

Sermon: "Identity"

If you haven't read the Book of Esther in the Old Testament, I recommend it to you. First, it's only ten pages in length. It reads almost like a stand-alone text within the bible. It is very different and noteworthy that Jerusalem, the law, the prophets, the Promised Land and even God is not mentioned. It does involve the survival of the Jewish people. It affirms the importance of religious identity.

As the story opens, we learn that Esther is an orphan, taken in by her uncle Mordecai, who is an advisor to the royal court. We learn the king has broken with the queen and that he recruits seven virgins from which he may make a new choice for queen. Beautiful Esther finds herself selected but hides her Jewish heritage. There are many twists and turns within the story as she becomes ultimately queen. It is filled with characters with various character flaws. It could well have been a chapter right out of television's "Game of Thrones." Her uncle's nemesis has convinced the king to decree that all Jews be killed, including plans to hang Mordecai. Esther reveals Haman's treachery and his plan to depose the king, and in so doing finally reveals her own Jewish identity. She then appeals for the safety of her people. The king grants her request, reverses his decree. Haman is hung in the gallows prepared for Mordecai.

There are two significant take-aways for me from reading this book. One; in AD397 at the Council of Carthage, male religious leaders validated this Old Testament book even as it gave representation to the influence and power of a single woman. Secondly, we see the positive implication of claiming our religious identity.

“And what of our own identity? “Who am I?” Some suggest that this existential question may be the most difficult one we will ever set down with.

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines the word identity, simply, “The distinguishing character or personality of an individual.”

The concept of identity is a far more complex consideration. Psychologists have offered this broader consideration, “Identity is the dynamic, ever-evolving, consideration of our memories, values, social roles, that shape our sense of self. Aspects of our identity include gender, sex, race, ethnicity, social class, skills and abilities, relationship status, age, family and like Esther, our religious identity.

Identity formation is a lifelong process. It encompasses our history, choices, and the inherent traits that we carry forward. Identity is also a blend of our personal self-concept, who we believe we are...and our social identity...how peers and society perceive *us, a more objective perception*. We judge ourselves based on our internal thoughts and feelings, while others judge us by our overall external action and behaviors. Identity formation is an Important, complex process to consider and assess. Giving time to the question “Who am I?” is the first step in the process of “Who do I want to become?”

Each and all of these statements and considerations also relate to a church’s identity as well.

Even though I have not been able to be a part of the process to date, I am pleased to see that our church has taken on the challenge of “wrangling” with its own identity. It is an important process even as it addresses the challenging “Who are we?” questions. It also encompasses our history, choices, values, and roles in the community. You have given time to respectfully question, consider, debate, rebut and then hopefully come to a strong consensus. Consideration has been given to internal thoughts and feelings but also some time to our social identity; assessing how our broader community views our choices, actions and behaviors.

Addressing these in positive deliberation, providing adequate time for discernment, will ultimately promote the potentials for church growth. Giving time to the question, “Who are we?” is the first step in the process of “Who do we want to become?” I look forward to our meeting today.

“Who am I as a Christian? The first answer is “I am a child of God.” It is ultimately even *more* than a lifetime consideration. We know that we were made in God’s image. Our final scripture speaks of a mirror that in ancient days was not as we know them, but simply polished silver, which would only reflect dim and imperfect images. Our earthly understanding of God and his plans thus are limited. But we are assured that there will come a time when we will see God as God truly is...and in so doing, finally see ourselves as we truly are.

Amen