

We Are What He Has Made Us
John 3:14-21; Ephesians 2:1-10

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I was listening to an interview with a psychotherapist on the radio the other day. He was hypothesizing about what drives human beings at various ages. I was struck that he mentioned that at a particular age, we have a strong need to know that the work we do matters, and at another age, we want to know that we ourselves are significant, not for the work we do, but just for being who we are. It struck me a little funny, that perhaps we need to hear what Mr. Rogers taught later in life rather than earlier. He went on to say that most unhappiness comes from our lives getting out of sync with our emotional development.

I have no idea whether that is true or not. I didn't catch the name of the therapist in the interview and I got to church and didn't want to keep burning gas in the car to listen, as it frankly seemed to be a regurgitation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, but I found myself reflecting on it quite a bit.

I may have mentioned to one or two of you that I have a birthday that ends in zero this year.

In fact, I just remembered the other day a story that a preacher friend of mine told a while back after his fortieth birthday. After waxing poetical about what a watershed moment it can be, of the epiphanies that surface regarding boundless youth and bottomless energy and the "full physical," he said this, "A few days later, I was looking in the yellow pages in the local Princeton telephone directory, and I noticed an advertisement there I hadn't seen before. It was from the medical society of Princeton and it offered a free taped medical information program. You simply call this number, tell them what tape you wanted to listen to, and they play it over the telephone. They had several dozen tapes

there on exercise, heart disease, smoking, jogging and so on. I was browsing through those and I saw one entitled... *The Fears of a Man Over Forty*.

I dialed the number.

A very pleasant woman answered the telephone and I was about to tell her what I wanted when suddenly I recognized that my wife was within earshot in the next room. I didn't want her to hear what I was asking for lest she think that I was worrying too much about myself, so I lowered my voice to a whisper and said, 'I want to hear about the fears of a man over forty.'

She hung up.

At first I was irritated that I didn't hear my tape, but then I thought, 'Maybe that is the tape of the fears of a man over forty.'"¹

At every age, we need to know that we matter.

At every age, we need to know that what we are doing is important.

At every age, we need to know that there is significance beyond the physical matter of our being.

The epistle to the Ephesians is, in some ways, a rather odd book of the Bible. There's not a really obvious reason why it was written. It's full of wonderful wisdom, but scholars tend to think that it was more like a general open letter to the church than particular in its claims. We're not really even a hundred percent sure who wrote it, but it does contain within it some rather important corollaries.

Chief among them would be, to my mind, wherein we find our significance.

¹ Long, Thomas. *Joy in the House*. Preached at Princeton Theological Seminary, July 5, 1987

In this second chapter, the author juxtaposes one way of life – one in which the manner of life is dictated by pleasure and acquisition, ruled by *desires of the flesh and senses*, as it were – with another of way of life.

The second way of life is characterized thusly, “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”

On the one hand, *desires of the flesh and senses* and on the other hand, *alive together with Christ*.

It seems a clear choice, doesn't it?

Flesh and senses are fleeting, Christ is not, rhetorical flourish completed.

Indeed, it could even lend itself to a certain amount of self-satisfaction, couldn't it?

There is a reason why in the third century all of those ascetics went out into the desert to flagellate themselves – they were looking for a clear practice to make sure they were being faithful.

One of them stood on a column for 37 years, I think.

There is always something very appealing about believing that what you're doing is the right thing, that by doing the right thing, our lives take on significance.

But the author continues, and its clear that grace isn't our own doing.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God -not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

The grace of God is a free gift. Indeed it is the most significant gift any of us receive.

But it sure is tempting to get pulled off into chasing something else – the desires of the flesh and senses.

I love this story that the late Fred Craddock told:

“I was in a home not long ago where they’d adopted a dog that had been a racer. IT was a big old greyhound, spotted hound, lying there in the den. One of the kids in the family, just a toddler, was pulling on its tail, and a little older kid had his head over on that old dog’s stomach, used it for a pillow. That dog just seemed so happy, and I said to the dog, ‘Uh, are you still racing any?’

‘No, no, no, I don’t race anymore.’

I said, ‘Do you miss the glitter and excitement of the track?’

He said, ‘No, no.’

I said, ‘Well, what’s the matter? You got too old?’

‘No, no, I still had some race in me.’

‘Well, did you not win?’

He said, ‘I won over a million dollars for my owner.’

‘Then what was it, bad treatment?’

‘Oh no, they treated us royally when we were racing.’

‘Then what, did you get crippled?’

He said, ‘No, no, no.’

I said, ‘Then what?’

And he said, ‘I quit.’

‘You quit?’

Yeah, that’s what he said. ‘I quit.’

I said, ‘Why did you quit?’

And he said, ‘I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit. And I quit.’
He looked at me and said, ‘All that running, running, running, running, and what I was chasing, not even real.’²

The letter to the Ephesians is not about making ourselves significant. We had that the minute God formed us out of the dust into God’s own image.

It’s not even about salvation; God has done that too.

It is about a way of life that reflects God.

It is about a way of life that reflects the image of God imprinted on us and renewed in Jesus Christ.

We are called into life in Christ.

Do you often think of yourself as being made for good works?

I try to be a kind person, I expect most of you do too, but I don’t go through life paying very close attention to whether or not I am engaged in good works.

Maybe that’s shocking to hear your pastor say, but I really don’t obsess over it.

I do think about the teachings of Jesus quite a bit though.

I do think of the things that he thought were important – kindness to strangers, the richness of God’s mercy, and I hope that means that I live that out a bit. I hope that means that maybe the image of God gets reflected in me just a little bit – maybe you feel the same way?

Listen to this from Elton Trueblood:

“I remember a word a man said long ago – a word which deepened my life immeasurably – and I go to him in gratitude, but he has absolutely no memory of the word or incident.

This is as it should be. In a group of twenty-five lay Christians meeting recently, each

² Craddock, Fred. Craddock Stories, Graves and Ward, eds. (St. Louis, Chalice, 2001) p107

told what was the major influence which had helped him to move over from nominal Christianity to a committed faith. Every one of the twenty-five mentioned *a person*. Not one mentioned a public occasion. And the surprising part was that all of the persons mentioned as thus effective in personal ministry were inconspicuous. Most of them had made a significant witness without knowing it.”³

“We are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

We will soon dedicate our pledges to a capital campaign that you’ve heard quite a bit about. Some of you may be pledging for the first time to this church, some of you only recently paid off pledges from our last campaign. Some of you will be in a position to give a very great deal, and some of you will give more deeply from your substance than you think the dollar amount will show. I am grateful to God for each of you.

The generation that built this wonderful sanctuary mortgaged their homes in order to be able to fund its building. However much I may grouse and complain about the state the boiler or more importantly, its pipes (not good, I might add) we are ever mindful that those clanging pipes, or the bathroom sink that has only cold water – of whatever we might *least* like about this building was built as a witness to their faith – and we’re invited to join them.

Walking forward and placing a card in the basket is a conspicuous witness.

But it is in service to what I pray will be generation and generation after generation of *inconspicuous witness*.

By that I mean simply living into the fullness of what God has made you to be.

³ Trueblood, Elton. The Company of the Committed. (Harper and Row, NY 1961) pp64-65

In the richness of God's mercy, we are joined to life in Christ.

That is our significance.

That is the source our meaning.

That is our reason for being as a church.

That is why we don't chase rabbits, we follow the savior, even to Jerusalem where there will be a cold tomb, in sure and certain hope that the resurrection will follow.

No, we get our significance and our value from God, who has joined us to Christ Jesus and seated us in the heavenly places so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

We are indeed what God has made us, created for good works.

This is the vocation that God has placed on us with God's image, that we should be alive in Christ. From that comes all our significance. From that comes value beyond the words to describe it because it is the very value that God places on us.

As you think of your life, remember that.

Let me conclude with these words from Frederick Beuchner:

"I DISCOVERED THAT IF you really keep your eye peeled to it and your ears open, if you really pay attention to it, even such a limited and limiting life as the one I was living on Rupert Mountain opened up onto extraordinary vistas. Taking your children to school and kissing your wife goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly. . . . If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence

of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”⁴

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

⁴ Buechner, Frederick. Now and Then (Harper and Row, New York, 1983) p