

You're part of God's group!
1 Peter 2:9-10

Friends – If I ask you the question this morning... “who are you?” You’d probably answer me back and say “I’m Ruth, I’m John, I’m Darryl, I’m so and so...”

And if I asked you again... “Who are you?” You might give me a puzzled look and say “Well I’m Ruth Harnett, I’m John Gill as opposed to Ruth Smith or John Smith”

And I’d ask again... “Who are you?”

At which point you might go from being puzzled to perplexed and respond “ummm... I’m a young woman, I’m a middle aged man, a senior citizen... I’m a mother, a father, a son, a daughter, I’m a lawyer, a teacher, a geologist.

And I’d continue to ask... “Who are you?”

Now some of you might get smart and figure you’ll give the pastor the answer that he’s looking for and you’d say “I’m a Christian! Nudge nudge wink wink”

But I’d still ask... “Who are you?”

Friends, it’s a difficult question. How do we answer it honestly... accurately...completely? Who are we?

I know that at certain points in my life I would have had a pretty quick answer for someone who asked me that. I’m a hockey player... I’m a skateboarder, a snowboarder, a rap artist...

My identity was defined by the things I was attracted to and I wanted everyone to know about it. In fact you didn’t really need to ask me who I was, you could tell just by observing me.

When I defined myself as a skater I had the haircut, the clothes, the shoes, I put skateboard stickers all over my binders and textbooks, my board was never very far away, spent most of my time skateboarding... I did the same thing when I was really into rap music and snowboarding.

I had chosen these activities, this particular music style, to give definition to who I was.

And friends as I was reflecting on how we identify ourselves I noticed that it's pretty much impossible to answer the question "who are you?" in a way which does not, in some manner, relate to other people.

Many of the factors which we choose to contribute towards our identity involve groups of people, whether it be those who like the same activities as we do, have the same music tastes, come from the same city, the same part of the country as we do, or maybe we went to the same school, work at the same company, are part of the same union, belong to the same political party or just simply have the same DNA as we do.

Who we are is connected to our relationships with other people and they in part make us who we are.

And even if you identify yourself as a loner, as someone who doesn't belong anywhere or fit in to the mainstream– even if you believe that what defines you is so unique and individual... it still relates to others by the fact that it sets you apart from them.

You can only be unique if there are other people who are different than you.

So... I think the most basic, most honest, most accurate and comprehensive answer we can give to the question "Who are you?" starts with recognizing how our identity is formed by the connections and relationships that we have with others.

And I have to confess that this is a hard truth for me to accept because it's all fine and dandy if those relationships and connections are ones that you like or desire.

I liked being associated with other skateboarders and snowboarders because I liked what it was that we had in common...

But there are a whole lot of relationships and connections in our lives which are simply imposed on us, and for whatever reason we might resent them.

You don't choose your family, you don't choose where you were born, you don't choose your race or your gender...how you were raised, or where your parents sent you to school...

When I was growing up and I came of the age where I began to understand the concept of cool and not cool – I suddenly realized that many of my relationships and connections didn't have that "cool" factor and by implication and association that meant I didn't either.

My family roots were rural Minnesota farming towns...my dad was a minister...I went to a Christian school...my body type was tall and skinny!

That wasn't cool like being from someplace like New York, or Boston, or having your dad work in business or going to the local high school, or inheriting genes that made you buff.

So I resented many of the relationships and connections which were implicitly part of my life, and I fought against fact that they partially defined me, and I did so by setting my own terms

on how I would relate to them and respond to any expectations they had for me.

Maybe you've responded in a similar fashion to those implicit relationships in your own life.

And this morning friends, I would like us to consider the way in which we respond to the implicit relationship and connection that Christ and his Body have with us... especially as it relates to how being a part of the church community of Valleyview forms our part of our identity.

Now maybe we didn't realize that being part of a church community is an implicit relationship? That it contributes to our identity... we've never really thought of it that way before.

We may have figured that we're associated with Valleyview as a result of our own choice, and in terms of our shaping our identity we're more likely to be here because its compatible with who we are, not so much because its a community that will eventually change how we see ourselves...

We're here because we like this church and what goes on in it, and we like the people who go here as well, so we decided to attend and be involved - at a certain level... for as long we feel comfortable with what's going on, for as long as the people here stay likeable...

And we would definitely think twice about sticking around if things would happen that would cause us to see ourselves differently - that probably would not be very comfortable.

Friends, establishing a connection with a church based on this way of thinking can be problematic.

I've been in the ministry long enough to know that eventually everyone...everyone goes through a point where they don't like what is going on in their church; they may not like everyone is there, and it's not very comfortable....so then what happens?

Well if we believe that our relationship with Christ and His Body - especially the local expression of His Body that you've connected with - in this case Valleyview, if that originates

from our choice, then when things begin to get uncomfortable, when it begins to challenge how we see ourselves...we can choose to withdraw.

Now I'm not talking about the times where Christ has called us to go and serve another part of his body somewhere else.

I'm talking about the general perception many people have that being part of a church is simply a voluntary association which can be undone at any point and time for whatever reason.

It doesn't necessarily have to be church politics. We may choose to be involved in a church community so long as we have the extra time, if there are no other activities going on in our lives,

but when our career begins to take off... when we are able to afford to go away skiing every weekend, when the kids start to play hockey...then we can choose to withdraw, because it was our choice to be here in the first place.

But... and that's how our scripture passage starts off. But...
Y'all are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God!

Friends if the Apostle Peter's description regarding a group of people who follow Jesus Christ is correct – and since scripture is infallible it is... then the truth of the matter is this - our connection to Jesus Christ and to his church here at Valleyview was His choice for us!

He has chosen each of you – and others yet to come - to belong here so that being a part of this particular Church community will have a transformational effect on our identity.

That our identity goes from seeing ourselves as people on the outside of God's group, to being on the inside. That together we form a group He has personally selected – God wants you to be a part of what He is doing at Valleyview – *Y'all are a chosen people – a group.*

He wants our identity to change from seeing ourselves as passive attendees to believing we have a part to play when we gather as active ministers – *a royal priesthood.*

You see when we gather together in a group as Jesus' followers, for worship, for prayer, for fellowship and encouragement, to celebrate the Lord's Supper we are more than a gathering of individual followers – we are Christ's Body.

The Body of the King of Kings, the Body of the One who mediates God's presence – the High Priest.

Friends believe it or not – when we are together in Jesus name... we carry the authority of Christ the King and we are the mediator who brings God's presence into our surrounding community.

Your act, your contribution of gathering together with the Body – your being here in Jesus name, radiates Jesus' authority into our neighborhood and it undermines the efforts of the enemy to

keep the hearts and minds of the people in our community from seeing Jesus as their King.

Your act of gathering on Sunday to worship, of participating in the prayer ministry, of coming together for Christ Care, or bible study – whether your neighbors actually see it or know about it or not – it sends out a spiritual signal identifying Jesus as King and the Holy Spirit uses that to draw people to faith in Him.

And you thought you were simply sitting through a Sunday service... Friends, you are not a church attendee – *y'all are a royal priesthood!*

And finally our identity is transformed from seeing ourselves as our culture does – as nice people who are nice to other nice people to seeing ourselves as a part of a Holy Nation.

Friends we all know what it means to belong to the Leafs Nation, or the Rider Nation – those groups are for sports fans who are fanatics.

Their devotion and loyalty are incredible – they will go to extraordinary lengths to support their team and show their enthusiasm. Even when things are bad, even when things have been bad for years and years... they still believe their team could win the cup.

Friends, Christ has chosen us to be a part of a Holy Nation – a group of people defined by their loyalty first and foremost to the one who is Holy – who is set apart from everything created - God.

And we will go to extraordinary lengths to show our love and gratitude for God and for His son Jesus Christ – because as Peter writes in verse 10 “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

The grace and mercy of being brought out of darkness into the light - through the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, accomplished in his sacrifice on the cross and in his victory over death – Amen!

That sets us apart from other people – we’ve experienced something not everyone else has - the grace and mercy and forgiveness of Christ – that sets us apart, so we are Holy, not perfect – just Holy.

The result is that we can’t help but to praise Jesus Christ because of it – that’s our main reason for getting together – we are the Holy Nation!

But friends – remember – this belonging; this identity is not something that we chose for ourselves. Christ chose it for us – remember that lest we become proud, lest we think that we’ve earned it somehow – we haven’t. It is a gift of grace.

But we also need to realize that Christ’s choice is not fate. God’s actions always call for a response from us and so Christ’s choice forces us to choose. To obey and be a part of God’s group, to gather and form the Royal Priesthood, to set ourselves apart from the rest of the world as the Holy Nation...

...or to disobey and withdraw from Christ’s Body – or participate in His church here at Valleyview occasionally on

our own terms and conditions, in order to keep the Church at arms length so that it doesn’t shape our identity or impact our life much...

Friends – you are here this morning so I believe that in your spirit you want to be obedient to Christ and gather as His Body – especially after hearing what the scripture says to us about what is really going on for us as a group.

The hard part will be deciding to be obedient in the week to come when it’s been a busy week and you’d love to sleep in, when you have a chance to take a little get away, when another activity conflicts with the time we’ve set to gather as Christ’s Body... and its so easy to say – oh its just this one time we’ll miss it, we’ll be there the following week.

But the next week comes around and the same temptations come along with it as the last week and before you know it “Gathering” with Christ’s Body becomes the exception instead of the habit.

This is why the apostle Paul once wrote to a church to say “*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the **habit** of doing, but let us encourage one another*”

Michael Jordan was a bit more blunt, He said “If you quit once, it becomes a habit – never quit”

Friends I’m not trying to be legalistic with this – I just want to help us understand what we’re up against here and encourage us to undo some bad habits by making a commitment to starting some good ones.

I believe we want to do this – that we want to gather to be Christ’s Body - and the good news is that the Holy Spirit can empower us to do so and arrange things so this can happen, so let’s invite the Spirit to work in our hearts and lives now so that we can choose to be obedient and gather.