

You're part of God's group!
1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 1 Peter 2:4-10

Friends – If I ask you the question this morning... “who are you?” You’d probably answer me back and say “I’m Jeff, I’m John, I’m so and so... insert your first name here”

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

And I’d ask again... “Who are you?”

At which point you might go from being puzzled to perplexed and respond “ummm... well I’m a young woman, or I’m a middle-aged man, a senior citizen... I’m a lawyer, a teacher, a geologist.. I’m a Canadian or a landed immigrant...”

Or given that fact that today is May 12 you might be among those who could say “Oh – I’m a mother.”

But I would continue to ask... “Who are you?”

Now some of you might get irritated at this point and say look I already told you – while others might think its time to give the pastor the answer that he’s looking for and you’d say “Oh - I’m a Christian! Nudge nudge wink wink”

And while I’d be glad to hear that, I’d still ask... “Who are you?”

You see Brothers and sisters, I would continue to ask this of you to demonstrate that this is a simple question but it’s also a very difficult one. How do we answer it honestly... accurately...completely? Who are we? What is our identity?

When I was younger I would have given you a pretty quick answer to that question. Who am I? Well I’m a hockey player... I’m a skateboarder, a snowboarder, a rap artist... that’s it -that’s who I am, that is who I desire to be known as.

When I was younger I defined myself by the things I was attracted to and I wanted everyone to know it. I wouldn’t

even wait for you to ask me who I was, you could tell just by looking at me.

When I was a skateboarder, I wore the clothes, the shoes, I had the haircut... I put skateboard stickers all over my binders and textbooks, my skateboard was never very far away, I spent most of my time skateboarding hanging out with other skateboarders, we'd talk skateboard talk in front of everyone else...

And it was the same thing when I was really into rap music and snowboarding as well.

I had chosen these activities, this particular music style, and everything that went along with it as a lifestyle and it gave definition to who I was and wanted to be known as.

Maybe you can relate to having gone through a similar kind experience when you were younger – or perhaps you're going through something like this right now...

But brothers and sisters as I was reflecting on the ways in which we understand who we are and identify ourselves it occurred to me that it's almost 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 contribute to our identity involve another person or other groups of people, whether it be how we are in relationship to someone, or we identify with those who like the same activities or have the same taste in music as we do, or come from the same city, the same part of the country as we do...

or maybe we went to the same school, we work for the same company, we are part of the same union, belong to the same political party or we just simply have the same DNA.

Brothers and sisters, who we are, our identity is connected to our relationships with other people and thus they make a significant contribution to 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 – or even if you believe that what defines you is so unique, that you are an individual who can't stand the idea of conformity... a hipster.

You are still relating to others by the fact that you are so unique and unlike them and you are set apart from them. The truth is that you can only be unique if there are other people who are different than you.

So... I would propose that the most honest, 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... I like how they affirmed my desired identity.

But there are a whole lot of relationships and connections in our lives which are simply imposed on us, we didn't choose them, they are implicit.

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

And it's possible for whatever reason that you may not like these implicit relationship and connections and you might begin to resent them because they don't affirm your desired identity.

For example when I began to understand the concept of what it meant to be cool and or not cool (again this is all about relationships with others) I realized that many of my implicit

relationships and connections in my life didn't have that "cool" factor and by thus association it that meant that I didn't have it 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 L.A. and Toronto hadn't become cool yet. It wasn't cool like having your dad work as a Civil servant (I grew up in Ottawa) or going to the local public high school, or inheriting genes that made you into a buff teenaged jock.

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 rebelling and rejecting those things and trying to set my own terms on how I would relate to them and respond or not respond to any expectations they had for me.

Maybe you can relate, you've responded in a similar fashion to the implicit relationships in your own life or you have a family member who defines their identity in this way.

And I've had us reflect on our identities and shared these personal examples with you this morning brothers and sisters because it sets the stage for us to hear what God has to say to us about our identity and how that is formed in part by our implicit relationship with Christ **and** His body – the Church.

So this morning let us consider the way in which we respond to the implicit relationship and connection that Christ and his Body have with us and consider how it contributes to the formation of our identity -who we really are.

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.

But consider what the Apostle Peter says to us in the scripture passage this morning.

Y'all are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God!

Brothers and sisters this picks up on what we learned last week from John 15:16 where Jesus said “*Y'all did not choose me, I chose you and appointed y'all to go and bear fruit...*”

In his letter the Apostle Peter is building on how Jesus chooses us as individuals and brings us together to become his Church.

Peter declares to us we are chosen to become a group... a people, a priesthood, a nation.

But its not just about going from the individual pronoun to becoming part of a plural pronoun – from you to y'all.. The key to the verse we are looking at this morning is the adjectives.

Its not just a people... it's a chosen people, not just a priesthood – it's a royal priesthood... a Holy nation

What this means for our us brothers and sisters is that Jesus has chosen each of us – and others yet to come – personally and individually to belong to Valleyview so that being a part of this particular Church community will have a transformational effect on our identity that lines up with those adjectives.

We covered the first one last week – where we change from believing that we are here because of our own choice and decision to realizing this is God's choice for us, and so our identity changes from seeing ourselves as someone on the outside of God's group, or someone who maybe wonders if they really fit in or belong in the Church to knowing this as the main reason that you DO belong – you are on the inside. You're part of God's group. God got plans for you to be a part of what He is doing at Valleyview – *Y'all are a chosen **people**.*

So, what are God's plans for us here? Well that's the next adjective, we are to become a Royal Priesthood, which means brothers and sisters that our identity starts to change from being a church attendee to seeing ourselves as being part of a group that ministers to the community. Passive to Active.

You see when we gather together in a group as Jesus' body 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 the Body of the one who mediates God's presence – the High Priest.

And we are Royal priesthood because when we are together in Jesus name... we carry the authority of Christ the King, the King of kings and Lord of Lords and we mediate that authority and rule of Christ 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.

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

Now this set us up for further transformation in our identity from being a Holy nation. But what does it mean to be a Holy nation?

----- *Introduction section for special guest* -----

Well let's reflect on what regular nationality means for our identity... we are Canadians and so culturally and socially that means we drink Tim Horton's coffee, we say eh?, we like hockey and we say sorry a lot. This is part of our national identity.

So a holy nationality would be how Christ sets you apart from your culture and society and nationality in order to be a witness to Him, just as the nation of Israel was set apart from the nations around them.

So does this mean that as a Holy Nation whether we should not drink Tim Hortons or play hockey or say eh? How does our Holy Nationality relate to our regular nationality?

Well – the answer lies in what happens to our identity because Christ chose us. The Holy nationality Christ gives us transforms our regular nationality.

It's not Christ vs. culture, nor is it Culture shaping Christ – it is Christ transforming culture and its' contributions to our identity.

And to help you better understand what this is like I've invited a friend to share with us, his experience of how the implicit relationship we have with Jesus and His Church contributed to the transformation of his identity and his cultural understanding of who He was.

----- *regular message continues here* -----

It means that we no longer see ourselves as our culture does – religious people who are nice people to other nice people – we are people who belong to a Holy Nation!

Now 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.