news!”* Mark 1:15
(NIV)

Jesus says, “When the kingdom starts coming, it is good news. And I’ve got a plan. I’m going to form a new community that follows a radically different way of life, creates an alternative culture, so that up there comes down here.”

And this is why I said last week – and I know that some of you rolled your eyes and thought “oh, that’s just preacher talk” – this is why I said last week that the Last Great Hope of Earth is not our politicians or our environmental agendas (as Leonardo DiCaprio’s recently told world leaders at the United Nations summit on climate

change).

The last great hope of Earth is ...

- You and me and those little communities of faith that are intended by God to be outposts of Heaven on Earth;
- Communities of faith where people collectively teach and challenge and encourage one another to live *as if Jesus was their King* instead of money or power or fame or anything else this world worships;
- Churches where, little by little, “up there” comes “down here” in us and through us for the benefit of the world around us ... because the answer to all

the brokenness we see is for “up there” to come “down here.”

Conclusion

I don't know about you but to me, that grand vision of Jesus is so much more challenging and exciting and motivating and fulfilling than “let's all do the best we can to run a few programs” or “let's be the best optional religious services provider we can be” or “let's all just tread water together until God beams us up.”

The question is ... what does it look like for individual Christians and churches to be conduits of “up there” to “down here”? What characteristics are present in those people and communities?

There are lots of ways to answer that I suppose but, in the past several months (actually, since the beginning of the Presidential primaries), I have felt strongly that there are five high-leverage avenues of impact that many churches and Christians have been missing out on; five characteristics that are like “light shining in the darkness.”

And I’m just going to give you the list of those five today without much explanation because this is what we’re going to begin talking about next Sunday and all through the summer (at least). Each of these will be covered in a message series lasting from two to four weeks.

Ok, here are five characteristics of people in whom “up there” is coming “down here.”

- They are *generous* with their possessions and financial resources. I mean, you can't miss that in what we read about the first 3,000 Christians.
- They are *gracious*, which means accepting and forgiving others as they have been
- They are *good*, which means they not only do good things in the world, they also endeavor to live morally upright lives.
- They are *God-centered*, which means they put Jesus in the middle of everything they do. Not in a crazy way They know what He thinks and it impacts how they think.
- And they are *Gospel-driven*, which means they never forget that they are here not just to enjoy God and the

good news themselves but also to make it possible for others to enjoy it, too.

By the way, if you look back at Acts 2 and also in Acts 4 you see these five characteristics at work in the very first Christians. This is part of what it looks like when up there comes down here.

And this is what we're going to work on together as a church. And I hope you'll join us even though summer is coming and there are vacations and family stuff and whatever. Obviously, you should do those things and enjoy those things.

But I challenge you, if this is your church, to stay connected this summer. If you're in town and you don't have to work, get out of

bed and be here. And if you can't be here, watch the live stream of the service or check out the message later after we post it on our website and app. I guarantee you'll be glad you did.

Let's pray.

Father in Heaven, may your name be honored and glorified because of us. May we be like light shining in the darkness. May your Kingdom come and your will be done on Earth – beginning first in us and then in the world around us – as it is in Heaven. We pray that “up there” would come “down here.”

And we pray in the name of the One who makes that possible, Jesus of

Nazareth, your Son.

Amen.

Feature Song – Do Something

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Baptism sign up
2. See you next week ... Mother's Day and new series "SHINE."

Endnotes

ⁱ I have adapted this from one of John Ortberg's excellent messages on this subject which can be read here:

<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1348349/posts>

ⁱⁱ Dallas Willard, quoted at <http://www.jesuscentral.com/ji/jesus-parables-teachings/jesus-keymessages/jesus-goodnews.php>