

Isaiah 51:1-6; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A few weeks back I mentioned I was hosting a family reunion for 22 people on my mother's side. That was the sermon where I wondered how big a roaster pan of baked beans I would need. For those of you who are curious, I used not my largest roaster pan, but the middle-sized one ("And it was juuusst right"). I still had more than enough baked beans, but we enjoyed the leftovers immensely.

The family reunion itself turned out as well as the baked beans, considering we attendees hardly knew each other. There were cousins I had not seen since 1980, when they were only ages 6 and 4, and now are married with children. Oh, there were awkward moments, as we introduced ourselves, as we tried to figure out where everyone would sit and who brought what and then what we would do first. But there were also some wonderful moments where we gathered around old photo albums, where my children found games to play with the youngest guests, and where we all took turns at the crank on the ice cream maker.

Family reunions on my mother's side used to be a matter of course in the 1950's, '60's, '70's and '80's. My Grandma was from a family of 14, and no Fourth of July went by without a huge gathering at the home of my Great Aunt Marian. Food and fireworks, badminton and horseshoes, games of rummy and Racko—I remember those wonderful reunions, and so do my mother and my aunt. My **younger** cousins, however, have few recollections of those days.

I think that's one of the things that drew my two youngest cousins, Chip and Matt, to the reunion at my house—the fact that they **couldn't** remember reunions up on the hill at Aunt Marian's. And no wonder they didn't remember. In 1980, their father—my mother's brother—was in a car accident. He lived for 6 weeks in intensive care at Geisinger Medical Center up in Danville. Then Uncle John died, leaving his wife Trudy, and their boys—my cousins—Chip and Matt. Trudy remarried not long after that. Her second husband was very good at helping her raise the boys. But still they moved away, and we simply lost contact with each other, except for the rare Christmas card or letter.

I believe that Chip and Matt needed to come to **this** family reunion a few weeks ago in order somehow to connect with the family reunions of **years** ago. In our conversations, it was evident these boys-now-turned-men wanted to know about their father (and his family) from the family itself. They knew some things about their father, but it was in the midst of our gathering where they learned more. And I believe it was important for Chip and Matt to **know** more about their father because it helped them know more about themselves. It deepened their sense of their identity as they learned where they came from.

"Listen to me," says the prophet Isaiah, "*you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug...*" Isaiah here urges the people of Israel to remember from whence they came. The rock from which they were hewn was Abraham, and his wife Sarah, two ordinary people who had been called by God into extraordinary lives, blessed by God to be the first parents of an entire nation—the people Israel, who in turn also would be blessed by this God. Isaiah wants the Israelites to remember they are descendants of Abraham and Sarah, and to take comfort in that knowledge. Israel **needs** comfort and reassurance, because at the time that Isaiah is speaking to Israel, the people are few in number, living in exile and oppression, seemingly without a foundation or home or identity at all. The prophet reminds the exiled Israelites that Abraham and Sarah, too, had felt all alone, only to be upheld and strengthened by God for the tremendous future ahead of

them. And it is this God and his saving power for his people, says Isaiah, which will outlast all things, and endure forever.

Isaiah's words connect the exiled Israelites once again to the promises the Lord God gave their ancestors, connect them once again to the flesh-and-blood people of God who came before them. That connection gives them an identity. Having that identity, they are called to trust this God and follow Him, just as Abraham and Sarah did. And then the words and deeds of the rest of their lives are to flow out from that particular identity they share as God's people.

At one point in my family reunion two weeks ago, my cousin Chip and I stood in my kitchen and talked for awhile, just the two of us. He recalled a dim memory of when his father helped me move to my first apartment after college. My uncle had driven a small U-Haul and, with my parents and me, carried my few boxes of personal possessions and used furniture up two flights of steps. Chip was only 5—he didn't remember much, and I'm sure he didn't carry much either, but he remembered a little, and he asked me about that day, and his Dad, what the apartment looked like, and what we'd done. Perhaps it appears an inconsequential conversation—we didn't discuss important things politics or religion or philosophy. We simply recalled a particular day in our lives. But it provided Chip with another scrap of memory about his Dad. And I experienced something rather interesting as well. As Chip and I stood and talked in my kitchen, I recalled the day back in 1979 when his father and I did the very same thing in my **childhood** kitchen—we simply stood together in that kitchen and talked at length. His father—my Uncle John—was visiting me and my parents in order to attend my brother's funeral. (I suppose it is the height of irony that my brother died in a car accident, and my uncle would die the same way less than a year later.) Anyway, my Uncle and I stood and talked and talked in my parents' kitchen, and I remember how comforting and strong and steady his voice was for me at a very painful, awful time. And now I stood in my own kitchen with his grown son, Chip, and I felt as if my Uncle John was right there with us. As if the family reunion was a much larger gathering than any of us there could imagine. Because somehow we were connected once again to people who'd gone before us—Grandma Burglund, Uncle John, my brother Danny and so many others we loved. Somehow we were connected once again to the wonderful gifts that their lives had been for us, the foundations their lives laid for us. That connection gave us an identity as a family. And it is my hope that the remainder of our lives will be shaped by that identity we share.

It's not just our Old Testament text which deals with identity, but also our Gospel lesson. It's a story where the identity of Jesus shapes the identity of his followers. Typically we read where the disciple Peter blurts out things before he thinks, and that is often a weakness on his part. This time, however, he blurts out something that Jesus recognizes as a revelation from God. Peter has been gifted with a moment of divine insight. Jesus asks the disciples who people think he really is. They say that some people think he's the prophet Elijah returned to earth, or maybe even John the Baptist. Jesus presses the identity question: *But who do you say that I am?* And it is Peter who answers without hesitation: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*

Peter has been blessed to see that Jesus is the connection between the disciples and the original chosen people of God—the nation of Israel, even Abraham and Sarah. Jesus is the connection between the disciples and the God they believe created heaven and earth. It is Jesus' identity as the Jewish Messiah, the Christ, Son of the living God, which links the disciples with the people of God in every generation, and links them with God himself and his kingdom. You might say Peter has remembered the rock from which he'd been hewn, and the quarry from which he'd been dug. For knowing Jesus' identity now shapes Peter's own identity. Jesus certainly makes that clear as he renames Peter. With that renaming of Peter as the rock, Jesus announces that the words and deeds of the rest of Peter's life will flow out from this particular identity he has. Peter will be a leader, the foremost disciple of Jesus Christ, a proclaimer of the good news of God's love for the world. And that proclamation will be what draws new generations of people into God's family.

When you get right down to it, the Church, and the individual congregations that make up the Church, are like a family reunion. Like the reunion I recently hosted, it can be a little awkward here, gathering with people you may not know very well or at all, attempting to become not just acquaintances, but to live in relationship with each other as Christ's brothers and sisters. Like the reunion I hosted, we may find it difficult here in our congregation to figure out what we're supposed to do—what our mission is, what gifts each of us has for the good of our ministry here and how we make use of those gifts, what God intends us to be as his people in this place, and how he wants us to serve others. But also like the reunion I hosted, this fellowship of ours is plainly wonderful. We strive for a mutuality of purpose, we have concern for one another and bear each other's burdens, we remind each other of the rock from which we've been hewn—and it all starts as we hear in our scripture and experience in our worship that we're part of the Body of Christ. We're connected to Jesus himself. And we're connected to Jesus' followers of every time and place (that's the communion of saints, my friends); we're connected to the people of God throughout history who have come to trust in his name and ask for his blessings and seek his will. It is in this place where those connections are made that our identity can be shaped, nurtured, strengthened, so that we can go into the world with the love of God. And the words and deeds of the rest of our lives will flow out from this very particular identity with which God graces us.

If you've been a part of this congregation for awhile, we're so glad to have you here at our reunion. If you are worshiping with us for the first time, then welcome to the family! **AMEN.**