

5-30-21
Trinity
Romans 8: 12-17

A More Certain Identity

I told some of you last week that my Aunt Bertha Jane, my dad's oldest sister, died in Kentucky at age 95. Aunt Bertha Jane had nine children. I grew up with most of them. One of them in particular. My cousin, Larry, was born four months before I was. We grew up together for sure. Larry lived most of his life with my grandparents. Aunt Bertha Jane's husband died while she was waiting for Larry to be born. I think Larry was number five of her children, so that meant there were four to be cared for at home by a mom who found herself unexpectedly single. I don't think Children's Services in whatever form it existed in those days was ever consulted. When the time came to go home from the hospital, my grandmother, Aunt Bertha Jane's mother, simply announced that she'd take this one home and rear him as her own. Aunt Bertha Jane didn't put up much argument. There were those four kids at home to care for, and I don't remember anyone ever gaining much ground when they tried to argue with my grandmother. She had had a houseful of children of her own, but they were all grown by then. Two of them never left home—another proclamation of my grandmother, so Larry grew up with three sets of parents—his own mother who always lived nearby somewhere and never forsook him; she just didn't rear him; my grandparents, whom he called Mom and Dad, and this bachelor uncle and maiden aunt who were sort of extra parents to a lot of us. So Larry took his late father's family name, but he grew up in the Phelps household and must have had lots of questions about why he was where he was, but I don't remember his ever asking them. That's just the way it was. I did some growing up there, too. It always felt a little strange for Larry to have all those

mamas, to have brothers and sister who lived nearby, but not with him. He went all the way through school in that arrangement and eventually married and moved his own family onto a part of the place where he had grown up, and they lived there until he died a few years ago. I don't remember his ever asking much about who he was or whose he was or how he came to be those things. I do remember some times when I thought I might have wanted to be part of that confusing family arrangement instead of the one in which I lived. He had a lot fewer chores to do and grass to mow than I did. But that arrangement was never offered to me, so I drifted in and out of it like all the other cousins who only had one set of parents did. But I always thought it must have felt weird to know that you had another mother who lived up the road who had more children after you and found a way to rear them, but couldn't find a way to take you home from the hospital. I'm sure there were some lying awake nights when he wondered who he was and how he got there.

Figuring out who we are is a big part of growing through life for all of us. Family is a big part of that for most of us, and, for most of us, that works well. For the rest of us, God usually puts other people in our lives to make up for what doesn't work there. Teachers, neighbors, the Church—there are almost always people to help us figure out who we are and who we can turn out to be. All of us spend considerable time and energy searching for identity and belonging. That's been one of the hardest parts of the past year and a half—the communities by which we identify ourselves have largely been unavailable to us. Family gatherings didn't happen. Clubs didn't meet. Gatherings with friends didn't happen. School was on and off line. Even the Church couldn't provide the nurture and care that many of us depend on. We adapted and found ways to get worship and reflections on Scripture and at least some effort toward community out there. But most of us probably grew Zoom weary pretty quickly. Hopefully our faith is foundational enough that it wasn't shaken and now that more and more of us are vaccinated and there are even plans to offer the vaccine to our children and things are

beginning to open up more and more, we can remember those things that make us who we are.

It's that discovering who we are about which Paul writes to the Romans. I'm sure the issues were different in first-century Rome, but people struggled as we do to know where they fit into the networks in which they lived. Early Christians, particularly in a place like Rome, had all kinds of issues to work through. Hebrew? Christian? Some other faith tradition? No faith? What would people choose around which to frame their lives? Those who held to the traditions of the Hebrews were suspicious of these Christians who seemed to want to throw out all the traditions that had sustained God's people for generations and follow this Jesus who had gotten himself killed. What kind of a God is that? Everybody knew there was one God. This talk about Jesus being God with us didn't fit in what they thought they knew. And his talk about sending yet another idea about God among us—what was that?

Even in the young Christian community, there was suspicion and skepticism about who belonged and who didn't—about what people had to do to be part of that community. Were Gentiles welcome? That required a major shift in thinking. Were they still supposed to keep the Law or was that all different now that Jesus had apparently kept it for all of us?

And they were all surrounded, Jews and Christians alike, by people like the Romans who thought all of them were more than a little over the top. What happened to logic and reason? Did we just throw them away in favor of this teacher who claimed to have died and live again?

Their situation was not unlike the one in which we live in which there are even more options available to us, more ideas and systems for us to identify with and to build our lives around. You know people, and I do, too, whose career is their whole world. They think as they were trained to think to do the job they do. They believe what's required to live in that world and to make sense of it. For other people, it's family identity and loyalty. Everything else falls in place after that, but we are family first. For

still others, its possessions or position. What we wear, what we drive, where we live, groups to which we belong, friends we claim—all that determines who we are. If we get that right, we've arrived. If we don't, then we keep striving until we do. Whether it's a cheerleading squad, a civic club, or an investment group, they all offer us an identity. That identity comes at a cost, and can change as the culture around it dictates. We can be riding near the top and be replaced before we know it only to find ourselves struggling to find somewhere else to fit, someone else to tell us who we are and what we can become.

There is another option. It is a more certain identity. Paul says that we can all achieve it. And that no one can take it from us.

That identity doesn't require dues, but we will probably wind us reorienting our attitude toward money because of it. It requires loyalty, but we get far more than we give to it. It requires many more things of us, but it offers us an identity and a purpose that no one will ever take from us. We arrive at this fundamental understanding of who we are when we believe that we really are children of God, people God loves enough to claim as his own, people who find our purpose and goal not in the standards of the world around us, but in the conviction that God's love is what holds the world together and offers us a place in it where we can find meaning and purpose that doesn't change with trends and doesn't depend on fleeting things.

Paul assures the Romans and us that we are God's people. In the same place where he asserts that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God, he calls us to accept an identity grounded in that love over all the others that offer things they can't deliver.

Any of us who are parents or who have cared about children, whoever they belong to, know the responsibility and the peril of hearing those children cry out from some point of need. It may be a belly ache in the middle of the night or a geometry proof that just won't come together or a girl who broke his heart or a team that passed her over—whatever it is when their very

foundations are shaken, they'll cry out to the one they believe will help them. For all of us, sooner or later, that one to whom we cry out is God. And the Good News is that when we cry out to God, God answers. Paul uses the language of family. He says when we cry out to God not as Almighty and Everlasting God or as Eternal Creator and Sustainer of the Universe or any other kind of liturgically correct language,--there is nothing wrong with any of those ways to understand God. But when we are at that point of our deepest need, whatever it happens to be this week—when we are at the point of our deepest need, probably only the worship leaders among us find much comfort in Almighty and Everlasting God or any of those other names. We want someone who loves us, someone who knows us, someone who will crawl right into our need with us and show us the way. Paul says when we cry Abba! That's what Jesus called God. About as close as we can come is to cry out for Daddy! Whatever you call your paternal parent is your business, but we all know what a Daddy is. Some of us had one and some of us didn't. But we all know what that is. And you know when you cry out to Daddy, he will hear.

That is the more certain identity which Paul says we can all know if we will. To cry out from our deepest need and to know that we are heard.

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of those other ways we identify ourselves. But try crying out to a zip code or a street address. Try crying out to the Corvette plant or to a bank balance. As much joy as the Roll Tide and the Big Blue Nation and the Cubs communities bring my life, sooner or later they will disappoint me. I'd be hard pressed to build much of a life on this past basketball season. We waited a hundred years to win the World Series. And it looks like it might be another hundred. There simply is not much response to be had from those places. If they add meaning and purpose to our lives, so be it, but they don't provide much in the way of a sustainable foundation.

On this day that we struggle to understand the mystery of the Trinity, we give thanks that God's love is more vast and so dependable than we can comprehend, that we experience it in

ways we can relate to in Jesus, and that somehow the Spirit keeps reminding us that it is real and that we can know it. That's an identity that will carry us through whatever hurt and disappointment all those other things throw at us. That's an identity that will go with us through both joy and sorrow. That's who we are, whether we get what we have coming in this life or whether we wait for the life to come to find the fullness of joy we seek. We are God's children; people God loves and always will. And nothing will change that. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Prayers of the People

Whatever images we think help us to understand the vastness of your love for us, O God, always seem to fall short. You are Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer not just of the world and its history and future, but of us and of all who will ever live on this planet or any other. We remember and give thanks that you do not call us to fear and trembling, but to call you Abba, the one on whom we can depend, the one who loves us. We are even bold enough to believe that your love is stronger than our fear. You call us into the only story that really matters, the story of your love for us and for everyone everywhere, the story that is renewed every day. While there will always be mystery about who you are and who you call us to be, we know that your love breaks through that mystery and helps us make our way through all that is wrong in the world we have made of what you entrusted to us. Even in the midst of this holiday that calls us to remember those who have died, especially those who have died defending this country, help us to continue to strive for that day when nations will not make war against one another and peace will not be just a dream, but a way of life.

We give you thanks for the joy that comes from knowing that we are your children and that you love us, wherever we are on our journey, wherever we are toward figuring it all out, however many times it takes us to move forward. We ask for courage to live into our calling, and to keep our minds and hearts open to

what your Spirit and your Church are saying and doing among and within us.

We pray that your Church, our Church, the Church, will be a sign of truth and reconciliation, that we will work across what divides us to show the world both the unity and the diversity that make us up and to remember that is the way you intend for us to be. Come among us even now, Gracious God, as a breath of fresh air amid all the competing claims that clamor for our attention. Bring us freedom and hope. Make us instruments of your peace and signs of your harmony. Show us how to care for one another, and keep us restless for ways to show your intention to a world that refuses to know it.

Let us who know that we are your people and that we can always be led by your Spirit instead of by our own. Help us to know helpful relationships with one another. We pray these and all things in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, remembering that Jesus taught us all to pray together when he said:*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen*