

Who We Are

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Genesis 12:1-4 and Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

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In the classic movie *It's A Wonderful Life*, the incomparable Jimmy Stewart plays George Bailey, a man who tries to live a good life helping his community. But George's life runs into a series of misfortunes that makes him wish he were never born. So, an angel named Clarence decides to teach him the value of his life by granting him his wish. After his wish is granted, George wanders through his community of Bedford Falls only to find that none of his friends or family recognize who he is. He is a complete stranger and they treat him like a complete stranger—not with warmth and hospitality but with coldness and sometimes even open hostility. Naturally, he is confused by all this, and it leads to the following conversation between George and Clarence.

“Why am I seeing all these strange things?”

“Don’t you understand George, it’s because you were not born.”

Well, if I wasn’t born, then who am I?

You’re nobody. You have no identity.

“Oh what do you mean no identity? My name’s George Bailey.”

“There is no George Bailey.”

Isn’t it terrifying to think of yourself as nobody? When we get to the end of our lives and people stand around and tell stories about us, I think most of us, maybe all of us want people to tell about who we were in ways that described the somebody that we were. The somebody

that we spent a lifetime striving to be. He was a good husband, a good father, a good grandfather. He was a true Christian. He was a true patriot. He was a great artist, an excellent writer, a good basketball player. These brief descriptions are identity shaping descriptions, and they are so important to us that the best way to get us to do something may not be to threaten us or to even entice us with a reward. But the best way to get us to do something may just be to tell us that this identity we are trying to form depends on it. Imagine you have a three year old who's acting out. Let's say they're throwing food at the table. How do you make them stop. Do you threaten to put them in time out if they don't stop throwing food? That may work. Do you give positive reinforcement? If you stop throwing your food, I will give you ice cream. You could try that too. But you'll probably have more success talking to the three year old about his sense of identity. Oh, I thought you were a big boy. Big boys don't throw food at the table. You must be a baby. Well, I guess I'm going to have to put you in diapers and treat you like a baby from now on. What three year old boy doesn't want to be a big boy? What three year old girl doesn't want to be a big girl?

Now I know what works on three year olds doesn't necessarily work on adults. But think again if you don't think this would work on us. Think about the most insulted you've ever been by somebody. I would bet it is because somebody attacked something about you that was important to your sense of identity, to the somebody you take yourself to be. What kind of father are you? What kind of Christian are you? What kind of American are you? What kind of mother are you? These things cut deep.

Well, if you understand the importance of identity, the importance of this somebodiness, then you will understand our story for today. Because you see way back in Paul's lifetime,

churches that were filled with Jewish Christians took it to be a big part of their identity that they were Jewish. And they thought it was so important that to them, if you weren't Jewish, in other words if you were one of those Gentiles, then you couldn't be a real Christian. You weren't really a part of God's people. Now, you could become a real Christian, but you had to be Jewish first. And that meant you had to do Jewish things like if you were male you had to be circumcised, you had to eat kosher foods like Jews eat. You had to observe the Sabbath, and all the Sabbath rituals that the Jews observe. Being Jewish was important to these guys. It was every bit as important as being a big boy or a big girl is for a three year old.

And so this is why Paul turns to the story of Abraham in our New Testament passage for today. You may say "What does Abraham have to do with Christians living in the first century. Why not just talk about Jesus. There's not one mention of Jesus in this passage." Well, I guess Paul could talk about Jesus in this passage. But if you are Jewish, who is more important to your sense of Jewish identity than Abraham? Abraham was the father of the whole nation of Israel. He's like George Washington for Americans. And Paul goes back to the story in Genesis and he tells of how Abraham was promised that his descendants would be like the stars in the sky—and the book of Genesis says that Abraham believed that promise and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. It was reckoned to him as righteousness. Now, what is that about? Well, what Paul tells us from the story of Abraham is that what made Abraham the father of Israel was not because he was circumcised, or he ate kosher foods or he observed the Sabbath, but what made him the father of Israel was his faith. And so we should hear what is going on here when Paul says "the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith." We should hear what's

going on here. What Paul is actually saying in a nice way is, if you are trying to make other people Christian by going through a bunch of Jewish rituals, then not only do you not understand what it means to be a Christian, you don't understand what it means to be a Jew.

You see, we have all these people in the early church who want to be separate from all the non-Jews running around, they don't want to be infected by any of them, and Paul is hitting them where it hurts. He is saying to these people, if you would try to separate yourself from all these non-Jews, or try to make them into Jews before you make them into Christians, then you don't know the first thing, you don't know the first thing of what being Jewish is all about.

Ouch! Ouch! That's their whole sense of identity. That's their whole pride. That's like saying you're not a real American. You're not a real man. What kind of mother are you? What kind of father are you? That cuts deep. But Paul means it because he tells these people in the first century church that being Jewish is not about following a bunch of rituals. It is about having faith in God and while Paul doesn't say it explicitly in this passage, for Jewish Christians, that faith in God is also faith in Jesus Christ, and if you don't understand that someone else who has this faith in Jesus is just as good as you, then you don't know anything about being Jewish.

Now, before I go any further I think we should take a moment to appreciate what a brilliant move this is for Paul. For you see he's talking to these people who take their Jewish identity with the utmost importance, but as he's talking to them he doesn't say welcome these Gentiles as equals or else God is going to get you. You probably already know that won't work. He's not saying welcome these Gentiles as equals and stop taking your Jewishness so seriously. He knows that they will never stop taking their Jewishness seriously, and so he's hitting them right

where he knows it will hurt. He's hitting them right at the very heart of this sense of identity.

And you can bet they heard him loud and clear.

Well, of course we are a long way from the first century. But here's the thing. I would hope that if you are here today, then at least a part of what forms your identity is that you are a Presbyterian and more importantly a Christian. And I hope you value this identity. I hope you value this identity to the extent that if someone dared to say you weren't a real Christian, or said what kind of Christian are you, that you would be hurt or insulted by that. If someone said to you you're not a real Christian and you didn't care, you just said ok, I guess you're right, I would be concerned about you. It is good to value being one of God's children. But what Paul shows us is that you can value being a child of God so much that you no longer understand what it means to be a child of God. And in Paul's day that happened whenever people said my being Jewish makes me better than someone who's not Jewish, but I hope you agree that we no longer understand what it means to be a child of God whenever we say that our Christian identity makes us better than someone else. It doesn't. Sometime in your life, you have probably heard someone say "God I just can't wait until you get those people. I can't wait until you get those people who don't believe in you. I can't wait until you get those people who hate you and do all these things against you." Or if not, maybe you've met people who say "If I'm a Christian and you're not, I should have more rights and privileges than you." A friend of mine was pastor of a church one time, and in this church there was a woman who was an active member whose name was Frances and Frances was married to a guy named Ishmael. Now Ishmael would participate in all the fellowship events and he would come to church each Sunday along with Frances. He was a part of the church family. But Ishmael was Muslim, so he

would not join the church and he would not sing the hymns or participate in worship when he was there on Sunday, but he would sit quietly and respectfully with his wife. If you asked him why he didn't participate he would tell you that this was his wife's faith, it was not his. Well, according to this friend of mine, apparently one time there was a Session meeting at that church and they were discussing having a dinner at the church for an anniversary party which was being paid for out of church funds. Most people on the Session thought that was a good idea, but one person spoke up and said "That's fine if we want to have a free dinner but unless Ishmael decides that he believes what all of us believe I think he should be made to pay for his dinner." Fortunately, someone else had sense enough to speak up and say "If Ishmael pays for his dinner then everyone is paying for their dinner." Now, folks don't misunderstand me. I am sure the person who said that Ishmael should be singled out and made to pay for his dinner meant well. I am sure this was someone who valued being a Christian and who wanted Ishmael to be a Christian too. That's the way it should be. But the moment you start thinking that being a Christian makes you better than someone else is the moment you miss the entire point of the gospel. We are not children of God because we are such wonderful people. We are children of God because we are forgiven by God's grace and we are no more deserving of that grace than anybody else.

What is your identity? What are the things about yourself that you value, the things about your life you want people to stand around and talk about when they put you in the ground? Like the Jewish Christians of Paul's time who valued being descendants of Abraham, I hope that all of us value who we are as children of God, as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. But do not allow your gratitude to God for who you are as a Christian be turned into an arrogant pride. Do

not allow valuing who you are, to make you forget what the gospel is all about, what God's grace is all about.