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An Unshakable Identity, Part 1

1 Peter 2:9-12

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation

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Our gospel reading today illustrates something that I deeply and desperately wish was more fully understood, experienced, celebrated by all people, especially the people of God. And then I wish an understanding of this, and what it means for us, could be transferred into the hearts and souls of the generations coming behind us.

While thinking about the truths revealed in this passage ten days ago, I had a unique opportunity that rattled this in my mind even deeper. I happened to be in Washington, DC, at the Israeli Embassy on October 7th, the three-year anniversary of the Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel. They were commemorating this, remembering it. And to do this, a group of us were invited to come watch some videos of what happened on that day. I can tell you it was one of the most sobering 40 minutes of my life, watching those videos. The presence of evil, the reality of what happened, and knowing about the evil down through history and how things like this have occurred before. Many of us in that room could hardly watch, closing our eyes. Others left the room, and some went into the bathroom and started to vomit. The whore of evil in our world is real.

After we watched these videos, there were six young survivors of these terrorist attacks who were there to tell us their story and some about their life in Israel.

As we listened to these stories, we heard unique things that happened to them and how God did certain things in their midst. But mostly, we all wept with them for what they had experienced. Near the end of our time together, one gentleman in our group asked these survivors what they would say to Americans right now, what they might say to us.

The young man who's shorter than me on my right here took the mic first. He said, “The real war in our world is not the war that's going on with guns and violence. That is the fruit of a deeper war. The real war is a war of beliefs and narratives.” In the end, he said, based on what people believe and what they hear and what they buy into, they take on an identity for themselves. And in the end, he said, the war is a war of identity about who people think they are and what they believe about themselves and what they believe to be really true in our world.

Knowing this, he said, “I would tell parents in America,” as a young parent himself, he was speaking to young parents. “I would specifically address my comments to them.” He would tell them not to leave the formation of the identity of their children to the wolves, but to be proactive and take initiative in helping their children form a strong and grounded identity in real and lasting things.

Then they won't be hoodwinked so easily by the sometimes crazy and oftentimes evil ideas in our world today. “Help your kids,” he said. “Know who they are as Jewish people.” They said, “We share the same heritage of the Old Testament. We're a part of this story. Help your kids know that they're in this story. Help them form an identity that is lasting and real and grounded in something that won't fade.”

I couldn't have agreed with him more. One of the most fascinating and perplexing concerning things I've observed in my lifetime is what I might call the rise and celebration of a vast array of peripheral, self-declared, temporal, and pseudo identities that people claim for themselves. These are even sometimes free-flowing identities that can be dangerously wrapped up in things that are based on feelings and very fleeting. It creates mass confusion in people's minds and hearts and in how we relate to each other.

For a long time, people in our culture have identified themselves and their value with fleeting measures like social status, material possessions, job titles, neighborhoods of residence, strength, beauty, skill, fashion, net worth, and so on. But even more complexity has been added to the identities that we claim for ourselves as we wonder, in confusion, more about whether God even put us in the right bodies or not, or if we are even human at all.

We may simply be just what we feel like at any given moment. To say many of us in our culture are in a massive identity crisis, in my opinion, is a huge understatement. Many in our culture are now clinging to worldly identities as if their very lives depended on them. In a word, it's saddening. It's very saddening.

Identity creation and projection, when one doesn't know who they really are, is an exhausting game to play. We weren't meant to play this game. It's a consequence of the confusion we have since we fell away from God in the garden. It's confusion.

When I was younger, I bought one of these false identities. It just sort of settled in on me as what we should aspire to be as men. I have a picture, sort of, of the persona of this identity here. As a kid, for some reason, I watched Clint Eastwood movies, and I thought that was it. To become a man like that: strong, silent, stable, faithless, alone.

Thankfully, God destroyed that idea in me and helped me humble myself and come to admit that actually, all of us men in the world are a lot more like this. I don't know if you've ever seen the movie City Slickers, but these are honest men in the world facing problems and challenges, hurts and heartaches, needing each other to work through the challenges that we face here on the earth.

As we packaged our discipleship strategy here at Nazareth, we talked about the essentials that were needed to help a person grow and mature in Christ and come into all that God created them to be.

Our goal is to disciple people into who God created them to be, so they can be the light in the world that God commissioned them to be, or has called them as light. And if you'll notice in the top right, there are the key essentials that we said need to be a part of the discipleship process in any person's life.

We just went through the gospel essentials, and we talked about the need for people to understand the good news of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins. And then we have the Bible check there. If you go to the next screen, we have the Bible check there as an essential part of people knowing what part of the story they're in and what history is about, and how God is working in history.

And then the third thing on our list was helping people know their true identity as people made in the image of God.

Our gospel reading today highlights three core aspects of an unshakable identity that God created each of us to operate in. To encourage this in each other is to move down the road of Christian encouragement and Christian life.

When we call these things out in each other, we're moving in the pathway of the glorious freedom of the children of God. When Jesus was baptized, some things were said to him that, when we come into Christ, are true of us.

I would describe this as a three-legged stool of our identity, given to us by God, that we can build an unshakable life and identity on. I wish every child in the world could constantly have these realities infused into their heart and soul by the parents around them, the grandparents around them, and the church communities that they're a part of.

It would change our world, friends, if people were raised with an unshakable, dignified identity that's real, that's given to people by God.

Matthew says this: “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went out from the water. And at that moment, heaven was opened.” Baptism is a symbol of a person coming into Christ and being given a new nature, a new life. The old identity in us, the old nature in us, is crucified with Christ. As a person is baptized, that's buried with Christ, washed away, and then we're raised to new life. If anyone is in Christ, they're a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come. They have a new identity.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went out from the water. And at that moment, heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God. It's a spiritual identity awakened by God Himself. When a person is born again, was descending on him like a dove, alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my son. This is my son.”

God is saying two things here about Jesus and anyone in Christ. He is saying that person there came from me and belongs to me or with me. The first leg in an unshakable identity is a deep sense of belonging.

We long to belong. When I was first married, I spent a lot of time with my wife's family, and we would talk about a lot of different things that we were involved in. And I would describe, as a young man, different things that I was getting invited to be involved in. And my father-in-law would often say to me, “Well, Tim, you know something? Everybody likes to belong to something. Everybody likes to belong to something.”

We have a deep need to belong. Christianity meets this need in the sense that God invites us through spiritual rebirth into his eternal family as sons and daughters of his. At the very core of our identity is not what we claim to be true about ourselves in a worldly sense.

But when a person comes into Christ, they become a son or daughter of the Most High God. And this is even greater than discipleship. Discipleship leads us to the point where we start to understand we have a Heavenly Father who cares for us. We are children of the Most High God.

John wrote about it this way: “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.”

At the very core of who we are, you and I were made to be in God's family forever. If you're born again into the family of God through Christ, friend, you belong to the greatest group ever, to the eternal kingdom of heaven. And when you have a sense of this settling in on your heart, the need to belong in so many things in this world just sort of fades away as this gets stronger and stronger in a person. They just know, “I am his forever. I belong. He's adopted me into his family,” and this changes the way a person lives if we're children there.

Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, “Then were heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, the firstborn.”

Friends, to be a Christian is to know that you know that you know you're his. No one can snatch you out of his hand. You belong.

Father, thank you for the opportunity to spend this time together thinking about what you've done for us in Christ; that you've invited us into your eternal family forever through Jesus. Give us ears to hear, Father. Help us have a deep sense of the change in our identity that you've bestowed upon us through your grace and your kindness in Christ. It is in His name we pray. Amen.