

Identity Matters: God's and Yours

6th Sun. of Easter – 05/10/26 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Acts 17:16-31 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 22-23, [Literally from the Greek] **“And Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said, ‘Athenian brothers, I see that you all fear the gods in regard to all things.’ ... What you all therefore continue to worship without even knowing, this One, I am publically proclaiming to you all.”**

Introduction

✘ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

✘ Allow me to begin with a quick question. Raise your hands please if your answer to this question is, “Yes.” Do you consider yourself to be a Christian; that is a believer in, and follower of Christ Jesus? (?? – *A few of you apparently do not, or are unsure. And I appreciate your honesty in this.*)

➔ You see, to answer that question in an environment like this is to make an important, public proclamation about your identity; something that we all do many times each day, both in bold and subtle ways.

- When you write or sign your name on a test or document or screen for a payment, you proclaim your identity. When you show or swipe your ID card; when you dress in a particular way or align with a specific movement, ideology or join a social or political group of people; even when you walk into one of the two public restrooms in front of you, you publicly make a proclamation regarding your identity.

✘ And that leads to another question which I do not want you to publicly respond to at this time: “Is your identity, that is, who you are, a product of what you decide and do, or is it what you receive from God?” To put it another way, “Is who you are a self-construction, or are you instead a creation of someone else, namely, God?”

➔ There seems to be quite a lot of confusion about this in our world today. A few years ago, in a paper for *The Minnesota Review*, culture and gender-studies researcher Whitney Stark argued that the science of Newtonian physics (i.e. the basic principles regarding classical mechanics that Sir Isaac Newton discovered regarding what happens when the force of one object acts upon another object in God's created laws of motion and gravitation, or the fact that certain forces have either a positive or negative force connected to them,) these kind of scientific concepts, according to Whitney Stark, are inherently “oppressive” because they divide the observed world into “binary categories” that unfairly force people and things to be identified by only two options; either as this or that. Whitney believes that conclusions drawn from nature should be suppressed in the name of social causes, allowing individuals to “construct for themselves who they are” (Whitney Stark, “Assembled Bodies: Reconfiguring Quantum Identities,” *The Minnesota Review* 88 [2017]: 69–82). And she is not alone, as this has become part of the mainstream thought in today's culture.

➔ This type of thinking, though, is disconnected from the objective reality of much of what God designed and created in a particular way for our benefit, enjoyment and safety. Imagine, for example, how things would go for an electrician or a chemist if he/she determined for themselves which connection or substance was positive and which was negative. Or, how would things go for a tow truck driver if he just decided, on the basis of his own feelings or preference, that his small, personal vehicle tow truck, could rescue a loaded semi-truck and trailer dangling over a guardrail on Berthoud Pass? He can declare his truck “capable” of such a rescue all day long, but is that going to make it so? No.

- ✘ There are certain things here in God’s Creation; in our human social and moral life that are not arbitrary; not human-made constructions, because they are instead connected to the objective, unchanging nature in which God designed and put them in place in this universe.
 - These are what we believers, like St. Paul in our First Reading today, would call “reality”, just as Paul reminds us today in verse 25 when he says, “[God] Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” Whether a person claims that for his/her identity or not, it is still always the case.
 - Likewise, Paul goes on to say in verse 31 that we all know who God is because we see Jesus Christ: “Of this, [God] has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.”
- ✘ That speaks directly to this concept of identity. First, the identity of God: that it is made known in and through Jesus Christ; and second, our God-determined identity: that, as verse 28 says, “in Him we live and move and have our being.”
 - Did you notice that Jesus Christ is intimately connected to both? God’s identity is revealed in Christ, and our identity exists in Jesus Christ.

I. The Necessity of Knowing Who God Is.

- ✘ Let’s see how Paul helps us to understand both of these crucial identities today.
- ✘ Another quick question – please raise your hand again if you say, “Yes.” “Do you believe that God exists?” That’s great, but do you know that Muslims, Hindus, Jews and Christians all would answer “Yes” to that same question. Yet, each one, if they are honest, would correctly say that their god is distinctly different from the others.
 - So, knowing who God truly is must be settled before we have any chance of knowing who we are.
- ✘ As he was walking through the marketplace of Athens; a society that publically proclaimed their belief in many different gods, Paul says that he found an altar that was inscribed with these words: “To the unknown god” (v. 23).
 - And soon after, he found himself standing before the local philosophers in their favorite gathering place for discussion and debate – the Areopagus. Verse 21 tells us how they were especially fascinated with thoughts and ideals that were “new”. To them, god was a product of human imagination; someone or something that we or others are able to construct for ourselves.
 - Just think about that. Isn’t the very concept of “god” that He is different than man; above mankind in thinking, power, control over nature and all that He, as God, has created, designed and brought into existence? So, to think that we can determine God’s identity and characteristics; isn’t that, in reality, the most blatant attempt at identity theft?
- ✘ Paul says in verse 29, “Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.”
 - If God is only a product of our imagination then we are making ourselves to be God. And if we do that, then to whom can we turn for help when those things bigger than ourselves come? You see, we aren’t as big as we often want to think we are, are we? I can’t control nature, weather, life, death or everyone around me, can I? And instead of that depressing me or making me think that I am now oppressed, it actually is extremely freeing and a great comfort!
 - God, because of His love for me, has already taken control of these things for me and everyone else. He’s given me His Word of truth that defines His name; His characteristics; His love and even those principles of what is right and what is wrong so that I don’t have to wonder how I should worship and relate to Him, or how I am to live in my relationships with others.

→ If only all of us could embrace His truths; could treat each other as He has given us to do in the Ten Commandments and more. Just think how different our lives and our world would be, right now.

II. In Christ We Know God and Who We Are.

✘ What a blessing it is then, that we do know who God really is from His own revealed, inspired and perfect Word. This sets us apart from those ancient Greeks that Paul was witnessing to in our text.

→ When they first heard Paul's words of reason regarding this one true, triune God in the marketplace they reacted as many people still do today whenever we share and proclaim our identity with God. In verse 18 they asked, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, 'He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities' – because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection."

→ Look, there will always be "scoffers"; those who want to put us down only because the truth we have from God doesn't condone or embrace or align with the so-called truth that they have tried to create for themselves, or those who simply think we are "nuts" because we believe in a God is greater than our earthly-limited way of thinking or because we actually embrace with joy and contentment the identity that God has revealed to us for Himself; that He has given to us in and through His Son, Jesus.

→ At the same time, there will also be those to whom the truths God has given us in Scripture are genuinely "new" and they sincerely are interested in learning more about this mysterious 3-in-1 God that has become our Lord, Master, Savior, Teacher, Comforter and eternal Friend.

✘ Paul told those Greeks at the Areopagus, in verse 22 that he could tell that they "feared the gods." That's all that the Greek word, δεισιδαιμονεστέρους (de-i-sid-ai-mon-e-ster-ous) means. They were trying to cover all of the bases they could imagine for fear of what might happen if they left any "unknown" god out of the picture.

→ To them, the idea of a personal, flesh-and-blood God was entirely foreign. They pictured all the gods appearing like humans, but never actually being humans in the flesh.

→ Yet, we know our God best because He did take on our human flesh. Because of His willingness to live with us; walk with us; teach us, and fulfill God's law to perfection when we couldn't, we are able to see the true depth of His personal love for us all. And then, the fact that He cared enough for us to actually suffer and sacrifice His own life on the cross to pay for the guilt of the sins of the whole world – there is no other so-called god among any other belief system that is willing to do that; or who desires that kind of intimate relationship with his people.

✘ Paul wanted most for those around him that day to no longer live in the uncertainty of knowing the one true God. Why? because to know Him is what brings clarity to our own identity before and with our Creator.

→ So Paul addressed the truth of our identity first as sinners before God. In verse 30 he told these searching souls, "The times of ignorance (i.e. not knowing Him), God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent." You see, before we can truly appreciate Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection for us, we have to understand why He died, and who and what He conquered in that death and resurrection.

✘ Knowing God in Jesus as we do, means we are able now to know who we truly are.

→ We who are flesh like Christ are those whom He made in His image. Paul said in verse 26 that God "made from one man every nation of mankind." This then determines our identity as we exist in an intimate relationship with our Creator. Jesus described our identity as believers

immediately upon His resurrection back to life in John 14:20, “In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.”

→ In fact, Paul says in verse 31 that, even though God has “fixed a day on which He will judge the world” regarding all unbelief and sin, for those of us now firmly in His family of grace and forgiveness, the “man”, Jesus, whom He has appointed to be our judge, (He) “gives assurance to all by His rising from the dead.”

✘ It’s that victory over death which Jesus gives to all those identified by His name as He placed it upon us with the sign of the cross upon our forehead and upon our heart when we were washed clean of all sin and named to be His child in Holy Baptism. What a blessed and glorious identity! Not one that I could ever construct or give to myself, but the truest and greatest identity God has given me, and has given to you in His flood of grace and love.

→ “You are My beloved and blood-bought son,” He says; “My beloved and blood-bought daughter.” “Your role now; your purpose and your identity is *Christian!*”

Conclusion

✘ You, my dear friends, are whom God has made you to be from the moment He conceived you within your mother’s womb. What a beautiful thing to remember and celebrate today on Mother’s Day.

→ Yet as wonderful as our mothers are as God’s gifts to us, He is still and always the giver of every good and perfect gift. He made you like no one else!

→ And our God; the eternal, true and triune God; the Creator of the ends of the earth – He loves you for who you are; just the way He created you! And in Jesus He has redeemed you to be His own, so that today and always He is with you.

✘ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.*