

Lent V Year C: 6 / 7 April 2019

St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

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“Paul’s admonition is to look forward to life in Christ and not cling to past ideas of what is or is not acceptable for membership in the faith community... You need to know where you have come from, but you need to be attentive to what lies ahead. Our destination isn’t survival, but life in Christ, which is giving witness to God’s love beyond the doors of our community.”

Isaiah 43: 16-21

Philippians 3: 4b- 14

John 12: 1-8

Psalm 126

Identity politics, one of the buzzwords in our current cultural atmosphere, is defined as a tendency for people of a particular religion, race, social background, etc., to form exclusive political alliances, moving away from traditional broad-based party politics. Forming alliances based solely on one’s identity – in whatever form that takes – from which to assail those outside the insular alliance is a prevailing attitude within many political as well as religious communities. The paradigm is this: if you are not with us, you are against us and must be rendered mute or vanquished. Identity politics is about dominance and subjugation; about one ideology prevailing over competing beliefs.

In a culture where one’s identity has become fluid, meaning it is more grey than black and white, uncertainty emerges along with fear of the unknown from which identity politics arises. White nationalism didn’t happen in a vacuum, nor did the rise of religious “right.” We fear what we do not know, especially if it challenges our privilege. We fear what is perceived as a threat to the status quo, a status quo that derives its power from unjust structures that favor one demographic over and against another. Some may argue that this is a newfound idea, but we would be mistaken. Throughout his ministry to the gentiles, Paul encountered this

exclusivistic ideology among his own associates. By that I mean his fellow Jews, especially the Jewish leadership.

Paul has a résumé that any Jewish man would envy. He bears the mark of the covenant on his body, he belongs to the favored social group, his familial lineage is impeccable, he studied law and passed the bar thus becoming a Pharisee who then went forth in zeal to prosecute and persecute those who did not adhere to the Law of Moses and proper temple practices. Paul had it made with so much going for him. Yet, he eschews it all in the name of Christ Jesus. Though he has the pedigree, for Paul, it is all for naught. It is meaningless in the grand scope of faith. Paul shifts identity: from cultural and religious norms and expectations, to identify as a disciple of Jesus, a follower of the Way. Paul denounces claims of privilege and exclusive rights in favor of fellowship with God through Christ Jesus. That is the transformation of Paul's life: from Pharisee to follower of the Way.

In the community of Philippi, Paul's argument is not with the Philippians, per se, but with those who have dogged him throughout his evangelism of the Gentiles. In Paul's time, Judaizers, were Jewish followers of Jesus who taught that Gentiles needed to bear the mark of the covenant and adopt Jewish customs and practices, essentially become "Jewish," in order to be a true follower of Jesus. This way, they reasoned, Gentiles can participate fully in the Covenant. Over and over again, Paul argues that this exclusivistic ideology was not essential. Matter-of-fact, it was a hindrance, an unnecessary obstacle. Paul's argument with the Judaizers was that in Christ Jesus, the former divisions are meaningless and that the Covenant is made permeable through Christ's crucifixion. The identity required by the Judaizers for membership is now vacated by the inclusiveness of Jesus' death and resurrection. For Paul, the way forward is in fellowship with Jesus. It is not – as the Judaizers argued – by looking back and adhering to past practices and traditions, which in Paul's understanding no longer gives or provides life to the people. Paul puts it this way: "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead."

What shapes our identity? That is the question this fifth Sunday in Lent is asking of us. And it is a relevant question to ask a Christian as well as a Christian community. Too often, the answer is exclusivistic. Much like the Judaizers, there are those who believe that unless you

practice faith as they do, accept their interpretation and teaching of scripture, abide by their rules and by-laws, you cannot be part of the community. That is the nature of exclusivism. It excludes those who do not conform to their ideology and theology. Inclusivity, on the other hand, is more welcoming of the dissenter.

There are many churches (regardless of denomination) that advertise they are welcoming communities. Whatever your identity, you are welcome to their service, their worship, their fellowship. It's a wonderful idea, but in practice, many fall short of unconditional welcome. "Come; be a part of our community" is the essence of a welcoming church. However, it can and often does fall prey to hegemony. We include you, however, this is how we do things. You have different ideas. Wonderful, now let us teach you our methods. After all, this is how it has always been done. In other words, hidden in inclusivity, lurking in its shadow, is privilege of place and adherence to the community's accepted practices and traditions, which is simply another form of conformity. Paul wants nothing to do with either of these ideologies because in Christ these divisions give way to a pluralistic world view predicated upon God's love. Community building is not dependent upon conformity other than conforming to Christ crucified, where the identity divisions are erased.

Imagine a faith community that invites and welcomes the stranger in their midst to fellowship and allows itself to be transformed by the stranger's presence and gifts. Instead of trying to teach the stranger our ways, we accept them as they are. I am talking about mutual vulnerability. The humility of one group to incorporate another without prior conditions and restrictions. I am talking about letting go of our identity – those things that we deem important, whether ritual practice, traditional teaching, or normative customs, and claiming a new identity in Christ Jesus.

In order to move forward, we need to forget what lies behind. That's not to say we don't learn from the past or honor the past. It means we are not shackled to the past. Paul's admonition is to look forward to life in Christ and not cling to past ideas of what is or is not acceptable for membership in the faith community. As anyone who drives knows, if you only look in the rearview mirror at what is behind you, you will crash the automobile. You need to know where you have come from, but you need to be attentive to what lies ahead. Our

destination isn't survival, but life in Christ, which is giving witness to God's love beyond the doors of our community.

We are on the cusp of Holy Week and we are being asked this day what shapes our identity, what shapes our community. Are we going to answer those questions like the Judaizers, making things conditional? Or are we, in faith, going to answer them in humility and vulnerability? How we answer the questions depend on what gives shape to our identity. For Paul, that is Christ crucified. I pray it is the same for all of us who profess to be disciples of Jesus and followers of the Way.