

“A Question of Identity”

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

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Ephesians 1: 3-14

So, it was a hard call, but I decided to preach on Ephesians rather than the beheading of John the Baptist. But there's a thread that runs through all of these—and it's the question of identity.

King Herod is trying to figure out who Jesus is—and the conclusion he comes to is that he must be John the baptizer raised from the dead.

Amos gets questioned about his identity as a prophet, as one who speaks God's word to the people, when he says things that the powerful do not want to hear.

And then in that difficult reading from Ephesians—that is hard to understand but filled with some of the best theology there is, we get this description of our identity—we are adopted children of God. Not just adopted children but adopted through Jesus Christ.

I'm going to be honest and say that I do not fully 100% understand this. I also know that my experience with adoption is just one window into this text—and that adoption in the time of Jesus and Paul was a different story—one that didn't seem to have all the layers of emotion and self-understanding that we have.

Adoption in antiquity was much more of a legal and social arrangement. It was straightforward, in the sense that an adopted child was the equivalent of a child by birth.

Actually, in Roman law (which was the law of the land during the time of Paul), an adopted person's status was even better than a biological son or daughter. That's because, in Roman law, you could disown your biological child for a variety of reasons. But, because adoption was an intentional choice, *you could never disown your adopted child*.

So, when we hear this word that we are children of God by adoption, it's a message that our place in God's family is ultra-secure. We will never be rejected or disowned or thrown out of the family—no matter what we do.

I think this is really hard for us to believe. This passage in Ephesians is quite possibly the most exuberant expression of grace in the Bible. Paul just keeps pouring it on. *God has chosen us before the foundation of the world*. It's original blessing not original sin. The basis of our relationship with God is not how *bad*—or *good*—we are but how much God loves us.

Yesterday was Clare's Gotcha Day—21 years ago, we got Clare and she got us. But our love for her didn't start on that day. I'm not sure exactly when it started but I definitely remember how real it felt when we turned in a stack of paperwork that was about the size and weight of a baby. And then, there's the picture of Paul and me getting the FEDEX delivery with Clare's picture and the news that we had been matched in China. Our faces are the picture of unfettered joy! And all of that love and joy was there before we even met Clare—before she did anything.

*Before the foundation of the world, God loved us.*

Not just in a warm, fuzzy feeling kind of way but in an active bringing us into the family kind of way.

For just a quick second, let that sink in.

I think there is some irony that our most fundamental identity is as adopted children. I say that because almost all adopted kids struggle with their identity at various points in their lives.

Wrestling with that question of who we are is a natural part of being human at this point in history—and in this culture. It's the primary question of adolescents and young adults.

And it's a question that comes up at big turning points in our lives. Turning points that often seem to define who we are—I'm unemployed; I'm retired; I'm the one whose partner has died; I'm divorced; I'm married; I'm a new parent; I'm whatever new job I have. It's also a question that comes up with long term struggles—sometimes it seems as if our illness or our role as caregiver or whatever challenge or disability we have *is* all that we are.

And under all these questions about who we are, is a deeper question, are we worth loving? Does our life have value? When you put us on a scale, will our value outweigh all the pain and hurt we have caused?

It is a rare child who has been adopted who doesn't struggle with the pain of rejection and abandonment. There are other truths that can be spoken into this pain. Truths like your birthparents couldn't care for a child when you were born and making an adoption plan was the most loving thing they could do. Truths like your birthparents had their own struggles with addiction or mental illness and it was not safe for any child to stay with them.

These truths can fill out the picture but they can't take away the primal pain—that sense that there had to be something fundamentally wrong with me—because otherwise my birthparents would have found some way to keep me.

What I have seen, is that most of us—whether we are adopted or not—struggle with this fundamental question of our worth. I am not a psychologist or sociologist but I think these big questions about our worth are being played out in our common life in this country—by leaders, as well as ordinary people.

As people of faith—as Christians—as children adopted by God through Christ—we have another level of both struggle and truth.

Our three daughters have all struggled with the rejection and abandonment that are a part of their story. And sometimes they have lashed out with, “You're not my mother. You're not my father.”

Those words hurt—but not as much as knowing how much pain they are in at the moment they are saying them.

I think there are times when we lash out at God in the same way. When we're feeling rejected and abandoned. When our pain takes over and becomes all that we know. We push the surest love we have away.

But just because we say, “Go away, God. You’re not my mother. You’re not my father. You couldn’t possibly love me that much—I’m not worth it.”—just because we say that doesn’t make it true. In those moments, I believe God is aching knowing the pain we are in.

And, God is there ready always to receive us—to forgive us—to help us forgive ourselves—to hold us tight with a love that is longer-lasting than our pain—because we are adopted children who will never be disowned.

We don’t spend enough of our lives in this place.

The pain, the self-doubt is fed by the judgment that comes at us from so many places. As welcoming and accepting as we are, we are human and that judgment can be here as well.

But our calling is to speak God’s word to each other and to the world. Just like Amos was taken from his ordinary work and life to speak God’s word, we have each been taken out of the ordinary ways of evaluation, and put here to offer each other reminders of how unalterably valuable we are—how beloved by God we are.

Each of our daughters has reminded a sister of how much we love them—at a time when they seemed to feel cut off from that love. Not too long ago, after one said, “You’re not my mother. You don’t care about me,” the other said, “Your birthmother loves you very much. But Mama loves you even more because she’s the one who’s taken care of you.”

We look at what God has done for us—given us this beautiful world and this amazing thing called life. We remind each other that even before all this, *God has loved us and claimed us as children*. God’s love for us is the surest, most secure thing there is. It’s the foundation of the whole world.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.