

Easter 5A
May 7, 2023
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL

Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31
I Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-10

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Risen Lord, Jesus the Christ. Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The text for our consideration today is this from Peter's first letter: *You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people so that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.*

So, these are not rhetorical questions. Dogs or cats? A show of hands. Mountains or beach? Surf or turf? Car or truck? Early bird or night owl? Coffee or tea?

All of these things and preferences contribute to who we are. And sometimes the preferences take on more gravitas – and you know as well as I do that there is no shortage of the labels of these preferences. Are you pro-choice or anti-abortion. Are you blue or red. Are you conservative or progressive. And these labels come to be weapons that we lodge at one another. Labels that subsume one's identity. Labels that are so easy to use – almost a shorthand by which we believe that we can understand another person. Labels that have broken down conversation and discussion and dialogue in our society. Reduced it to a simple label, as if that label could really describe who we are as complex, multi-faceted, deliciously intricate individuals. A label that functions as a lens through which we look at another and draw conclusions and make value judgments about that person, usually vis a vis ourselves – and this comes dangerously close to being like the Pharisee's prayer: I thank you God that I am not like this sinner.

But you see, labels don't only work on how we view others. Labels can also affect – and even shape – how we view ourselves. If a particular word or descriptor is applied to us, sometimes we think that we need to act to live into that label. We see it often with children or teens – when they have been identified or labeled as a trouble-maker, well, lo and behold, they act in that way even more. When we have been labeled as the one who will do it all, no surprise that we start to take on more and more to our to-do lists. And, perhaps more dangerously, when we adopt a political label or identity, we may find ourselves being drawn into the more extreme elements of that label – you know, “in for a penny, in for a pound.” And from that more extreme position, we may find ourselves degrading those of other labels. And there is a vicious circle then that goes round and round and we end up in silos and echo chambers.

There is a story that is found in all three synoptic gospels. A story about the disciples who were fighting and squabbling with each other over who was more important. Can't you just hear it? And Jesus did hear it and I can only imagine him shaking his head. And then he said, “You know these kinds of fights and disagreements happen all the time with those who are not my followers. But it will not be so among you.” Now, I don't know if Jesus was giving them a command – don't do this! Or if he was stating the obvious – that because they were followers of his, those kinds of contests have no place in their life together.

Because of this, the writer of the letter of I Peter spoke of identity—identity of individuals and identity of the group as followers of Jesus. This is who you are, he wrote -- *a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people*. And my friends, that is who we are as well – a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.

And because we are God's own people, we do things differently. We see things differently. We react to things differently. We see and act through the lens of Jesus.

So, how does this come about. In the waters of our baptisms, we are washed and cleansed and brought into the community of faith with the others who have been washed and cleansed. A bath of the new birth in the Holy Spirit. And we are marked with the sign of the cross of Christ – forever. Dr. Luther said this in his discussion about baptism: *In baptism the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is drowned and dies through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.*

And in this new life that is graced upon us, we too make promises of our intention in living in this covenantal relationship with God and with each other. We live among God's people, hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, proclaim the good news of God in Christ in word and deed, serve all people following the example of Jesus and strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

And in all this, we must remember that we are not intended to do this alone. We cannot. Well, I know that I cannot. We need each other and others need us. We need to share with one another the precious words of Jesus that began our Gospel reading – do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe. Context is important here – Jesus spoke these words to the disciples at the last meal that he shared with them. He knew what was coming and he knew that it would confound them and bring unspeakable sorrow. But yet he spoke words of hope. And that is what we do for each other as well.

My friends, our lives as baptized people of God are different from those around us. Our identity is centered in the cross of Christ, the cross on which Jesus was crucified and the cross over which he conquered death. And that gives us hope, hope as we live our lives together as God's chosen people, God's own, called out of darkness into the marvelous light.

So all you dog-loving, coffee-drinking, early birds, watching the sunrise over the ocean – and all you tea-drinking, night owls with cats in your laps enjoying the mountain air, as cherished as any of these may be, remember that your identity is found in the cross of Christ through the waters of our baptism – an identity that shapes how we see others and how God sees us. Marked with the cross of Christ – forever.

Thanks be to God.

