

I/ We ... True Community

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1 Corinthians 12: 12 - 27

This is the third - and last - of a short series of messages where we've been looking at the issue of identity – who we *really* are. We've been comparing and contrasting 'identity teachings' found in Scripture (particularly Jesus) with that of our culture, and this had lead us to a spiritual paradox that is stated frequently in the Gospels. It goes something like this: "*To find life, we must surrender our lives*". I.e., we will never find our true identity (meaning, the unique person that God created us to be) until we are willing to limit our own free will, in surrender to God's plan for us. [To get the details of those first two messages, I would encourage you to go to our Web site (MeetwithGod.com) click on 'resources' where you can download a copy of all our messages either in text or MP3 format.]

Leonard Sweet, who I have been quoting frequently in this series, has written a challenging book on the subject of identity, (The Three Hardest Words in the World to Get Right) says this:

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The goal of the Christian life is to lose oneself and use oneself up in a cause and creed, not of one's own making, but of God's own choosing. A love that does not insist on its own way or its own say is perhaps the greatest flash point of friction between the gospel and contemporary culture – between the Christian metanarrative and our own mini-narratives.

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That middle sentence is worth repeating: *A love that does not insist on its own way or its own say is perhaps the greatest flash point of friction between the gospel and contemporary culture...*

There is an account in the Gospel of John of a time when Jesus began to explain to the people who were flocking to see and hear him, about the necessity of his sacrifice, and how we participate in it; using imagery of his body being the Bread of life, and talking about 'drinking his blood'. Because of the language he used, a lot of people found this teaching to be not only hard to understand, but *offensive* – so much so that they began to leave him in droves. And Jesus looked at his little band of 12 disciples who were left and asked them, "You don't want to leave too, do you?"¹

¹ John 6: 52 - 58

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So what Sweet is saying is that for today's culture, the concept that I am not or *should* not be in complete control over my destiny, or that someone else (*anyone* else – even God!) should have final say as to the direction of my life – well, that's a deal breaker for many! It's a 'flash point of friction between the gospel and contemporary culture'. This is the place where many people are going to say, like those half-convinced disciples in Jesus' own day, "This is where I get off. Thanks anyway. But, no thanks."

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Now, for those who stay – for those who, as we described last week, are willing to 'seek the face of God' – and thereby die to ourselves – this is the beginning of a whole new world. *This* is Real life... a self-identity, a 'skin' that we can finally be completely comfortable in, because it was made for *us*. Designed by God for our blessing, and not by culture for its own profit.

When we surrender to this Christ life, we find an interesting phenomena taking place. On the one hand (and we talked about this a little bit in part one), even though our culture has almost deified the "I", making self the center of everything from truth, to meaning, to purpose in life (it's all about *me!*) still, we can't get away from the bottom line that we come into this world alone, and we will leave this world alone. So, in that sense, it's true, it *does* come down to me.

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I like the image that Mike Slaughter presents as he tells of an insight that he had while looking at a gravestone in a cemetery one day. He saw a person's name and two dates (their birth date and their dieing date.) In between was a dash. And it occurred to him, what we do in the dash is what really matters!

Our whole story is 'in the dash'! and he points out, we make choices every day that give content to that dash. And they are *our* choices. No one else's... they matter greatly. And when that second date arrives, whether it is 'too soon' from our vantage point, or 'just about right', we will come face to face with God... alone and empty handed. What I'm saying is that while our culture may *overdo* its emphasis on "I" there is some sobering truth to the extent of its importance. We should be wary of any theology or teaching that supports the loss of "I"...

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On the other hand, as we look to Jesus to give us a better picture of what our “I” should be like, we find that it is *impossible* to live out the mind of Christ, again, it is impossible to be filled with the fullness of Christ apart from a love connection with *others*.

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Let’s put it like this: There is no meaningful “I” without “You”. And the deeper we go into the mind of Jesus, the more we realize that we cannot define ourselves apart from others. And particularly as believers in Christ, we find that our personal identity is inseparably linked to the wildly divergent, eclectic often maddening, group of people called *the church*. The Body of Christ. And the world beyond that.

It is really difficult to overstate this. To say “we need each other” is not forceful enough. Think about the words we read so frequently in Scripture – and consider what they are really saying to us.

For instance, in the example of the life of Jesus. We pointed this out in both of the previous messages: Jesus said “I and my Father are one”. That Jesus never acted or spoke alone. “I do nothing apart from the Father”, he said. That is meant to be our example. It’s not just ‘me’. It is ‘us’.

Our historical creeds all begin with “I believe”. But Jesus begins, “Our Father”. In that prayer, which we call “The Lord’s Prayer”, none of the disciples took Jesus aside and asked him, “Lord, teach *me* to pray.” No, they asked him to “Teach *us* to pray.”

In our Scripture reading for today, Paul says it as bluntly as he can: “*No one* can say to anyone else, ‘I have no need of you.’” No one. Here’s a deep thought which I’ll leave to the sermon discussion groups to ‘flesh out’... one of the most significant lessons that we are taught in the Creation accounts is not simply that our appearance is no accident, but we were intentionally created (however that happened) according to a *specific model*. And that model is somehow, God himself.

In Genesis 1:26 God says, “*Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness*”. Now, let me ask you, did you ever notice that this is written in the plural? “Let us make” ... “in our

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likeness.” Yet the Scripture is clear and consistent in its message of only ‘one God’. So, who is ‘us’? (I have no idea how to word this grammatically correctly!)

Well, Hebrew scholars will talk about the “Royal we” (plural of majesty) or something like that, but New Testament scholars will tell you that there is more to it than that. The Creation account is the first reference to the Trinity, the heart of the Christian faith.

God is one, yet God *exists in community*. Three-in-one. Jesus is constantly reflecting that in the Gospels - his interconnection with the Father, it is not something he *does* it's *who he is!* The relation between Father, Son, and Spirit is the most foundational doctrine in our faith.

What I'm illustrating here is that the *need* that we have for one another to be complete as human beings goes beyond just psychology, or practicality. It is in our very design – it is a foundation of who we are as people created in the Image of God.

And the way we connect with one another, the way this foundation is lived out (ideally) is through bonds of love. Our connection with other human beings is what love is. Which is why we read in the New Testament this dual emphasis of treating people the way Jesus would treat them, but also especially the people within the Body of Christ. Jesus said, “The world will know that I am in you by your love for each other”. And he was referring, of course, to the church. As the world sees how we love each other, they will see Christ.

Paul ends his letter to the Galatians by saying this,

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“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

“Especially... to the family of believers” – why does he say that? Well, because (for better or worse) the Church is – should be – the closest thing we have on earth to pure community. To a living human example of the unity of the holy Trinity. Now, sadly, we not only seldom reach that level, but the other part of that (which is how we relate to the *rest* of the world) is also frequently lacking. One biblical scholar put it like this, “The Christian community...defines

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only the minimum of love's responsibility, not its farthest extent."² And too often we strike out on both levels.

[Which is why we're going to start a six-week series after next week's wonderful Laity Weekend, called "Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations". The logic of this goes something like this: We can't be a church without an understanding of who we are as *individuals* in Christ; but we also can't be a complete individual in Christ apart from finding a healthy relationship to the Body of Christ. So, we're going to talk about the church over the course of six weeks.]

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Back to this... why is it, then, that something that is so fundamental to who we are and who we are meant to be is so difficult for us to do? I mean, I need to breathe, and I need to eat, and I don't have any trouble doing either one. Especially eating! But I also just as foundationally need to *love*, and yet *that* is hard. It is a struggle. Why?

Listen to this answer, from Leonard Sweet:

"Love is hard. Love is tiresome. Lovers don't enjoy loving. Lovers enjoy having loved and being loved. 'Only connect!' is E. M Forster's prescribed solution. But "Only connect!" may be the hardest commandment of all to keep.

Lovers will cry (Jesus did over his best friend, Lazarus). Lovers will be lonely and afraid (Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane). Lovers will get furiously angry (Jesus did in the Temple). Lovers will be rejected and betrayed (Jesus was by Judas, Peter, and if truth be told, all the disciples). Lovers will be misunderstood (Jesus was almost constantly). Love and loss go together like sauce and stain. Intimacy means that we love others amid loss, and our losses are huge: abandonment, betrayal, death, failure, guilt, heartache, jealousy, poverty, rage, sorrow. The list goes on and on.³

Love is difficult because in Christian love we are living the world to come in the world that is. Did you get that? We are living the world to come in the world that is. We don't have the option of living one world at a time – if we did, wow, it would be so much easier for us! We could take cues from the society and be successful, we wouldn't have to be so concerned about the needs of others, and their feelings, we could ignore the poor, and strike back when we're wounded.

² Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), p. 204, quoted in Sweet, p. 137

³ Sweet, p. 131 - 132

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Because – as Sweet points out – all those situations we’re going to have to deal with. Its life in this world. We’re going to make decisions about those things... every day.

But we’re called to live the world to come (the world that we are really praying for in the Lord’s Prayer when we ask “Thy Kingdom Come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven”) – that world isn’t here, and it won’t be here completely until the End. But we are called to live as if it is here now. And that’s where the trouble begins! That’s where it starts being real complicated.

That’s where we have to deal with all that list of hurtful stuff that we do to each other... that’s where we start to realize that we *are* our brother’s keepers, and not only that, but that brother may well reject and resent our help, but we *still* are called to press on. *This* world is where we learn to live out the commands of Christ, even though not only is the world that we are living in broken and hurting, but – hey – so are we. We’re not going to get it right all the time. We’re not.

But still, we *need* each other.

Something that Pastor HY and I have begun talking about is how we can try to foster stronger friendship ties among the people of FUMC. As a mission oriented community (which is something that we should *never* change) we find personal relationships forming, almost accidentally, as we serve a broken world shoulder to shoulder. But we also find that there are a number of folk who come in our doors, spend time, and wander out the back, and their comment is ‘this is not a friendly place’. Now, I’m going to have much more to say about this in the next series.

But in our context of this morning... let me just say this – I think what they are saying is “I don’t know how to break in”. A church that is built totally on interpersonal relationships has ceased to be a church, it is a social club. On the other hand, we need each other, and we need to connect better in ways that will last.

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I came across this testimony by Chuck Swindoll:

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An old Marine Corps buddy of mine, to my pleasant surprise, came to know Christ after he was discharged. I say surprise because he cursed loudly, fought hard, chased women, drank heavily, loved war and weapons, and hated chapel services.

A number of months ago, I ran into this fellow, and after we'd talked awhile, he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You know, Chuck, the only thing I still miss is that old fellowship I used to have with all the guys down at the tavern. I remember how we used to sit around and let our hair down. I can't find anything like that for Christians. I no longer have a place to admit my faults and talk about my battles--where somebody won't preach at me and frown and quote me a verse."

It wasn't one month later that in my reading I came across this profound paragraph: "The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit that there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give his church. It's an imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality--but it is a permissive, accepting, and inclusive fellowship. It is unshockable. It is democratic. You can tell people secrets, and they usually don't tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers. With all my heart," this writer concludes, "I believe that Christ wants his church to be unshockable, a fellowship where people can come in and say, 'I'm sunk, I'm beat, I've had it.' Alcoholics Anonymous has this quality--our churches too often miss it."

Now before you take up arms to shoot some wag that would compare your church to the corner bar, stop and ask yourself some tough questions, like I had to do. Make a list of some possible embarrassing situations people may not know how to handle.

A woman discovers her husband is a practicing homosexual. Where in the church can she find help where she's secure with her secret?

Your mate talks about separation or divorce. To whom do you tell it?

Your daughter is pregnant and she's run away--for the third time. She's no longer listening to you. Who do you tell that to?

You lost your job, and it was your fault. You blew it, so there's shame mixed with unemployment. Who do you tell that to?

Financially, you were unwise, and you're in deep trouble. Or a man's wife is an alcoholic. Or something as horrible as getting back the biopsy from the surgeon, and it reveals cancer, and the prognosis isn't good. Or you had an emotional breakdown. To whom do you tell it?

We're the only outfit I know that shoots its wounded. We can become the most severe, condemning, judgmental, guilt-giving people on the face of planet Earth, and we claim it's in the name of Jesus Christ. And all the while, we don't even know we're doing it. That's the pathetic part of it all.⁴

Those are powerful words, with a powerful point.

If we truly are in need of one another, then we need to find ways to foster those kinds of relationships within this community – relationships like that are happening, for sure, but its kind of random. We're missing too many.

⁴ Charles Swindoll, Leadership, Vol. 4, no. 1.

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We need multiple access ramps to genuine personal relationships that will have opportunity to grow over time. I love what Larry Osborne said in a seminar that both HY and I have been listening to. He was talking about small groups in his church, and how they are based on 10-week models. At the end of every ten-week session (which they offer 3 – 4 times a year) the group, literally, disbands. The next time, they reform – and if the group wants to, they can stay together. There's no effort to break them up. So, they have groups in his church that have met for 16+ years.

On the other hand, someone may find at the end of that 10-week period that this isn't the place for them. Well, they can just say, "Thanks, but I'm going to go to another group next time."

The reason they do this, says Osborne, is because...there are some people that you really are glad that they're believers. But you're also very happy that heaven is really *big!* (You know what I mean!) They find that a person will try an average of 3 – 4 different groups before they settle in. What I find impressive about that, is that their culture says, "This is worth it... don't give up."

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You'll be hearing more about that from us soon.

Look around... this is your family in Christ. And we need each other. It's among these people that we are going to practice the love that we are commanded to share with those *beyond* these walls. It starts here.

Amen