

Finding My Identity

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Ephesians 2:3-10

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

***Our Lord has
a purpose,
wherever we
are sent.***

Last week, Pastor Pete launched us on an exciting new series as we move into the fall and as we center our lives around the mission theme of “In Christ together for the world.” “In Christ” as we trust, love and follow Jesus and grow into the image of Jesus. “Together” as we grow in our love for one another and our mercy towards one another. “For the world” as wherever we go, God is sending us. Our Lord has a purpose, wherever we are sent. So we are “In Christ together for the world.” The book many of us are reading as a guide is the wonderful The Me I Want to Be by John Ortberg, and you can get a copy of it in our Grapevine Bookstore opposite the Great Hall after this service. Today, we think about this matter of being “In Christ” and how it enables us to find our identity in the God who loves us.

Thinking about “the me I want to be” is certainly relevant for our day, when everyone is constantly telling us what he or she thinks life is all about and how we should see ourselves. Every week, in a thousand ways, we hear, “Make as much as you can, own as much as you

can, have as much fun as you can, be as thin as you can, be as busy as you can, be as healthy as you can, be as happy as you can.” So, if we listen to our culture, the me we want to be is sailing a catamaran with a beverage in hand as we watch the Redskins beat the Dallas Cowboys on HDTV with both a Wii and an Xbox attached! Well, what is the me you and I really want to be?

A week ago, Ann Marie and I spent several days in Sunnyvale, California visiting our children and our twin preemie grandsons, who were still in the intermediate neonatal unit of the hospital after four months. They have finally come home, and we are very grateful for your prayers. Our son and daughter-in-law have a coffee cup with the image of a baby on it and the words printed underneath it, “Me 2.0.” And while our children and grandchildren may be the 2.0 and 3.0 versions of ourselves, you and I still have to discern what our 1.0 version of ourselves is to be. My son was driving me to see our grandchildren when he stopped for a man walking across the street. I was able to read the words on his T-shirt: “When God made me he was just showing off!” You know

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something? He's right! When God created you He was just showing off! God loves you and I assure you the "me" God wants you to be is wonderful!

Let's look at one of the most significant passages in the Bible to see how true that is. When the apostle Paul wrote to the church in the town of Ephesus, he spent some time telling us of the three-part story of our lives. Part One: what we were like before God intervened in our lives. Part Two: the hope we have because God did intervene. Part Three: why did God intervene? So, in Part One: what we were like before God intervened in our lives, Paul says, "All of us once lived...following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else" (Ephesians 2:3). So, in Part One, we see the me's we were before God intervened were a bunch of messed up me's! We yielded to our sinful selves and were going to receive the due penalty for our behavior. So Part One of our story doesn't look so good. Paul says bluntly, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We were a long way from reconciliation with God and with each other!

Part two opens with the simple words, "But God," and because this coordinating conjunction "but" signifies a huge shift from the wrath of Part One to the hope of Part Two in this

story, it has been called the holy conjunction! *But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

This is pretty profound. Through faith in Jesus, God links your life to Jesus' life. When God raised Jesus from the dead, he raised you, too. Now listen carefully to this verse. I am going to ask you a question about it. *6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.* According to that verse, where are you sitting right now? You say, I am sitting in this sanctuary. Yes, very good. Your powers of observation are excellent. But, where else are you sitting? *God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.* Sometimes this is referred to as our position. We are seated with Christ in heaven. We are "in Christ" together for the world. You may think of yourself as sitting in this sanctuary, and indeed you are, but positionally, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are also sitting at the right

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hand of God right now, because you are in Christ and Christ is seated at the right hand of God. You are co-positional, literally in two places at the same time...here and now, present in the space-time continuum that is our present reality, but also, here and now seated with Christ in the heavenly places, because where Christ is, you are, in him. Which, among many things, means that when you die physically here on earth, your next experience is not “going to heaven” *because you are already there*. You are with Christ seated at the right hand of God the Father right now! When you die, you will be instantly aware of the Lord who loves you. As the apostle Paul wrote, “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (II Corinthians 5:8 [NIV]).

And why did God do this? Why, out of mercy, did he make us alive with Christ, raise us up with Christ, seat us with Christ, even when we were dead in our sin? This is Part Three of Paul’s story of our lives. Part One: judgment, Part Two: hope, and Part Three: grace. God did this ⁷ *in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus*. Isn’t that fabulous? God sees all the junk in your life, all the stuff that is so messed up, that is sin, and instead of turn-

ing his Godly head away from you, as he most certainly could justly do, he instead makes you alive out of mercy and grace. Believe it. No matter what has happened in your life, no matter what is going on right this second, God loves you more than you love your next breath, and in Jesus Christ, God is always thinking positively about you. Everything about you that could disqualify you from friendship with God was canceled out on the cross in the death of Jesus, and you have been seated with Christ in the most privileged place in eternity—the right hand of the throne of God. Mercy is the offer of kindness and the withholding of a penalty that is due and, in Jesus, God offers both kinds of mercy to you and to me at the same time. What that means for the me we want to be is fantastic!

Paul continues: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life* (Ephesians 2:8-10). I love how other translations handle the phrase, “we are what God has made us.” They simply say, “We are God’s workmanship (NIV)” or “We are God’s handiwork (Amplified).” Workmanship and handiwork are

*All of creation
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words that speak of a craftsman—someone who puts energy, intelligence, imagination and love into a creation—such as the lovely quilts made by the Piecemakers here at VPC or the anthem of the choir or the changed lives because of our English-as-a-Second Language program, and so on. In each of these cases, something is made, there is a handiwork. The root of the word translated workmanship or handiwork is the simple word *poiema*, from which we have the English word “poem” – *poiema* – poem, for we are God’s poems, created in Christ Jesus for good works. The Book of Romans says this about creation: *Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made* (Romans 1:20). “Has made” is from *poiema*. All of creation is a poem of our loving God, and you certainly are a poem of God, as well.

Have you ever worked to write a poem? When I was ten, I remember sitting down to write, “Not far away, about five hundred feet is a place where all the children meet, to work and play, rehearse and say, what they learned in school that day.” My first poem! For many years, when our children have returned home for a visit, I have sat at the computer to compose some page-long, silly ditty of

welcome and of love. Three months after our daughter Lindsay was married to Don Land, they left their cat, Sassafras, at their home and visited us for Christmas. I spent some time in front of the computer in order to write:

Don and Lindsay

We welcome you

HOME!

It’s so much
nicer than to talk
on the phone!

Your lives in this time

Are a wonder to see:

Joyful expressions
Of happiness and glee!

Your courtship was precious,

Your wedding such cheer,

Your presence delightful,

At the end of this year.

We pray for God’s blessing
On your home with such class,
That all are blessed with you,
Even warm Sassafras!!

I enjoy cultured poetry such
as:

This one, I think, is called a Yink.
He likes to wink, he likes to drink.
He likes to drink, and drink, and
drink.

The thing he likes to drink is ink.
The ink he likes to drink is pink.
He likes to wink and drink pink ink.

SO... if you have a lot of ink,
then you should get a Yink, I think.

– Dr. Suess.¹

Of course I only read that
from One Fish, Two Fish, Red
Fish, Blue Fish to our children
several bazillion times, as I
imagine you have as well.

¹ Dr. Suess, *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*.

He is telling you that God has thought a lot about you, that you are no accident, that God has invested a lot of time and energy in you, that you are precious to Him.

Whether you write a simple poem or one of the depth and complexity of an Emily Dickinson or Robert Frost or Maya Angelou, writing a poem takes time and reflection and work. You have to put yourself into it. When God made you into his *poiema*, His poem, He put Himself into it, into you!

So when the apostle Paul writes, “You are God’s handiwork, you are God’s craftsmanship, you are God’s poem,” he is telling you that when God created you, God was just showing off—His love and His power in you! He is telling you that God has thought a lot about you, that you are no accident, that God has invested a lot of time and energy in you, that you are precious to Him. What is the “me” you want to be? “Oh, Lord, the only me I want to be is the poem of me composed by Thee!”

At the same time we think about the me God made us to be, we are all very aware of the “me” we don’t want to be. There is something more than saying, “I love me, I love me, oh how I love myself. I love me, I love me, my pictures on my shelf (anon).” In his book, The Me I Want to Be, John Ortberg explains there are several “me’s we don’t want to be.” I don’t want to be the me I pretend to be or the me I think I should be or the me others want me to be or the me I am afraid God wants me to be or the me that fails to be. John Ortberg

was speaking to a wise man and, as a way of understanding how the you that is you is doing, asked this man, “How do you assess the well-being of your soul?” He replied, “I ask two questions of myself: Am I growing more easily discouraged these days? Am I growing more irritated these days?”²

Most of us know perfectly well the aspects of the “me” we are that we don’t want to be. The great question is, if you are a *poiema*, a poem of God, what would that “me” be? It would be the me that prays, “Oh, Lord, the only me I want to be is the poem of me composed by Thee!” And our Lord tells us in so many ways what that me is to be. He said, “Come to me all who are weak and heavy laden and I will give you rest” A rested me! He said, “My joy is in you!” A joyful me. He said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” A loved and never deserted me.

Samuel Shoemaker once told of a middle-aged couple who were invited for dinner to meet a woman visiting from out of town. She heard they were religious and, because she was not a believer, she expected a dull evening. She was surprised to meet two attractive, interesting people. After dinner, she found the gentleman had a delightful Southern accent, a wonderful sense of humor and a listening ear. She poured out

² Ortberg, p. 21.

“O Lord, the only me I want to be is the poem of me composed by Thee!”

all her troubles. Her blood pressure was too high, her red cell count was too low and everyone had mistreated her, and she poured out all her troubles. He listened for a while then he said, “Why don’t you just turn all this over to God?”

“What did you say?” she replied. “Why don’t you turn all this over to God?” he repeated. Her surprise and annoyance were soon followed by renewed interest. They went on to talk of many things and spent a delightful evening. When she arrived home, she found that this couple had a letter waiting for her. They said they were praying for her and had sent her some small books to read. After reading the letter, she ripped open the package of books and began to read. It wasn’t long before she knelt down beside her desk and gave her life to God. “Within twenty minutes it was all over,” she said. The cocktails and sleeping pills, the holier-than-thou attitude toward others, the fears and the self-pity “just went.” There was immediate physical improvement. The blood pressure went down and her blood cell count went up. She gave herself to enter into the reality of prayer and worship and the offering of her life and resources to our Lord.

Here was a woman who didn’t believe, who looked down on believers, a woman with deep inner fear whose life

was touched by Jesus through a couple whose own lives had been touched by Jesus. They were a *poeima*, a poem of God, and through them, our loving Lord wrote his own poem in her. One of the greatest arguments for the power of believing in Jesus Christ and following him is the changed lives of the people who know Jesus Christ and who understand their own lives are the poem of God, where others may meet Jesus and come to believe in him. It is Jesus who makes you his *poiema*, his poem. Open your life to him and know of his loving embrace around you. Pray with me, “O Lord, the only me I want to be is the poem of me composed by Thee!”