

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Voice-Our Choice: Our True Identity
Rev. Dr. John Judson
January 4, 2015

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Ephesians 1:3-13

Francesco Fiordilino is not a name most of you have heard before and that may be because you don't keep up with the mob. He began his crime career as a runner for the Bonano mob syndicate. Slowly over time he worked his way up to becoming one of their most feared enforcers, murdering several people along the way. At some point however he began to realize that his life might be on the line, so when he was contacted by the Feds he agreed to testify against the syndicate and in so doing sent several people to prison for long stretches. Francesco understood clearly the risks involved with his testifying and so entered the witness protection program. He was given a new name, a new identity and a new life. He was promised a life time of income and security. But during his time in the witness protection program, something happened...or I suppose didn't happen...he went right back to his old ways. Francesco got involved with illegal gambling, both as a participant and a strong armed collector of debts, and then when it appeared that he was going to be killed he once again turned himself into the feds. In a sense his new identity could not change him. He was the same guy before and after.

This struggle with a new identity is not one that only shows up in the witness protection program. It was one that was at the heart of the early Christian church...especially in a place like Ephesus. For you see, the Ephesians knew who they were. They clearly understood their identity as Roman citizens of Ephesus. It is hard for us as 21st Century Americans to fully appreciate the power of their identity. To be a Roman in Ephesus meant that one participated in all of the political and religious rituals that defined that society. There was no separation of church and state. There was no, "I will choose whether or not to go to the Temple." To be a good Roman citizen...to be a loyal Roman citizen meant one did what everyone else did. In Ephesus this meant attending to rituals around the city's goddess Artimus. One gave offerings. One had statues of Artimus in one's home. It also meant giving honor to the Emperor in one's home and in public...as if he too were a god. Anyone who did not do these things was immediately suspect as a traitor and an atheist; both of which could land you in jail or worse.

Into this city then came the Apostle Paul, proclaiming that God, in and through God's son Jesus, had come to give the Ephesians a new identity. Paul tells the Ephesians that they are not first and foremost Romans, but that they are children of God through Jesus Christ. He tells them that they have been redeemed and forgiven. He reminds them that they are part of a plan for the recreation of the world through Jesus Christ. He tells them that they were marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. All of these concepts were ones that said to the Christians that in order to be a follower of Jesus they could no longer be a good Roman. They could no longer go to the Temples. They could no longer worship Caesar as god. They could no longer be the kind of citizens they had once been. In addition their personal lives were to be marked by acts of sacrificial living in which all persons, regardless of status in the Roman Empire were seen as being equal. In other words, to take on the Christian identity meant to consciously choose to be a different kind of person regardless of the risk.

The issue for all of us here is that the contrast between our civic identity and our religious identity is not that stark. Ever since Christianity became the official religion of the west about 1700 years ago, there has been this underlying assumption that being a good citizen and being a good Christian were one in the same. The upside of this is that over time Christianity has helped to shape our nations laws in terms of equality and freedom. The downside is that we as main-stream Protestants have seldom had to seriously consider what it means for us to take on a Christian identity which may be at odds with the identity given to us by our culture. For more conservative denominations they have seen their identity as being one that stands against the moral laxness of society. For more liberal denominations they have seen their identity as being one that stands against the economic powers in society. For those of us in the middle, it has been easy to simply ride the wave of culture and never stake out a clear cut Christian identity.

Fortunately for us, the Session, our board of elders, has decided that discovering this Christian identity is important, and so at their last retreat they discussed three questions. What kind of disciples ought we to be making? What kind of a church ought we to be in order to make those kind of disciples? What kind of leadership ought the church have in order to be the kind of church that makes the kind of disciples we ought to be making. In other words they are struggling with the issue of Christian identity; namely what ought that identity as disciples look like in the 21st Century. Right now there is a writing team that is taking the results of those discussions and is putting them in a useable form. What I would ask of you though, is that you participate in this process; that you too think about what kind of disciples we ought to be making, or what our Christian identity ought to look like, then commit your thoughts to paper and send them to me so that I can send them on to the writing team.

That is my challenge to you for this week; to participate in the process of helping us discern what it means to have a Christian identity in this every changing culture in which we live; and then share those ideas with the rest of us that we might see more clearly who God desires us to be in Jesus Christ.