

A New Identity

Gen 32:22-30 and 1 Peter 1:13-20

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

It's a standard scene in movies about war or life in some kind of a repressive regime. A person is wanting to move from one place to another, or through some passage into another part of a city or country, and someone—usually a menacing looking guy—stands in their way and asks to see their 'papers'.

Now these 'papers' are identity papers—they confirm who the person is and whether or not they have permission to move freely from one place to another. We all have them, even if using them isn't as dramatic as in the movies. My passport identifies me as an American citizen, and my visa names me as a minister of religion. It also says nice and big that I have 'no access to public funds'. I am, though, allowed to pay taxes here, even if it doesn't say so in my passport.

The idea of identity papers gives us a chance to think more broadly about our own identities. It's such a broad term, but it's an important one for psychologists and sociologists.

According to my friend Wikipedia, identity formation is the process of the development of the distinct personality of an individual in a particular stage of life, in which individual characteristics are possessed by which a person is recognized or known. This process defines individuals to others and themselves.

An identity crisis happens when an individual loses a sense of their own personality and historical continuity. The term was coined by the psychologist Erik Erikson. According to Erikson, an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself.

Healing for an identity crisis comes when the process of identity formation is restored or repeated, and individuals reclaim those characteristics that define them to others and to themselves.

In our church family we've been talking about the idea of the 'active ingredient.' The active ingredient is the substance in medicine that makes the drug work—that makes us feel better. Whatever else makes up the rest of the pill or liquid, it's the active ingredient that makes it work—the part of a drug that actually heals us, that makes us feel better, the part of the medicine that's designed to restore our health.

Like a lot of you I've been taking hay fever medication this summer. Mine has 8mg of acrivastine in it—that's the active ingredient in Benadryl—the part of the capsule that helps control my sneezing and itchy throat. I took some this morning so I could get through two services today.

To be an active ingredient is to live our faith in a way that make our communities better, healthier, more shalom-filled places. Active ingredients bring the message of the gospel—the message that heals us and restores health in authentic ways to the places where we live and work and study and shop.

This is a journey through what it means to be missional people in a missional church. We find our missional habits and practices—we find our identities as Christian disciples—at the intersection of what we believe about God, and what we do about that belief.

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

This passage from Peter's letter goes hand-in-hand with the text from Genesis that Zena read earlier in the service.

First Peter was written to the Christian churches in what is now modern Turkey. This is a general letter—not written to one community with a specific set of problems, but written to all Christian churches with teachings that all of us can relate to. Our text comes at the beginning of a longer section on the responsibilities that go hand in hand with the gifts we've received from God. "Shape your priorities", the writer says, "to the priorities of God."

The gift that Peter is talking about here, just so that we're clear, is the redemptive gift of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection. It's the core message of the gospel that calls us to a new way of living—to a new identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

That core message, by the way, is the basic structure of why Jesus the Messiah came in the first place. It goes like this: God created us to live in perfect Shalom with him and with the world. Shalom represents the Hebrew idea of wholeness or completeness—"the webbing together of God, humans and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight."

But that Shalom was broken by our sin—by our rebellion against God, and human history up to this point has been about God reaching out to us to bring us back into a whole relationship with him—to put the pieces of Shalom back

together again. Jesus the Messiah came to bridge that gap in a decisive way—to offer everyone a way to be connected with God again, just as he intended from the start.

The central idea in this letter, as one writer put it, is “the contrast between what the readers had once been and what they have now become because of their obedience to Christ.” In other words, the focus of this letter is the way those who follow Christ experience a radical change in our identities.

But this isn’t anything new. God has been calling his people to a new way of life—to a new identity built on him alone—from the earliest pages of the Scriptures.

Jacob is one of the great characters of the Old Testament. He’s a sort of slippery character with marginal ethics when we see him. He cons his father and cheats his brother out of a blessing that should have gone to him. He gets conned by his father-in-law in one of the great two-for-one deals in the Bible. And when we see him he’s wrestling with an angel and won’t let him go until he gets a blessing from him. (Jacob has bit of a blessing fetish.)

But Jacob gets more than he asked for. As a part of the blessing he gets a new name—Jacob becomes Israel, and plays an important part in bringing God’s covenant to life.

See what I mean? Part of following God means allowing our identities to be transformed as God himself works in us and through us to remake us into the people we were meant to be all along. He might not always change our names, but he always reaches in to help us become the people we were meant to be.

In our staff meetings this year we’ve been reading a book together called ‘God Hides in Plain Sight’, which is on our reading list in the bulletin. The chapter we discussed last week was about the idea of baptism—of being cleansed of our sin and welcomed into the community of faith. But the author made the case that there was a lot more going on, too. He writes:

“Baptism is what occurs when we are shown who we are apart from our roles, our masks, our attachments, and our created selves. It is the means by which

we take on the most real roles in our lives. It is when we hear a voice from heaven saying “This is my child in whom I am well pleased.”

Part of becoming missional people in a missional church means recognizing that as we grow in faith our core identities change—they’re transformed—we go from who we thought we were and why we thought we matter, to who God calls us to be and why he loves and cherishes us.

How does this help us become missional people? How does this idea of identity change help us work together as a missional church?

If we look back at the passage from 1st Peter we see three steps toward aligning ourselves to God in a meaningful way—we see three practices we can apply as we seek to be active ingredients in our homes and jobs and schools and neighborhoods.

First, we see ‘prepare your minds’. We can’t get around the need to understand our faith and to be able to articulate it. Reading and reflection—conversation and prayer are the ways we prepare our minds to engage the world as disciples of Jesus.

Next the text calls us to ‘be self-controlled’. This is not just about resisting sin, though that’s a part of it. It’s really about taking responsibility for the way you live your life; this is a direct challenge to the concern I hear sometimes about how hard it can be to let colleagues and friends and neighbors know that you’re a Christian. This is your identity. The rest is secondary.

Finally, ‘set your hope fully on the grace of Jesus Christ’. This is a part of the Christian life that we don’t talk about nearly enough. Hope is supposed to be one of the markers of faith—one of the outward signs of trusting that God is who he says he is, and more importantly, that he’ll do what he promised to do.

This is about developing the discipline of hope—about living lives that are marked by the discipline of hope.

That’s not how we talk about hope most of the time, is it? We think of hope as something that comes and goes—we might wake up some days and feel

hopeful. But Christian hope isn't just a feeling that may or may not hit us on any given day. Christian hope is something that we practice—something that we cultivate as we grow in our knowledge and experience of the way the living God works in our lives.

Hope isn't just hoping that everything will be OK. Christian hope is trusting that God will come through—it's living with the knowledge that somehow God will bring his creation to himself, and that in the meantime he loves us and cares for us.

It's in the rest of our text that we see where this new identity comes from: 'For you know that it was not with perishable things that you were redeemed, but with the precious blood of Christ.'

It's through Christ's blood—that symbol of struggle and sacrifice—that we are given our new identities. It's because we've been redeemed and forgiven that we can leave our old lives behind and become something completely new and different: disciples of Jesus Christ.

Identity formation happens as we develop those parts of our personality that define us for others and for ourselves. The question for us is this:

Where does our faith fit into the way we see ourselves?

Where does our faith fit into the way others experience us—not just here at church but in our homes and jobs and schools and neighborhoods.

Being missional people in a missional church means allowing our identity to be transformed. It means that through Christ's sacrifice we can become the people he made us to be in the first place.

On the front of your bulletin this morning you'll see a quote from a great little book that the Council is reading over the summer...

"...this presents an amazing opportunity for the church to become the most relevant, most vibrant, most vital part of people's lives—both to the young and the old. But to pull that off, we need to radically shift our thinking from

believing that success means being a safe place for people to catch up and be together for an hour or two on Sunday and maybe hear an entertaining message, to recognizing that we are, first and foremost, a movement of people called to a dangerous mission.” (Dave Gibbons, *The Monkey and the Fish*)

My prayer for all of us, as we wrestle with what it means to see our lives and our church in a different way—my prayer is that we’ll prepare our minds for the task, that we’ll take responsibility for allowing our faith to be visible in our lives, and that we’ll live lives marked by the hope that comes from believing that God is exactly who he says he is, and that he’ll do what he said he would do.

Then we’ll be missional people in a church with a mission—people whose identities are reflections of the one who made us, who redeemed us, and who loves us still.

I can’t wait to see what happens next.

Amen.