

**+ 1 Peter 2:4-10 + Living Hope Identifies with Christ +
+ Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 5th Sunday of Easter + 14 May 2017 +**

CIR HIRI!¹

Who do you identify with? What do you identify with? Awkwardly worded questions that everyone seems to be asking questions like that these days. Do I identify with this group? With this person? With this organization or race or generation or gender or culture? Am I conservative or liberal or somewhere in between? Are you male or female or...? So many people are struggling to define their identity. So many are struggling to define who they are, and this society-wide struggle with identity permeates our entire culture. It seems like the air we breathe is filled with confusion about identity and who we are. It's no wonder, then, if you and I struggle to know our own identity.

So what is my identity? Today is Mother's Day—a day to celebrate God's gift of mothers and grandmothers and mothers in the faith. Some people know me as the son of Carolyn Gumm or as the grandson of Betty Gumm or of Florence Degnitz. A month from now we'll celebrate Father's Day. Some people know me as the son of Pr. Alan Gumm or as the grandson of George Gumm or of Willard Degnitz, but are family relationships or family history truly my identity? Are you defined by your family relationships or family history?

We've entered the season of graduations. Throughout May and June, classes are graduating from colleges and universities, high schools and kindergartens. I'm proud to say that I'm a graduate of Luther Preparatory School, Martin Luther College, and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, but is my relationship to any of those schools truly my identity? Are you defined by any schools you've attended or jobs you've held or groups you've joined?

Let's broaden this search beyond families and organizations. Is the amount of melanin pigment in my skin truly my identity? Does the color of skin really define who I am or who you are? Or the fact that I'm male. Is my gender truly my identity? Does the fact that you are either biologically male or female define who you are? How about my social status? Is my personal location on the economic spectrum truly my identity? Does your social status define who you are? How about my cultural background? Is the western/American culture in which I grew up truly my identity? Does the culture in which you grew up define you? How about the church body or congregation in which I hold membership? Does being WELS or a member of Cross of Christ Lutheran Church actually define who you are? While all of these things are identifiers, can any one of them truly be your identity or mine? If not, then what is my identity? Who am I? What is your identity? Who are you?

As modern and contemporary as those questions sound, they were really questions that were on the heart and mind of nearly every early Christian, especially those in the first generation of believers after Christ.

For those who had been Jews or raised in Jewish homes, as Christians, they weren't Jews anymore. They no longer needed to circumcise their sons or eat kosher or celebrate every prescribed festival in the first five books of Moses—all items that had been part of their cultural and religious lives since infancy. Yet as Christians, who were they? The Jews threw them out of their synagogues. Their families slammed the door in their faces. They were strangers. What was their new identity?

For the non-Jews, the Gentiles, as Christians, they weren't pagans anymore. They no longer needed to offer sacrifices at the altars and shrines of the local gods and goddesses. They no longer participated in worship practices that often involved giving in to whatever desire moved them—hunger, lust, violence, fear. Pagan religion permeated their culture and their home lives, but as Christians, who were they? Their families threw them out and cut them off. Local leaders questioned their patriotism and their mental health. They were strangers. What was their new identity?

Peter understood what it was like to be a stranger who followed Christ. He and his brother Andrew had walked away from the family fishing business because Jesus had called them to follow him. Peter had witnessed all of the excitement and opposition that Jesus faced over the course of three years. He and the other apostles recognized Jesus' identity as ***“the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*** (Matthew 16:16)

Yet he saw the rabbis and scribes and teachers of the Law, the very leaders and judges of Israel, the most respected men in all the land reject Jesus. Peter had watched enormous crowds follow Jesus for his miracles,

¹ “Christ is risen!” “He is risen indeed!” This is known as the Paschal Greeting, one of the oldest and most widespread traditions in the Christian church. Throughout the weeks of the Easter season, whenever the minister says to the people, “Christ is risen!”, they respond loudly and boldly, “He is risen indeed!”

and then abandon him when his teaching became **“too difficult.”** Yet when Jesus asked if they would still follow him, Peter replied, **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”** (John 6:68)

Peter learned firsthand how humbling it is to follow Christ and how easy it is to deny him. Yet Peter also experienced Christ’s forgiveness. Later the Holy Spirit made Peter bold to face opposition for following Christ, for proclaiming Christ, for taking the good news of Jesus to non-Jews. He faced all that even if it meant losing everything, including his life. Yet Peter discovered that as a follower of Christ, his identity was embedded in Christ. That’s what all those scattered “strangers” in all those Greek cities needed to discover too. The truth is, that’s a message you and I need to hear just as much in this identity-confused world!

When you think about your identity in Christ, what picture comes to mind? Maybe you think of yourself as Jesus’ little lamb or a branch connected to a vine, but do you ever think of yourself as building material? As a stone or a brick in a wall? Probably not, but that’s the picture Peter uses to describe you and me and Jesus. **“As you come to him, a living stone—rejected by people but chosen and honored by God—you yourselves, as living stones, a spiritual house, are being built to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”**

Now Peter doesn’t describe you and me and Jesus as a bunch of dead, lifeless rocks. No, we’re **“living stones”**—stones full of life being built up into **“a spiritual house,”** all built on and around Jesus the Living Stone. Yet Jesus isn’t just unique because he’s **“a living stone.”** No, he’s also a testing stone, a litmus test of sorts. Peter goes back to the ancient prophecy of Isaiah and the Old Testament hymnal of the Psalms to explain. **“For it stands in Scripture: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and honored cornerstone, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.’ So honor will come to you who believe; but for the unbelieving, ‘The stone that the builders rejected—this one has become the cornerstone,’ and ‘A stone to stumble over, and a rock to trip over.’ They stumble because they disobey the Word; they were destined for this.”**

When it comes to all these discussions and debates about identity, the question needs to be asked, “Do I identify with Christ or not?” If I say, “No,” if I reject Jesus, if my entire life is not built on and around him, then he becomes a rock that I stumble over. He becomes a rock that makes me trip and fall on my face so I skin my intellectual knees. No matter how hard I try to reject Jesus like an ancient builder rejecting a misshapen rock as a cornerstone for a building, all I’m going to do is trip over him again and again until I fall flat on my face in death. My natural rejection always leads to death.

Yet if I do identify with Christ, if I do trust in him with faith planted in my heart by the Spirit, then Christ is no longer a source of pain and frustration and death in my life. No, Jesus becomes the cornerstone of my life. Back in Peter’s time, buildings and homes were built with stones fit together and sealed together with mortar, but building a building couldn’t work unless you had a good, solid, well-shaped cornerstone. Peter describes Jesus as a stone rejected by the builders—by those who served his Old Testament church. Yet God made Jesus the cornerstone for our lives, for the spiritual house of which you and I are **“living stones”** put to good use in the rising walls of that spiritual home.

...But you and I are more than just **“living stones.”** Peter lays it all out for us in a series of glorious, beautifully rich, Old Testament terms. Because Jesus is **“the stone that the builders rejected”** and has become **“a chosen and honored cornerstone,”** I am now part of **“a chosen race.”** Peter is not talking about how much or how little melanin pigment is in my skin, because the color of my skin—my “race”—is not my true identity. No, in Christ, I am part of **“a chosen race,”** a set-apart-to-be-holy family of believers, a family of followers of Christ chosen purely because of God’s undeserved love. That family, that race of believers comes **“from every nation, tribe, people, and language.”**

Because Jesus is the great High Priest who offered himself as the sacrifice for all of my sins and yours, because Jesus is the King of all who holds life and death in his hands, I’m a member of **“a royal priesthood.”** You and I are royal priests. We are brothers and sisters of the King of kings possessing the eternal inheritance of heaven and having full access to our heavenly Father. That means you and I are not defined by where we fall on the economic spectrum, but before God, he sees us as royal priests in Christ.

Because Jesus was without sin, I am now part of **“a holy nation.”** Peter is not talking about a specific nation or kingdom on a map, because where I come from is not my true identity. No, in Christ, you and I are citizens of **“a holy nation”** made up of saints—sinful people made holy in the blood of Christ—from every nation under heaven. Where I come from doesn’t matter.

That means we are also ***“a people for his possession.”*** You belong to Jesus. I belong to Jesus, because your soul and mine were purchased at a tremendous cost. We were purchased with the precious blood of Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lamb of God who died that we might die to sin and lives that we might live for righteousness. You know what that means? If you and I belong to Jesus, then our family relationships, our family histories filled with generation after generation of sinners, are not our true identity. No, we are ***“a people for his possession.”*** Belonging to Christ alone defines us!

The fact is, before Christ came into your life, you had no identity other than condemned sinner. Your natural sinfulness pulled you in every dark direction and like everyone else, you struggled to define who you really are. Then Jesus came into your life. You heard the good news of the Savior and it was like nothing you had ever heard. Maybe your parents brought you to the font where baptismal waters were poured over your head and God’s saving name was placed on you. You went from being someone without an identity to being ***“God’s people.”*** Before, you had no access to God’s mercy that embeds your identity in Christ, but now you have received that mercy.

Why did God do all that for you? Why did God call you out of the darkness of confusion and foolishness? ***“...So that you may proclaim the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*** As a follower of Christ, your true identity is embedded in Christ and that transforms your life into a life filled to overflowing with God’s praises. Now you identify with Christ as the cornerstone of your faith and life, as your great High Priest, as your King to whom you belong. In the end, all those cultural and racial and gender and family identifiers prove that they cannot be your identity. No, the living hope that you possess identifies you with Christ. You are a follower of Christ. That’s your identity. That’s who you are! **CIR HIRI!** Alleluia! Amen!