

Sermon Series: Who We Are as Christians
Part 1: We Are Redeemed
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July 12, 2020

Romans 3:21-16; John 1:9-14

Today, I am beginning a 4-part sermon series titled, “Who We Are as Christians” This week I’ll be preaching on the fact that, We Are Redeemed, next week I’ll preach that We Are Called, on the 28th We Are Empowered, and on the 2nd of August, We Are the Church. I hope you will learn a little more about who you are during this sermon series as we study the scriptures together.

The story of scripture is a story of God’s redemptive work. From the beginning of the Bible to the end, God’s chief goal / God’s mission is to bring us back into a right relationship with Godself. You see, in the beginning God created humanity to love and to know and to be in relationship with Godself. We know the story, Adam and Eve lived with God in the Garden of Eden, but then tragedy. They disobeyed God and their sin separated them from God. They were cast out of the garden. Their sin caused a great rift that God has been working to repair so that we can experience that garden relationship again.

You know I have had some broken relationships throughout my life. Sometimes it has been my fault and I have done harm to someone. Other times it has been because someone wronged me. In my high school years I was a new, zealous Christian. Sometimes my zeal got the best of me and I was not exactly the best example or witness for Jesus Christ. At times I might have been kind of like the guy with a bullhorn who stands on the street corner preaching hellfire and brimstone. There were moments I was not gentle and kind as the scriptures call us to be. Paul says in 2 Timothy that we are to correct our opponents with gentleness. Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15, “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.” Proverbs 15 calls a gentle tongue a “tree of life”. We could all use a little more gentleness in how we respond to one another. Anyways, one of my track running mates called me a hypocrite one day. And I did not take it gracefully and instead, an argument ensued that did harm to our relationship. Looking back, I realize how immature and silly I was – how my zeal

was not tempered with love but was bound to pride. Thankfully, even in my immaturity, I recognized that I had wronged that friend of mine. I was able to apologize for the way I had acted AND for being a hypocrite. Something happened in that authentic and heartfelt apology. I really did mean what I said when I apologized. I think he could tell it was authentic and it healed our relationship. It is interesting to me that oftentimes when we apologize and seek forgiveness, relationships are strengthened to be even better than they were before the person was wronged. Well, that was the case here too. Our friendship grew as a result.

Now that is a typical forgiveness story, right? But consider our loving God and God's forgiveness story. We have sinned against God and others. We have done harm to God's purposes and God's mission of redemption. God has never wronged us. However, even though we are the ones who have sinned against God, it is God who has done all the work to repair the damage done to our relationship. The creator of the universe; eternal and almighty, thought us so important that God chose to suffer and die for us. And God pursues us and seeks after us and woos us. Like the story of the 99 sheep and the one who is lost and wandering, the shepherd goes after that lost sheep. So too does God love us and come after us.

We think ourselves so valueless sometimes. We look at ourselves and we wonder if there is anything of worth. But the same God who has created a universe of billions of galaxies and trillions of stars, of unimaginable complexity that our scientists have only scratched the surface, thought you valuable enough to die for you. You might think, "God, but my sins and my thoughts – the things I've done.... How could you possibly love me God?" Then you have people like the Apostle Paul. He admitted to being a persecutor of Christians who persecuted people to their deaths. He oversaw the stoning of the first known Christian martyr, Stephen. Today, we would call Paul, "Murderer, terrorist." Then you have someone like the thief who was on the cross next to Jesus. Some of us might say he had wasted his life on crime as he admitted to his thievery. However, in that short moment of repentance with Jesus, Jesus declared to him, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." These are just two sinners of so many in the Bible who we find redeemed out of God's great love for them.

God loves sinners and God's love for us is infinite and unconditional. The scriptures remind us that nothing can separate from God's great love. You see

folks, this is the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Though we are sinners who have sinned against God and others, we have a God who loves us, who will do anything to save us, even die for us. And that's exactly what God did.

Sometimes we need a reminder of how God sees us, of who we are in God's eyes, so that we can remember to see others in that same way. We must value the sinners around us, even the worst of sinners who are like the Apostle Paul. We must see the potential for redemption; that God desires to see all people saved. God desires all people to one day be at the table, to celebrate at the heavenly banquet. We must not forget God's heart towards people. We must not become judgmental and forget that God forgave a sinner like me. We must not become prideful of our virtue and our faith and forget that the scriptures say that none of us are innocent. Dear church, this is one of the problems I see. Those who have experienced God's redemption can sometimes be the first to not see the potential for redemption in others. We see the criminal and instead of compassion like Jesus had for that thief on the cross, we condemn and judge and look on them with disdain and pity them and see very little hope for them. However, God sees a child of God, a masterpiece of God's own creation, a person of sacred worth, and a person worth dying for.

We oftentimes don't see people the same way God does. The lack of gentleness and kindness and compassion and forgiveness I see in the world today, especially on social media and in the new can be disheartening. I will strive to not contribute to that lack of love. I will strive to view every human being as person of sacred worth. I will see the potential and hope for redemption of all people. I will feel in my heart, the love that God has for the least and the lost; the imprisoned, the people with the worst reputations, the worst of sinners. I will forgive people who have done harm to me and to others I love, just as Jesus did when he cried out from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." I will love my enemies and pray for those who persecute me. This is the unconditional love of God. That though we did not deserve it, God loved us anyways. Though we did not do anything to earn it, God poured out grace for our sake. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Accept that grace by faith and you will be redeemed.

Jesus Christ died for us and was raised from the dead into new life. He was given up for our sins and raised for our salvation. If we are in Christ, we are forgiven of our sins and now possess the promise of this new life in Christ. But

what about the victims of sin? What about the victims of violence and injustice and unspeakable harm that people suffer? One of the theologians I studied in seminary said that the Psalms remind us that God is righteous because he gives right to those who suffer violence and injustice. Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection is also for those who have suffered. God identifies with those who suffer as Christ was humiliated, tortured, and hung on a cross. Jesus had to struggle with forgiveness for the very people who put him on the cross. Christ was tempted to avoid this suffering while he was in the Garden of Gethsemane, but ultimately he said, "Father, take this cup from me, BUT not my will but yours be done." Sometimes we are the victims of sin. Other times we are the perpetrators of sin. Whether we find ourselves as a perpetrator or a victim, Christ died for you and can identify with you. You are worth it to Christ. You have sacred worth to God. As someone who is in Christ; who has declared Jesus Christ as your Lord; you have been redeemed into a new life with Christ. This new life in Christ is now, here in the present as we strive with God to make earth a little bit more like heaven and strive to build the Kingdom of God here. This new life in Christ is now, here in the present, as we grow in our closeness to God and as our relationship with God deepens. This new life in Christ is now, here in the present, as our hearts are transformed by the Holy Spirit working in us, making us more like Christ. However, this new life in Christ is also not yet. It is a promise, a dream of a future with God forever in paradise. This new life in Christ is both here and not yet. Praise God for this new life in Christ. Praise God that we are redeemed. Amen.