Sermon – Identity-Rooting Prayer
Sunday February 9, 2020

About 15 years ago, a man was found lying unconscious and beaten behind a Burger King in Georgia. His clothes and his wallet had been stolen so the police couldn't identify him. Later when he regained consciousness, they realized he had total amnesia.

The FBI did fingerprints and DNA testing, but nothing came up. Dr. Phil hired a private investigator, but they couldn't find answers.

For over a decade, this man lived with no identity and no knowledge of who he was.

Can you imagine what that was like? To not know who you are? What if that were you? What if you woke up one morning with no memory? With no friends, no past, no connections. With no sense of who you are. That would be brutal wouldn't it? You'd spend the rest of your life trying to find your identity.

You might not have amnesia but many of you here today are still trying to figure out your identity.

You and I spend lots of energy doing this. Trying to figure out how to be loved, how to feel special, how to find meaning.

Author Henri Nouwen suggests that we tend to define ourselves in one of three ways.

- I am what I do.
- I am what others say about me.
- I am what I have.

If *You are what you do*. Your identity is your role. You're a student, a mother, a breadwinner. But the problem with this identity is that you'll only feel good about yourself as long as you perform. Because if if you fail a test, if you miss a goal, if you lose a relationship, you won't know who you are anymore.

If *You are what people say about you*. Your identity is your image. But the problem with this identity is that you'll only feel good about yourself as long as people like you. But if they don't like you anymore, you'll fall into depression.

If *You are what you have.* Your identity is your possessions. But the problem with this identity is that you'll only feel good about yourself as long as you have more stuff. But the truth is, more is never enough.

These counterfeit identities will ultimately leave you empty. They have their proper place in your life, but when you base your identity on them, you'll never find true rest.

Why? Because they're not who you are at the core. The most important thing about you isn't what you do, it isn't what people think of you, it isn't what you have. So what is the most important thing about you?

We're in a series called *Paul's School of Prayer.* We've been studying his prayers in the New Testament because they show us how to pray more in line with God's priorities.

Today we're going to look at his prayer in the book of Ephesians. We're calling this message Identity-Rooting Prayer. Please turn with me in your bibles to Ephesians 1.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he[a] predestined us for adoption to sonship[b] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, 9 he[c] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

11 In him we were also chosen,[d] having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

In this prayer, Paul answers the question of identity and shows us who we really are. And it has nothing to do with what we can do but everything to do with what God has done.

Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we have a new identity. And Paul says that your identity isn't found in who the world says you are. **Your true identity is found in who God says you are.** *This* is the most important thing about you!

In verse 3, Paul says that God has blessed us in the **heavenly realms**. What does this mean? This isn't about a physical location, it's about a spiritual reality. In other words, Paul is saying that your identity doesn't come from the world. The world says you are what you do, what people think of you, or what you have.

But God doesn't see you that way. When God sees you, he says you are *blessed, chosen, adopted, accepted, redeemed, forgiven and deeply loved*. Do you realize that? *This* is the most important thing about you.

This means you don't get your identity from being a straight A student, a soccer mom, a high achiever at work or a people-pleaser. You get your identity from God and who He says you are.

In fact, Paul goes on to say that God has blessed us **with every spiritual blessing**. This doesn't mean that our blessings are otherworldly. It means that they come from the Spirit.

Paul is saying that you can't come up with your own identity and be whoever you think you need to be. You need the Holy Spirit to give you your new identity so that you can live into who you really are.

I have to confess that this passage was a hard one to study. It's actually one of the most theologically loaded and structurally complex passages in the Bible. In fact, in the original Greek, this whole passage is written as one single sentence!

So rather than unpack every blessing verse by verse, I thought we would stand back, look at them as a whole and explore the central theme that brings them all together. Sound like a plan?

Paul says that our new identity means that we are:

- Blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ (v. 3)
- Chosen and adopted through Christ (v. 4-5)
- Accepted by God through Christ (v. 6)
- Redeemed and forgiven in Christ (v. 7)
- Have an inheritance of spiritual riches in Christ (v. 11)
- Are indwelled and sealed by the Holy Spirit and included in Christ (v. 13-14)

What do all these blessings have in common? They're all found *in Christ.*

The term *in Christ* is the central theme in this passage. It's also one of Paul's favourite phrases. He uses this term 164 times in his letters. 11 of those references appear in these 11 verses alone!

So what does it mean to be *in Christ*? This term has two meanings. First it **refers to our status**. Like a branch is connected to a tree, or a limb is connected to a body, if you're a follower of Jesus, you are united and identified with him in the same way. What is true of Jesus now changes what is true of you.

That's why Paul goes to great lengths to remind us of what Jesus has done for us. Because in Christ, we are chosen and adopted into God's family.

But this wasn't our natural status. In the next chapter, Paul says that we weren't born in a state of union to Christ. Instead we were born in a state of alienation from God. It's only because of God's grace that we can turn away from our sin. And it's only through faith, that we are united to Christ.

A great picture of this is baptism. In baptism, we're baptized into Christ. We're baptized into a new identity. Just like Christ died to sin, we also die to sin in Him. Just like Christ was raised to life, we also are raised to life in him. What is true of Jesus changes what is true of you.

Being in Christ means you have a new status, a new identity. You're no longer defined by your past or your failures or your wounds. Being in Christ means that you are defined by what Jesus has done for you on the cross. **Your true identity is found in who God says you are.**

But maybe you're thinking, Doesn't God say that in Christ I'm righteous and blameless? Because I know myself and that's not me. I don't live that way most of the time.

Does that mean then that what God says about me isn't true? Or that I'm not a real Christian?

These questions point to the second meaning of the term in Christ. Being in Christ refers to our status but it also refers to a **relationship**.

For example, June 18, 2005 was the best day of my life. That of course is the day I got married. I made a vow to love and cherish Joanne for the rest of my life. Now when I fill out forms about my status, I check the box that says "Married." Because part of my identity now is that I'm a husband. That's my marital status.

But just because my status says I'm married, it doesn't necessarily mean I'm a great husband or that I have a great marriage. My status doesn't guarantee the blessing.

A story is told of a woman who asked her husband, "Why don't you tell me you love me anymore?" To which the husband replies, "I told you I love you on our wedding day. If that changes, I'll let you know."

My status doesn't guarantee the blessing. To enjoy a great marriage, I need to grow in my *relationship* with Joanne. We don't have a perfect marriage but we do work hard at it. We talk and pray regularly, we have fun and go on dates nights, we're currently doing a marriage course that's helping us to understand each other better.

Your status doesn't guarantee the blessing. You grow into the *blessings* of a great marriage only by growing in your *relationship* with your spouse. And in the same way, **you grow into the *blessings* of your identity in Christ only by growing in your *relationship* with Christ.**

Think about this. The term Christian is used only three times in the New Testament. And it's never used by Jesus or by Paul. Any guesses what the term is used most often to describe followers of Jesus? It's the term *in Christ.*

It's like God is saying, because you're in Christ this is who you are:

- You are blessed, chosen, adopted, accepted, redeemed, forgiven and deeply loved.
- You are God's beloved child and co-heirs with Christ.
- You are complete in Him, created to do good works, strengthened by His mighty power.
- You have the hope of eternal life, authority over the enemy and everything you need for godliness.
- You have a Father who has compassion on you, a King who will return for you, and a Spirit who will guide you

This is your true identity. So how do you live into it?

You learn to see yourself as God sees you. At Cornerstone, one of our signature courses is our Identity in Christ Workshop. Because for most people, the challenge isn't that they don't know that God loves them. The challenge is that that truth hasn't transformed how they see themselves yet.

The workshop features teaching, creative exercises, art, music and reflection. Every participant also receives an Identity Resource Package they can take home with them.

You can sign-up for this if you're interested.

But during the workshop, we watch the music video for Jason Gray's song Remind Me Who I Am. It's a powerful video you should definitely check out on YouTube.

In it, the singer is hitchhiking through an old town, meeting ordinary people along the way. With each person he meets, he takes a Polaroid of them holding up a cardboard sign with a word that describes how they see themselves. People are snapped holding up signs with words like:

- Weak
- Rejected
- Anxious
- Betrayed
- I don't matter
- My life doesn't work

As he encounters the brokenness in himself and in others, he sings these words that become his prayer:

> When my heart is like a stone,
> And I'm running far from home
> Remind me who I am
> When I can't receive Your love
> Afraid I'll never be enough
> Remind me who I am
>
> If I'm Your beloved
> Can You help me believe it
>
> Tell me, once again
> Who I am to you, who I am to You, whoa
> Tell me, lest I forget
> Who I am to you, that I belong to You

Throughout the video, the singer is collecting Polaroids of all the people he's meeting. But at the end, there's a twist. As he looks back over these photos, something has changed.

The people are still there, but only now, the words on their signs have transformed. The words that were once there that defined their brokenness are gone. Instead there's only one word on all the signs. It's the word, "Beloved."

Through this journey, the singer has been transformed. He's learned to see himself as God sees him. He's also learned to see others as God sees them. As beloved children of God.

You can learn to see yourself as God sees you too, by praying this simple prayer: *Lord, remind me who I am.*

This prayer invites God to help you see yourself not through the lens of your failures or your wounds. Not through the lens of what you do, what others think or what you have. This prayer helps you to see yourself through the lens of how God sees you – as his beloved child.

You can pray this prayer as a breath prayer. You can pray it when you're anxious, when you've messed up, when you're alone. You can pray it when you're overwhelmed, when you're tempted, when you're hurt.

Praying this prayer isn't something you just do as a new believer. **You need to constantly come back to your identity in Christ through prayer.**

In a book that I just finished reading, the authors say.

> Claiming, embracing and resting in our identity as beloved sons and daughters of God is a fundamental development we return to repeatedly.

I've been a Christian now for 25 years, I've been a pastor for 15 of those years. I've preached and taught on Identity in Christ. I've designed workshops and curriculum on it. And yet last year, in a hard and challenging season, I found myself coming back to my identity in Christ and praying *Lord, remind me who I am*.

In fact, that book I quoted describes how when Christian leaders are in their most productive and fruitful season, God is actually shaping them to deepen their sense of identity. Because God wants to make sure that their character and identity are strong enough to hold all that He still wants to give them.

That's why **How your embrace your identity in Christ will determine whether you finish well or not.** Because everything flows out of it. In order for God to do the work he wants to do through you, you must let Him do the work he wants to do in you. You can only grow as high as your roots are planted deep.

No one wants to look back at their life with regret. You want to finish well. You want to love others well, you want to serve God well, you want to do your work well.

All this got me thinking about Vision 2020, the vision God has given us to plant a new church campus in another community. Why are we doing this? It's because we want to develop new leaders and reach more people for Jesus.

We've said before that mission is putting love where love is not. After all, the Bible says that we are to love God and to love others. But the Bible also says that we love because God first loved us.

In other words, **we can only be faithful in mission as long as we're growing in our identity in Christ**. Unless we're rooted in this identity, we won't make it. Our life and ministry flow out of our experience of first being loved by God. We love because God first loved us.

That's why Jesus finished well. Because he got his identity straight.

When he was tempted in the desert to define himself by what he did, what others thought of him and what he had, he could reject those voices because he had learned to see himself as God sees him.

When he endured disappointment, loneliness and heartache, he persevered because he had learned to see himself as God sees him.

Do you want to finish well? Do you want to overcome adversity? Do you want to leave a legacy of loving and serving others well? Then you need to see yourself as God sees you. Lord, remind me who I am.

I'd like to close with these words from Brennan Manning.

> Sadly, many of us continue to cultivate such an artificial identity that the liberating truth of our belovedness fails to break through. So we become grim, fearful and legalistic.
>
> Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. God's love for you and his choice of you constitute your worth. Accept that and let it become the most important thing in your life.