

January 18, 2015 -- Second Sunday of Epiphany

“Light from Darkness: Washed, Sanctified and Justified” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 6:11-20; John 1:43-51

A few days ago, I listened in as Rhiannon talked with one of her college friends. Rhiannon is going to be 18 in two months. She is almost a legal adult. As I listened to her talk with her friend, I thought to myself, in typical adult male fashion, “*Man, she and her friends spend a lot of time talking about who they are or who they want to be.*” I tried to remember back to my days as a teenager.

My few friends and I used to go out on warm summer nights and do various things like climb buildings, break into the ventilation tunnels at the college in town and go to the top of the Olympic training ski jump at the edge of town. At the top of the ski jump we would talk about philosophy and the world and other things while we watched the stars late at night. As I tried to remember those conversations, all I could remember were very intellectual and very important things we discussed. If I were honest, I would guess much of our discussion revolved around who we were and who we wanted to be, just like Rhiannon and her friend.

Our readings today are all about identity - who we identify with, who we consider ourselves to be and who we want to be as Christians. Jesus says “*Follow me*” to Philip, and Philip doesn’t even blink before he does just that. Philip’s very first act after following Jesus is to go out and evangelize. His best friend, Nathanael, though, is a bit of a hard case. Nathanael has identity issues.

Philip tells Nathanael, “*Everything we have learned from the rabbis and the prophets has come to pass! The Messiah is here! He is a man named Jesus, from Nazareth!*”

Nathanael responds by saying, and I am paraphrasing here, “*Seriously, dude? Nazareth? Do you know the people from Nazareth? Have you been there? Have you ever seen anything good come from there?*” The equivalent for us would be, “*Has anything good ever come from the Jersey Shore?*”

Nathanael takes pride in his lineage, his past, his town, where everybody is like him. He takes pride in his identity. Philip has learned quickly, however. He understands that God’s work in the world takes precedence over any human identity we might give ourselves. He knows that to argue against any of those identities is a fool’s errand. Identity concerns sound ridiculous when the reasons for not following the Son of God are, “*Oh, he is from Nazareth*”, or, “*Oh, he is Jewish*”, or, “*Oh, he is male*”, or, “*Oh, his skin is dark, or pale, or reddish, or yellowish*”? Philip sees this sort of excuse-making for what it is and simply says to Nathanael, “*Come and see.*”

That is really what this is all about, isn’t it? Just come and see. “*Let yourself be changed by what you see. Let yourself be transformed by the presence of God.*”

When we hear Paul’s impassioned pleas to the Corinthians, it is these identity issues that are underneath them. Let’s remember that the new Corinthian church is right

in the middle of one of the wealthiest metropolitan areas of the empire. Merchants, power brokers, intellectuals, world-class athletes and artists all circulate in the market square. The very wealthy and free men of the city all owned slaves. At the temples of Corinth and the surrounding areas, the entrance fee was to pay a prostitute, either male or female, it didn't matter. If you lived in Corinth, you lived in the shining decadent star of Greece.

To make sense of Paul today, we need to understand one more thing: for the Corinthians and for the Roman worldview of the day, there was a strict separation between the spirit and the body. This is why a slave was important. The slave was an extension of his master's body. The harm of physical exertion and work was taken on by the slave, so that the master could focus on accelerating his spiritual, political and intellectual life. The risk of injury, harm, overwork, exhaustion and even death could be transferred off to the slave. The identity of the master was whatever he chose - politician, follower of Apollo, dilettante. The identity of the slave, however, was completely tied up in his master.

Paul walks into Corinth with strange talk of this Jesus dying on a cross and being raised bodily again. He talks of being enslaved, yet free. He talks of Christ's body. Some of his talk sounds like lists of rules and behavior alterations. It sounds difficult and harsh and incredibly judgmental.

Worst of all, he is messing with their sex lives. Like us in 21st century America, the Corinthians were obsessed with sex. And like the Corinthians, our attempt to argue by way of sex and sexuality when we are so obsessed is a run down the rabbit-hole and misses the point completely of what Paul is trying to tell the Corinthians.

I want to suggest two things when we read Paul's rant about sexual immorality: **First**, with whom do we want to share our temple of the Holy Spirit? How do we want this temple to travel in this world? Do we want it to be defined by the things of this world, this culture; or do we want it to be sanctified by the God who has claimed us? **Second**, whenever you hear about prostitution and sexual immorality in Scripture, we should always hear two words - *idolatry and infidelity*.

In America, we have created an idol of sex. This does not mean we, as Christians, should avoid it. Nor does it mean, however, that we give into it. It does mean we seek to sanctify sex and sexuality. Sex is of the body and is therefore of God. Know therefore that any conversation about sex, sexuality and all of its derivations in our day and age, are a labyrinth exploring the nature and contours of the idol.

Rise above that discussion, and remember you are no longer identified by who you have been, remember who you are becoming and who claims you. Don't participate in the idolatry. This is not about rules. This is not even about right or wrong. This is about who and what we will worship.

And it is about fidelity. The God who has chosen you, body and soul, claims you for his own. *Infidelity* is the word the Prophets use when they speak of Israel drifting away from God. It is no different for us. In fact, I would suggest the best way to read Scripture

is as a witness, in both Old and New Testament, to the impact of infidelity to God, of forgetting and compromising on the promises God has made with us through Jesus Christ. Calvin says we should read this section of Corinthians as intended “*to magnify the efficacy and dignity of the spiritual marriage which subsists between us and Christ*” (from Calvin’s Commentary on 1 Corinthians).

Paul’s words have to be framed then from the perspective of identity: Who are we, who are you, in Christ? After Paul lists off a whole bunch of aberrant behaviors, he begins this entire section by saying, “*Such were some of you (sinners). But you were **washed**, you were **sanctified**, you were **justified** in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*”

Let’s look at each of these - washed, sanctified and justified-, let’s come and see, as Philip says, what this means for the Way of Christ. These are heavy theological terms, but let’s just keep it simple and take these words in the context of identity:

Being **washed** refers to “*Who we have been*”.

Being **sanctified** refers to “*Who we are becoming*”.

Being **justified** refers to “*Who claims us*”.

WASHED

Nathanael has issues based on who he *has been*. He identifies with his hometown, his family, his background and training. In our day and age, the most pernicious and destructive identity, I believe, is also the most false and least determinative: that of *race*.

No branch of science even acknowledges the idea of ‘race’ anymore. Genetically, there is no such thing. Anthropologically, there is so much mixing of location and peoples, it makes the separation of different races a pure fantasy. Race is purely a creation of cultures of power in order to maintain power and has no foundation.

On this day, the day before we honor the great Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., let’s acknowledge what he knew to be true - “*I look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character*”.

If our designation of race as an identifier is meaningless, what other ones might be as well? This is why Paul tells us, “*There is no Jew or Gentile, there is no slave or master, there is no male or female*” (Gal 3:28).

When we are baptized, then, we are washed clean of all those things we have used to identify ourselves with our past. Or to put it another way: we are no longer identified with who we have been. This does not mean we cannot find meaning in our past relationships or experiences; it does mean, however, that our landscape for understanding those relationships and experiences has been changed forever. Because we are baptized in Christ, because we have been washed in the same way Jesus was, our past is no longer the way we identify ourselves. That is why Paul says, again paraphrasing, “*You used to be this way. You used to use your past and who you thought you were to do all kinds of things - drink, have sex with anything that moves, treat people poorly, steal, cheat - and think there would be no impact. You can get away with that if you*

believe the body and the spirit are not one. You can get away with that if your identity is one which is completely defined by the culture you no longer live in.”

The newly baptized Corinthians are called to understand that they do not live there anymore. Their mindset and point of view must shift radically to catch up to the Holy Spirit.

SANCTIFIED

Once we have ejected the limiting and self-oriented identification with our past and culture, we can begin to live into who we are becoming in Christ. This is what *sanctification* means; it means becoming the person God intends us to be by the power of the Holy Spirit, who has come to reside in us when we accepted a life in Christ.

From the perspective of the Holy Spirit, there are no rules. “*All things are lawful for me*”, Paul says. None of this is about rules. It is about what brings us closer to the Holy Spirit and what pushes us away from the Holy Spirit. Paul adds to that phrase, “*not all things are helpful*” and “*I will not be enslaved by anything*” (to which I would add *in this world*).

When we are being sanctified, or made holy, by having been set apart by God through our baptism in Christ, something dramatic changes within us. We share a future in Christ. Among all the other things that means, this means a direct rejection of the separation between the body and the spirit. If we share a future in Christ, it means we are becoming like Christ and we therefore share *both body and spirit* with Jesus Christ.

This is why we use the phrase “*This is my body, given for you. Take and eat. This is my blood, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Take and drink*”. This is bodily, shared, experiential spiritual work. It is how we become *the body of Christ*, individually and communally. Now bodily acts can actually harm us spiritually. Now, we can become enslaved to things of the body - because we are becoming fully embodied in our faith.

Sanctification is the work of sharing in Christ in body and in spirit, becoming like Christ, in these bodies, in this place, with these people, in this physical, created world.

JUSTIFIED

Nathanael is an excuse-maker. He justifies his attitudes and experience in his identity with his past. There is no reason to believe the Messiah would come from Nazareth. There is no reason to leave the comfort of the shade of the olive tree to go and see another so-called Messiah.

But Nathanael has another quality which Jesus sees in him - he is also “*a man of no deceit*.” He may make excuses. He may be a product of his culture. But he is not a liar. He will respond to truth when he sees it.

And Nathanael is loyal. He is loyal to his friend Philip; he at least owes it to his friend to “*Come and see*”. So when he goes to Jesus with Philip, Nathanael sees the truth - that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. Nathanael sees because he has been seen by Jesus. Jesus responds to this by saying, again I paraphrase, “*That is all it took? For me to see you?*”

Well, now that you are here, hang around a while and I will show you the very ladder, the very promises, which were given to our ancestor, Jacob, when he saw the angels of the Lord coming and going to and from heaven itself.”

For Nathanael, for Philip, for Paul and for the Corinthians, and for us, who have been washed in baptism and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, we know ourselves to be claimed by God. This is our justification for who we are now. *“You are not your own”* anymore, Paul says.

We know we are no longer defined or justified by our past. Now we share a future in Christ, and we know that our bodies, our actual bodies, and what we do with them have an impact on our relationships with one another and with God. *Do you not know that you, each of us, all of us here today, are a temple of the Holy Spirit within?*

Our life of faith, our experience with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, only makes sense from the inside out. We cannot define or understand it based on who we have been. We must, like Nathanael, *“come and see”*, and allow ourselves to be transformed by God. We must let God move our entire foundation to a new land, a new world. We need to remember who we are becoming and who has claimed us. Let us be defined by God. Let us identify solely with the one who has died for us, who has embodied us and who claims us. To accept it to be so means, *“we will see greater things than these. Truly, truly, I say to you, we will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”*

Amen.