

March 4, 2018
Third Sunday in Lent

“Your Identity or His?”

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel.” This first proclamation of Jesus Christ in St. Mark’s Gospel is something I tend to use a lot in my preaching, especially in Lent. We call John 3:16 the “Gospel in a nutshell.” Mark 1:15 might be called “The church’s proclamation in a nutshell.”

Of what should we repent? Well, of course of our sins. The repentance focus of Lent all points forward to the celebration of Jesus taking away our sins by His cross. St. Paul writes, *“How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”* Dead to sin, we repent of that sinful nature still sticking to our flesh and strive and struggle to *“walk in newness of life.”*

But as we read through Paul’s letter to the Christian church at Corinth, it becomes evident that our blatant sins of thought, word and deed are not the only things of which we need to repent. We need to repent, turn away from, our own identity...or perhaps better said, the identities we so eagerly present to the world.

One of the big problems at the church in Corinth was what I call “the cult of personality.” Believers were more enthused about their preachers and the charisma of the presentation of their theology than they were about the simple message of salvation. In his admonition of this church, Paul notes that these folks are saying things like, *“I follow Paul,”* or *“I follow Apollos,”* or *“I follow Christ.”* It’s important to note the first word in these statements—“I”.

The believers aren’t making a proclamation about the faith. They are making a statement of their identity. The importance is being placed on the group they belong to, not on the main thing, namely the Gospel of Christ.

I can’t say we Christians today have the exact same difficulty as the Corinthians, but we certainly struggle with similar erring.

As an individual just think of all the different ways you seek to place a certain identity before the people around you. Those of us who participate in political discussions look to be seen as intelligent, informed and moral in our thinking, and we’re enthused about our position on the topic de jour. Anybody here that blatantly espoused a certain sports team? Uh, yeah! We want everyone to identify us as a fan!

We happily identify as proud parents and grandparents, right? Slap that honor student bumper sticker on the car and accost people with the pictures on our smart phone. In our careers we energetically work to be seen as excelling...or at least as competent. We try to portray our families as loving and happy, even when under the surface they’re not. I don’t even need to talk about the picture folks intentionally or even subconsciously paint of themselves on all the social media...and then we make jokes about reality TV being fake.

And I’m not saying all this is sin. Such identities aren’t at all bad in and of themselves. But consider, who is it you’re trying to impress and by whose standards? We work to create an identity that is well received by the world, and we do it by the world’s standards. Why? Because we think that it’s really important.

Now ask yourself this: when do you seek to amplify Christ and identify as His child in your life? And I’m not necessarily talking in public. Do you do it in your own home among

family? If not, why not? Why not seek to make your identity not about you but about Christ who is your Lord, and you being His redeemed child and humble servant?

Is it because by the world's standards, that's just foolishness?

"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Worldly standards, worldly respect, worldly glory; none of it means squat in the eyes of the Lord. If the world is who you are trying to impress, what does that say about where you are ranking God?

Has the world saved you for eternity? Has the world sacrificed to guarantee you life? No! If anything, the world is what afflicts you with physical pain and decay as well as spiritual strife, stress and despair! It's the foolish things of God—humility, service, sacrificial love—all found in Christ, that bring you salvation. This is where your identity lies. You are in Christ and therefore pleasing to God! Repent! Turn from the world and identify according to the foolishness of Christ!

This may look silly to the world. This may even cause loss of face before the world. But would we rather look wise to the world and have God sadly wagging His head at our foolish denial of Him, or would you rather risk looking foolish to the world by your boasting in Christ and in Christ bringing a smile to the heavenly Father's face?

Yeah. Don't focus on the identity you have before the world. Pursue the identity you've been given in the free gift of Christ and His righteousness. Repent, turn from the world and toward Christ and who He has made you by His cross—God's holy child.

And one somewhat disturbing asterisk to add to this sermon—St. Paul writes this letter to a church, not to an individual. It therefore bears consideration of ourselves as Grace Lutheran Church and the identity we present to the world.

We have a reputation as a friendly congregation, happily receiving visitors. That's not a bad identity to have as a church; it sure beats being seen as a bunch of self-righteous snobs. But as we're being friendly to folks as people of this church, do we talk more about our people, our beautiful facility, our fun activities and fellowship, our mission efforts, VBS, Fall Fest, ECC and other stuff WE do? Or do we highlight what we know Jesus does for us here? Do we talk about Him and His love and His life? Do we boast in Him? Is Jesus our focus, or is Grace Lutheran Church?

When I ask those questions, I'm disturbed by my answers.

So *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel."*

Let us risk looking foolish to the world, both at home as individuals and together as Christ's church. Christ's never tried to look good to the world. He looked the fool to do the gracious will of His Father to save us. Boasting in our Savior, let's be willing to look the same. Let's not fear the world looking at us like we're foolish and silly, for in following Christ we're certain to one day see the very face of the Father gazing on us with a smile.

Amen.