

“Most urgent answers.” Ephesians 2:11-22

Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So, then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Let me address you as Paul the apostle did: “[Dear] **fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.**” What is this about?

Today’s reading helps us to reflect on who we are, and what is our core and most enduring identity for us as Christians. I would suggest that these questions – **who am I and why am I here?** – are the most urgent, most critical questions that our society faces today. These questions need the most urgent answers. Why so?

It seems that our society today is obsessed with the issue of our identity. Who am I? How to identify myself? This obsession is quite understandable. Why? Our society has put in a huge effort to erase God the Creator from the picture. However, that seeming success has come with a hefty price.

The true God is the Creator. We are His creatures. As the Creator He defines who we are and why we are here. Moreover, our almighty and all-wise God also bestows upon us a wealth of gifts that we all need to lead fulfilling and joyful lives.

Yes, He defines who we are – we will discuss it later – and He also defines the purpose of our existence, more, He defines our significance and He gives us the most wonderful community to belong to – His own family.

What happens when we reject the Creator God? We are left to supply all these, as I would say – the most important things in our lives, on our own. Then we are left to create our own identity, to come up with our own meaning, to establish our own significance, and to find our own community to belong.

All these tasks are easy for our Creator Father, for He is God, that's what He does. He designed us, He fashioned and created and ordered this world for us, He gave us life and placed us into this world and in our many relationships that we have with numerous people around us.

If we choose to reject this God given reality of our lives, we still need to derive our identity and significance from somewhere... This is where all the frenzy that we witness today comes from.

But where can someone derive their identity from if they are without God? We can't create it on our own, therefore, usually we try to derive it from something that is larger than ourselves. From some larger group of people.

Those may be different groups. Usually, people choose to identify with some groups that would fulfill their longings. We all long for meaning, for recognition and appreciation, we all long to be good, to show that we are good, we want our lives to matter. And if there are any groups where we could belong and feel our longings satisfied, we will identify with them. "That's who I am, that's what I stand for, that's what makes me a good person and gives significance to my life."

The problem is that all these groups where people may choose to derive their identity from – and often they are many – are still too small and, therefore, they create for us the next problem which is as old as humanity itself.

Divisions. Hostility. Hatred. I am talking about this primal division – us and them. Us and them. "Us" – that is our group, that is us who think alike and have similar values, and preferences, passions, vision for the future, etc.

Often, we think about "us" as good. For we stand for what we value, what we believe is good, and against those who believe and act differently, who pursue different goals. "Us" is good and that makes "them" ... not so good.

So, we derive our identity and significance not only from our group and what we value, but also from standing against, battling against "them", the others.

Throughout history this has been our fallen human condition.

Tribal wars, national wars, religious wars, and so on. It is not different today, and unfortunately rejecting God the Creator has only intensified this hostility among different identity groups in our society. Just a few examples.

Who are you? Are you pro-choicer or pro-lifer? Are you fighting against climate change, or are you a climate science denier? Are you pro-Trump or against? Pro-Israel or pro-Palestine? Pro-LGBTQ+ or against? Pro-science or pro-faith? Are you? Pro-inclusivity and diversity or a hater? Pro-vax or an anti-vaxxer?

I imagine that much of this sounds familiar. As we have witnessed lately, those identities derived from belonging to one or another group have great potential to divide us more and more.

The arguing becomes more and more passionate, the hatred more and more vitriolic. In the name of tolerance, we are ready to destroy anyone who disagrees with us. There is less and less grace, less and less forgiveness.

This is what we see more and more. If we believe that our group is right, that means that the others are wrong, and not just wrong – but evil, deplorable. In a way we dehumanize the others and that gives us a licence to treat them whichever way we desire. The same principle was at work behind the most terrible atrocities in our history – holocaust, genocides, ethnic cleansings.

We dehumanize others, and then we feel justified when we behave like pigs – cursing, disrespecting, and treating as second-class citizens those who disagree with us. At the same time feeling morally superior to them. Unfortunately, this trend is gaining momentum in our society.

And don't think that we as Christians are spared from this plague. What happens in society, soaks into our Christian communities as well. We used to be divided between denominations, e.g., Catholics vs Lutherans vs protestants.

Today we are divided along different lines. Listening to the Scripture, or going with times? Pro-Creation or pro-evolution? Pro-Biblical design for marriage, or pro-social acceptance? Pro-traditional liturgy or pro-contemporary? And one of our favourites, pro-women's ordination, or against?

If those are things that define our identity, then we do experience in the Church similar shameful expressions of disrespect and hatred as in the wider society, and we may still feel justified ... for "our group" stands for what is good and enlightened, and against those who are foolish and backwards.

How can God's wisdom help us in this mess? It can. When the Word of God shapes how we understand our identity and how we see the world and others in it. Our Triune God gives us the most beautiful, the most magnificent vision on who we are as human beings. And this view is the only real antidote to the growing hostility and hatred that we witness in our society. What is this vision?

Hear this! This is what our God tells you. He has made you in His Image and likeness. What does that mean? That He created all people from every nation, tribe and language, male and female, as His emissaries. You too!

He made us and sends us as His ambassadors, to live according to His gracious will and to imitate Him and His loving care wherever He has placed us. This is our first identity, and this identity comes with our God given supreme significance.

Think about this analogy – as ambassadors derive their significance from the country they represent, so every human being derives their significance from their Creator. This is how you are to think of yourselves, not less.

The Bible also reveals what our problem is. Our rebellion against our Creator God, our foolishness rejecting His gifts, our darkened minds and souls that don't know our loving God for who He is, and that don't even know who we ourselves are.

This condition is the cause of all divisions and hostility among us. This condition of foolishness is what forces us to seek our identities in narrow places, looking for answers to our longings where they can't possibly be found.

Sin is the name of this destructive and deadly condition. But, praise to the Lord, this is not the end of the story. There is more. He tells you more. Do you know how valuable you are? Or we can even ask – do you know what your price is?

Usually, it depends on what someone is willing to pay. You should know and always remember your worth. Jesus Christ, Your Redeemer, gave up His life to rescue us from our rebellious state and to bring us into the wonderful fellowship with the Triune God. That is your price. That is your worth in His eyes.

This is how we as Christians are to look at every human being, as created in God's own image and as being redeemed by Jesus Christ, as infinitely precious in God's eyes and – if only they accept God's invitation – as destined for eternal life with God the Father and with Jesus and with all God's chosen people.

Jesus came down into this world, torn apart by our divisions and hostility. He brought us peace, not by means of terrifying power, but by the blood of His cross. When we hear what Jesus has done for us and how highly He values us, this Good News changes us from inside, it creates in us new hearts. It brings us peace; it establishes our identity as beloved and cherished children of God.

Now, when we hear that the same Jesus, who loves you so much, that in the same way He loves every other human being, and similarly desires give them eternal hope and bring them into God's own family – we too begin to see them differently.

As Paul put it, the love of God, the blood of Jesus shed for us, destroys every dividing wall, it washes our hearts clean from every stain of hostility, and it renews us as the Holy Spirit builds us into the dwelling place of God.

We may still have different opinions, different priorities, different preferences, sometimes we may be deceived and tricked by schemes and cunning of the world and the devil and our own sin, but that doesn't make anyone our enemy.

Jesus brings us all near to Him and nearer to one another. He is our peace, and how could we dare to disrespect or be rude to someone whom Jesus loves and cherishes, for whom He sacrificed His life?! Or how could we look down or despise someone who has the same Spirit of God in them?!

The sad reality is that even as every person is created by our Father and redeemed by our brother Jesus, many are still separated from His body, the Church. Many still haven't received His peace. Many are still confused trying to create their own identities and somehow to be significant.

They urgently need to hear the answer to these key questions – who am I and why am I here? We have the answers. The most beautiful, the most fulfilling, the most magnificent answers – you are created by the Triune God for glorious greatness, and redeemed by the Son of God for eternal joyful blessedness!

May our Father grant to everyone the opportunity to hear these answers so that many more of our loved ones can be made as Paul said **“fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God ... being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”** Amen.