

Ephesians 2:11ff: Identity and Community

A little girl asked her Dad “Where did humans come from?”

He answered “God made Adam and Eve; they had children; and the whole of the human race are their descendants”.

A couple of days later the little girl asked her mum the same question.

Her mum answered, “Many years ago there were monkeys. They had children, and over time the human race evolved.”

Confused, the girl went back to her dad... “Dad, you told me that God created the human race. But mum said they came from monkeys. How’s that possible?”

“Well”, he said, “it’s very simple. I told you about my side of the family and your mother told you about hers”.

It’s an important question: where do we come from? Where we come from shapes who we are, and often where we will go. Questions about where we come from are questions about our identity.

Last week we heard Paul pour out a vision of what God is like. He describes a God whose very nature is blessed, and whose action passes that blessing on to us, for us to live in and pass on to others.

He does this not to teach us something about God. Instead it seeks to open our hearts and minds to an experience of connection with God - to imagine and soak in the wonder of who God is; to sense God’s presence in and with us. Because faith is about this connection. And living in the light of this connection means understanding ourselves in a new way.

This morning I want to highlight 2 things from this passage that Paul suggests are really important for us as followers of Jesus who are called to live out of the experience of connection with God: identity and community

First, IDENTITY.

There’s a huge irony that we know, and a re taught, much more about the world than about God... and yet it’s God who accounts for the whole world.

It stands to reason that if we haven’t got to know what God is like, what God thinks of us, what God has to do with us, we’re likely to be in big trouble. And for many of us, the sad truth is that if we’re honest, even if we hear the words “God loves you”, what we carry

around with us is a picture of ourselves that says “I’m unlovable”, and to go with it we have an image of a God who is an angry judge. I watched a comedy show by Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby this weekend. It’s called Nanette. It’s not for the faint hearted - there’s a lot of adult content - but if you haven’t seen it and you can get access to Netflix, I heartily recommend it.

Gadsby is a gay woman who grew up in Tasmania, where homosexuality was illegal until 1997. And she describes very vividly how damaging it can be to live in a culture where your core identity is denied or undermined. She’s funny, but what she says cuts like a knife. Because her story is of life in a culture - not so very different to ours - where she could be silent about the shame of being verbally, physically and sexually assaulted, could fall into a career of making money from making people laugh about her sexuality and identity - because of cultural judgments about the identity of people who happen to be gay.

So where do we go to know our identity? From chapter 1 of Ephesians Paul points us towards God. Remember back to last week when we heard that humans - all of us - are chosen and *destined* to be in relationship with God; the God *bestows gifts* on us, *lavishes* us with grace, *makes himself known* to us and *gathers us up* into a story in which we are loved and of infinite value...

Hannah Gadsby’s story isn’t religious, but it is about how we look beyond the false constructs of identity that culture places around us, in order to see who we *really* are, and where our identity truly lies. And when we start to understand the truth that we are valuable, that we are loved, everything changes.

Paul reminds the Ephesians that there was a time they didn’t know this: when they were “the uncircumcision” (v11) - those who had not been included in the Kingdom of Israel and were alienated from God. When they were “without hope” (v12) and “far off” (v17)... “strangers” (v19).

And then he reminds them to that this is not their true identity. Because “now” he says... “you have been brought near”.

This is true for us too. We have been brought near - intimacy with God is possible for us. Some of us know it. Perhaps some of us still need to hear it, or to hear it again this morning: You are Beloved. A child of God. A bearer of grace.

Paul says that each of us is nothing less than a saint. Every one of us. We are drawn near to God made holy and blameless in his sight. Forgiven. Connected. Not because we are perfect... far from it. But because Jesus looks upon us and loves us. We are loved. Holy in God’s sight. Not because of anything we do, but despite everything, because of who God is. Nothing we do or say - nothing we do or say, can make God love us any more or any less. Our identity is based in who God is - blessed... in who God created us to be -

beloved children; and in Jesus, who draws us to God the Father through his extraordinary, costly self-sacrifice.

How will we respond? The Methodist Covenant prayer begins “I am no longer my own but yours; put me to what you will”.

This brings us to the second of Paul’s concerns: community.

The faith community finds its home in the church. Despite the individualism of our culture, we are not created for isolation; humans are built for community.

The Church looks at first blush like a pretty terrible attempt to create heaven on earth, right? Take a look around at the body of Christ around you. It certainly isn’t perfect! Church for us might be a shabby building on a street corner. A place we go to sing songs, hear someone talk, receive bread and wine, say some prayers, possibly meet some friends... It’s painfully ordinary, or worse.

But there’s more to the Church than this.. You see a church isn’t just about its function. It’s about its being. The Church exists because God created it. Not because you or I do a great job of building it, or because we’re super-Christians. Quite the opposite.

There is more to the church than meets the eye, The church is the vessel that holds us - the people looking for or trying to grow in living connection with God - together. The Church is what God has given us so that we can rub along together, iron sharpening iron. As humans we are never going to be perfect this side of the grave. We are going to be working on growing up in Christ all our lives. And there are going to be times we fail. And so the church that we see will always be flawed... but the church we see is only part of the church. Because there is more to the church than us. There is God - working in and through, and even in spite of us. God working amongst God’s people, in all their shares and sizes and good points and bad points, to grow and shape us individually and as a community, whenever we meet. The church is God’s gift to us as a place to be. A place to join in. A place to grow.

Paul’s word to the Ephesians about what is given through finding our identity in God and growing our faith in community is peace. Peace is mentioned multiple times in this passage: Jesus is our peace; Jesus makes peace; Jesus proclaims peace. Jesus breaks down divisions, and reconciles us to one another and to God. Faith in Jesus breaks down our alienation from God; breaks down our alienation from one another; and which breaks down the walls that exclude people who haven’t experienced connection with God yet, so that we can build a place of peace for ALL people.

Our identity as children of God is that we are people of peace. Together we are called as God’s children to build a house here at St Anne’s, where all are accepted; all are loved, all are welcome and all may know God’s peace.

