

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Making the World New: A New Identity  
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Matthew 4:18-22; 1 Peter 2:1-12

He knew who he was. He had a very clear sense of his identity. He was an Air Force navigator. He joined the Air force right out of college and trained to navigate a wide variety of aircraft. He was so good at it that he would eventually teach at the Air Force Academy. This identity also allowed him to know his obligations. My best example was Bill's commitment when he navigated an AC-47 gunship in Vietnam. His obligation was to protect soldiers on the ground. On one flight he navigated his ship so close to the action that incoming ground fire ripped through the fuselage, with some rounds flying between his feet and tearing at his clothes. Yet he did not recommend that the plane abandoned its mission. He knew his obligation; an obligation that flowed from his identity. He knew who he was. But then, after 25 years of service, he was called into his commander's office and was told it was time for him to retire. Bill thought about it for a moment and told his superior how much he loved the Air Force and what it meant to him. What if he didn't retire? The answer was short and sweet. You will be cashiered out and lose your pension. Again, Bill pondered and said, "I suppose I will retire then." But as Bill told me his story I could hear the pain in it. He said one day I knew who I was, and the next I had no idea. One day I was an Air Force officer and the next a civilian. Who was he?

Who am I? What is my core identity? These are questions human beings have been asking from the dawn of time. This is why we gathered into families and tribes, gangs and nations, because those groupings gave us our identity. But what happens when we are unmoored from those identity giving connections? I ask that because our lives are filled with identity transitions. When one identity is lost we have to go in search of another. Early in our lives we are someone's child; then we may be siblings, then friends, then students, then perhaps student athletes, or musicians or thespians, then graduates of particular schools, then maybe parents, employees, homemakers, then volunteers, then retirees. I think you get my point. All along our life's journey we take on new identities that give our lives meaning and purpose. The issue becomes what happens when we lose our identity? We graduate and we are no longer a student. We lose a job or retire and we are not who we once were. Our children leave home and the parent/child relationship changes. Our world is turned upside down and we have a tough time. Who am I?

This struggle to answer the question of identity is nothing new. It was the same one that was faced by Peter and by those to whom he was writing. It was faced by Peter because before Jesus showed up he had a clear sense of who he was. He was a fisherman, a small business owner and a husband. But then along came Jesus. Jesus called to Peter and Andrew saying leave your nets, your families, your businesses and follow me. I will give you a new identity, you will be fishers of men. Now, no offense to Jesus, but I would guess that Peter and Andrew had no idea what Jesus meant by being fishers of men...or what it would mean to be a disciple of Jesus. Peter's sense of identity had undergone a radical shift. The same was true for those to whom Peter was writing. Before Jesus came into their lives they had identities, not simply as Romans, but as citizens of a particular city and as worshippers of a particular god. We can see this with the people the Apostle Paul encountered in Ephesus. Their identity was they were Ephesians who worshipped the great god Artimus. Now that Peter's audience, or those Ephesian Christians, were following Jesus, they needed to clarify who they were. They needed once again to be able to answer the question of who am I? Fortunately for them and for us, Peter offers an identity that spans all of life's transitions and allows us to know what our obligations are.

So who are we? We are, "A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." I realize that this sounds like four different things, or four different identities. Yet in reality they are simply four ways of

saying the same thing. And that same thing, is that we are part of God's ancient and yet modern family. We are part of the family that was created when God called Abraham and Sarah and gave them a new identity as a people with a purpose to bless all the nations on the face of the earth. In other words, our identity is rooted and grounded in the great God of Israel and God's story. What this meant for those who were reading Peter's letter and means for us, is that we are not part of some new religion or some civic organization, but that we are family. We are God's family. I realize that this can seem a bit disconcerting because we often speak of ourselves as being part of a religion, or a denomination, or a church and it is those associations that shape our identity. Biblically however, those do not define our primary identity. As the Apostle Paul puts it, there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all...and for Peter this means one family. And as one family, Peter tells us that there are two obligations that come to us; one internal and one external.

First, the internal obligation. Peter tells us that we are to be like living stones allowing ourselves to be built into a spiritual house. What in the world does that mean? It means simply that we are to be a family. Let me ask, how many of you had chores to do when you were growing up? At my house, my brothers and I had a rotation of chores. One would set the table, one would clear the table, one would do the dishes and one would mow the lawn. Though we often fought about whose turn it was to do what, we all understood that family meant each playing a part in making things work. This is what this image of living stones is all about. People in the time of Peter knew that in construction, every stone mattered. It didn't matter whether the stone was the bottom, middle or top of a wall, or a column or was over the arch in a doorway. Each mattered because each carried part of the load for the building. Peter wants us to understand then that our internal obligation is that each of us is intended to carry part of the load of God's family. Each of us has a role to play in the family. Each of us has our spiritual chores that allow the family to function. Our spiritual chores can be everything from praying, to preaching, to giving, to singing, to teaching. Our obligation is to be living stones, helping to build God's spiritual house.

Second, the external obligation. Peter tells us that we are to "be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." I have to admit that this image is one that can be a bit disconcerting because it might be hard to think of ourselves as priests. Even so it is a wonderful and hopeful image. So what is a priest? Simply put, a priest is someone who builds bridges between God and human beings. Priests serve as intermediaries and intercessors between heaven and earth. It was their sacrifices that made things right between human beings and the gods. What does this mean for us? It means that we are to be interceding with God on behalf of the world. And this intercession can take two forms. It takes the form of prayers. We are called upon to be praying for the world; for friends and enemies, for those we know and don't know, for those who are in need and for those who can help meet need. Intercession also takes the form of action. If there is one thing that the scriptures make clear, it is that sacrifices that are acceptable to God include caring for the poor, the widow, the stranger, the alien, the refugee, the children and those who live on the margins of society. Intercession means seeking justice and mercy for all; or, as we discussed two weeks ago, it means living our purpose as a holy people, reflecting God's character into the world.

We have been given a great gift. We have been given an identity; an identity that begins at our birth and baptism, and continues throughout our life. That identity is that we are family. We are God's family. And it doesn't matter if we are together or apart; if we are here in the metro area or spread around the world; if we speak the same or different languages; if we are of the same or different sexual orientations; if we are of the same or different gender identities; if we have the same skin color or are of multiple hues. We are family. And Bill? Well he discovered this same identity. After retirement he became connected with a large Episcopal church where he lives out his obligations with joy and commitment. My challenge to you then for this week is to ask yourselves, How am I living out my identity as a member of God's family by being a living stone and a bridge builder for God?