

April 22, 2012 - The Reborn Identity

I'm going to begin this morning by asking you a question this morning. "Do you ever wish, sometimes, maybe, that you could have a fresh start. I mean, there are many reasons why some of us might like a fresh start. I can think of certain NHL Teams down 3-1 in their playoff series who might like a fresh start. There are different reasons in life that you might want a fresh start, some light hearted and some more serious. Maybe when your relationship starts to get tense and under stress, you wish we could have a fresh start. Maybe if you'd had something go wrong and you've been hurt by someone in the past, you kind of wish, maybe I could just get a fresh start and start all over that part in life. People who are weighed down by problems and guilt and debt and addictions and habits and fears, all of those things make us wish that maybe just for awhile we could have a fresh start and begin again. At different times we all feel that need, that desire, to have a fresh start; a desire to have a clean slate, as it were. Now, some people will say that every day is a clean slate. Perhaps you've heard the expression before: "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." And that is true, it's hard to argue that fact. But the problem with that statement is, today may be the first day of the rest of my life, but I'm still me in that first day of the rest of my life. I have an idea of how this is going to go, it may be a new start, but I'm the same old person that I was yesterday and I'm probably going to get some of the same old results that I got yesterday.

Have you ever wished, I've wished this sometimes, that you could actually go back in time. That you could find a time machine and go back into your past and you think "If I knew then what I know now, my life would be much different and I'd do things much different. If I knew then what I know now I would go back and I would invest in things like Microsoft and Facebook and anything starting with "I". That's what I would do in investing. I would not invest in things like Bata Recorders and Zune or Aerosol hairspray with the CFC's in it that was going to get banned to save the ozone. I would know which sporting teams to root for if I went back in time, which ones to cheer for, if I went back in time. And I would know who to date and who to not date, if I were able to go back in time. And some of those things, I would know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em and when to walk away and run. These are some of the things that you would know if you got to go back in time and do things again. However, what I realize, if I went back in time and if I took the place of my fourteen year old self then things would be much different as I went through life but if my fourteen year old self just got to start over and do things again, my fourteen year old self would probably make most of the mistakes he made the first time around and my thirty-something (I don't do that to be modest, I just can't actually remember what the number is). I'll say 38 year old self, he would probably make some of the same mistakes again that he's made before. You see, to see some real change in our lives, we not only need a new start but sometimes we feel like we need a brand new self, a brand new me.

In the Gospel of John in John 3:1-21, this man named Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the middle of the night and they have this discussion:

“There’s a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader, who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. “Rabi” he said “we know that God has sent you to teach us, your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.” Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” “What do you mean?” Nicodemus exclaimed. “How can a man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?” Jesus replied “I assure you. No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of the water and of the Spirit.”

Have you ever had one of those “Huh” moments? Ever had one of those moments where what was going on in front of you or what you were hearing just didn’t quite make sense? I saw a commercial just yesterday, actually and this woman is lying in bed and she has obviously just texted something and she says “I just texted my boss that I’m in bed with a nasty clown.” I meant to say “cold” but I typed “clown”. Have you ever had that kind of problem and you’re sending a text and the auto correct helps you out, so to speak. Or maybe you’ve received one of those texts and you get the text and you read it and you go “I have no idea what this person is trying to tell me.” Or maybe you’ve had this discussion face-to-face. I’ve had some of those from time-to-time where I’m talking to someone and they finish saying whatever they are saying and I look at them and I don’t say this out loud usually, but I look at them and I say “I understood every word you spoke, but I have no idea what you said.” Ever had one of those minutes and you just kind of sit there and go “Huh, I don’t get it.” Well, Nicodemus, in this story, was having one of those “huh” moments. He’s talking to Jesus in the middle of the night and Jesus says “I tell you the truth, you want to enter the Kingdom you have to be born again.” And Nicodemus goes “Huh, I don’t get it. How is that possible? How do you do that? What is the process there? Jesus, that just physically cannot happen.” Well, first of all, if you ever have one of those “Huh” moments, particularly when you’re reading the Bible, if you’re reading the Bible and you read a story and you don’t quite get what’s going on there, please don’t feel bad. Because the rest of us have those ‘Huh’ moments and Nicodemus had one of those ‘huh’ moments when he was talking to Jesus one-on-one. So, please don’t feel bad if that happens to you when you’re reading the Bible sometimes.

But secondly, I have these discussions with a friend of mine from time-to-time and we actually get into deep conversations occasionally, which is surprising, because we’re both male. And so, that’s not typical for us. But sometimes we’re in these deep conversations and I’ll be talking to him about something going on in my life, something that’s not going exactly how I want it to be going and he’ll say “Well how do you deal with that when that happens?” And so, I’ll say “Well usually, I’ll do this and I’ll do this”. And then he says the thing that annoys me the most, he says “How’s that going for you?” I have to sit there and go “Not very well, I guess.” And so, he says “Well maybe you should try something different.” And that’s kind of what Jesus is doing with Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes to him and he wants to know the secrets to what God is asking of him and he’s a Pharisee and he’s a religious leader of the Jewish people and Nicodemus comes and says “Jesus, what do I have to do?” And Jesus says “You have to be born again.” And he says to Nicodemus, it’s not just about trying harder or putting more effort in or making more rules or holding people to a higher standard, he says

“Nicodemus, what you’ve got to do is you’ve got to start all over with a brand new you.” You can’t just treat the symptoms of what’s happening, you’ve got to treat the cause and the cause is you. You’re not right. You’re not the way you’re supposed to be. You’re not the way God made you. And to really experience life in the Kingdom of God you don’t just need a new start, you need a new self.

Paul writes to the Church in Corinth and says this in 2Cor. 5:14-15,17-18:

“Either way, Christ’s love controls us. We believe that Christ dies for all. We also believe that we all have died to our old life. He died for everyone so that those who receive His new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ who died and was raised for them. This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone a new life has begun. This is a gift from God who brought us back to Himself through Christ. God has given us the task of reconciling people to Him.”

And in these and in other texts, Jesus promises new life in his Kingdom and that means not just a fresh start; or a clean slate; or a new beginning; but a transformation of our entire being, of who we are. And so for the next four weeks, as we go through this series, we want to explore exactly what that transformation is supposed to look like and what it can mean in our day-to-day lives, to be reborn when we come to Jesus.

Perhaps you have heard it said before, that on her wedding day, a woman sees three things. Before the wedding ceremony, she has these three things in mind. The aisle; the alter; and him, the groom. And as she’s going up the aisle and as the ceremony is going on, she remembers those three things: The aisle; the alter; and him. And from every day after the wedding she remembers those three things. It actually becomes her mantra through life: I’ll, alter, him

But sometimes changing is not as easy as we would hope it would be. It’s not as easy to change who we are as we like, and especially when we’re not really exactly sure what we’re supposed to be changing into. We know we’re not at the right place. We know we’re not who we want to be, but we’re not exactly sure where we’re supposed to go or how we’re supposed to get there.

This all got me thinking about identity and who we are and so I decided, I went on Facebook and I looked up myself on Facebook. I found numerous Mike Parkers on Facebook, this is just a handful of them. Some of them look similar to me, some of them look nothing like me. None of them are actually me. And so it’s hard to grasp this exact idea of who you are. I went on Google and Googled ‘Mike Parker’. Some of the options for potential Mike Parkers was: I could be a college football player; I could be an artist; I could be the Professor of Bio-ethics at Oxford, I thought that was a good choice; or Professor of English at the University of North Carolina; I could be a politician from Mississippi; an author; sometime I might just go ahead and introduce myself as the tuba player from the Monumental Brass Quintet from

Washington, D.C. I thought that was a good one to go with. Vice President of digital marketing of Simitec; or, I could be a Los Angeles County Sheriff. And I thought “Oh! All of those Mike Parkers are valid Mike Parkers and they’re great Mike Parkers to be, but none of those is me. And so, who is this Mike Parker supposed to be. I think all of us have those moments, when we wonder “Are we really the person we were meant to be?” Are we really the person we were supposed to be? Are we in the right career? Are we the right height and the right weight and the right hair style and the right look? Are we the parent or the spouse or the sibling or the child or the friend that we are supposed to be to those around us? Are we doing what we’re supposed to do with our life? And we’re not sure exactly what it is, but it seems like at times we have this sense that something is just not quite right. Something is just not quite the way it’s supposed to be.

Many of us feel like the man in this clip I’m going to show you in a minute. In this scene, he is very confused and he is uncertain and he is actually fairly lost within himself. To set up the scene for you in a minute, this man whose name is Jason, woke up in a fishing net on a trolley. They scooped him out of the water two weeks ago before this scene. He remembers nothing that happened in his life before that moment when he got fished out of the water. (video clip).

“How could I know all that and not know who I am?” Jason is confused and he’s frustrated and he’s sitting there and he’s telling his friend “I know all of this stuff and I can function in this world at a rather high level, but I don’t know who I really am. I can’t really put it all together and there’s this sense about me that there’s something not right. There’s something missing about who I am. With all the money and with all the different passports that he had he could have easily started again. He could have started a new life. He could have started with a clean slate and been anyone he wanted to be. But he wanted more than that. He didn’t want to be just anyone. He wanted to know who he really was. He wanted to know what his place was in the world.

Many of us go through life feeling that same way - at least at points in our life. We feel like “You know what, I have learned a lot of stuff and I’ve acquired a lot of knowledge. I can perform and I can function at a reasonably high level in society, but there’s something missing. There’s something not quite right. There’s something that I feel inside that says, I’m just not quite where, or what I should be. Who am I really meant to be?” The Apostle Paul’s answer is this. He says “When you come to Christ, you are not only given a fresh start and a new beginning, but you are given a new you. But the new you is really the original you. The you that God designed you to be from the beginning. Before you come to Christ, there is a veil and there is a fog that keeps the pieces from fitting together properly like they’re supposed to. That prevents you from seeing life clearly. But, in Christ, we see clearly who God is and when we see who God is, we see who He created us to be.” This is what he says to the Church in 2Cor. 3:16-18:

“But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. For the Lord is Spirit and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. So all of us who have had the veil

removed can see and reflect on the Glory of the Lord and we are being transformed into His likeness with ever increasing glory which comes from the Lord, who is Spirit.”

Paul says, in Christ the fog lifts and you can see who you were really meant to be. You cannot only see who you were meant to be but Jesus starts reshaping you back into who you were meant to be. It's like those home renovation shows you see on T.V. But there's two types of home renovation shows. There's the one home renovation show which is a renovation show or a demolition show, for the most part and they come in and they gut the whole place and they destroy it and sometimes they knock down big parts of it and then they come in and they do all this new stuff and they rebuild it and they add all these things into it. But, there's the other kind of renovation show that's a home restoration show, which are becoming more popular these days, I've noticed. And these guys, they come in and instead of just clearing the whole thing out and gutting it and knocking down the walls, they come in and they start stripping all the layers of paint off the wood. They get the fixtures and they start repairing them to the way they were supposed to be. They come in and they don't just demolish the house, they restore the house to how it was meant to be. The glory it was supposed to have when it was first created. And that's what Jesus wants to do in your life.

Paul writes to the Philippians and says in Phil. 3:20-21:

“But we are citizens of Heaven where the Lord Jesus Christ lives and we are eagerly awaiting for Him to return as our Saviour. He will take these weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like His own, using the same power with which He will bring everything under His control.”

Paul says “our complete transformation comes at Christ's return. That's the unveiling; the big reveal is when Jesus returns. But right now, at this very moment, this is who you are, you are a citizen of Heaven.” It's as if, in that scene we watched earlier, Marie reached across the table and picked up all those passports and sorted through them and threw out all of them but one and opened the one up and handed it to him and said “This is who you are. This is the person you are meant to be. This is the answer to the question that you've been seeking.” If you watched that movie, the character Jason, goes through 3 movies and through all three movies he goes through with the name Jason Bourne. But it's not until the very end that we realize that's not his real name. It's not until the end of the third movie that he realizes who he really is.

This week, Abigail will become a Canadian Citizen on Thursday, I believe it is. When she becomes a Canadian Citizen, on that day she will have all the rights and all the privileges and all the freedoms guaranteed that come with being a Canadian. Well, those who are in Christ, Paul says, when you are in Christ, you reclaim your citizenship in Heaven.

There's another movie from a long time ago, 1987, called “Overboard”. In this movie there is a rich lady named Joanna. By a twist of fate, she falls off her yacht and washes up on shore with amnesia. She's found by this guy, his name is Dean. Dean sees an opportunity here

once he realizes that she has amnesia and so he tells this woman that she's his wife and he takes her home so she can do the cooking and take care of his 4 boys, who are not the most well behaved boys. She can do pretty much, whatever else he wants her to do around the house and whenever she starts to complain he says "Oh! Don't you remember? You used to love doing this. This used to be your favourite thing in the world." That is the plot of the movie and as the movie goes on Joanna begins to recover some of her memories and glimpses of her past and most importantly, she begins to recover a sense of her true self and that's something she lost long before her amnesia. At the end of the movie, her true identity is revealed and when she realizes not only who she is but she realizes that she is the heir of a very wealthy family. Well, believe it or not, that's more or less, our story as well.

Jesus tells a parable about a boy who left his father's house and took off to a far country and took all of his inheritance with him and when he got to that far off country he blew all of his money on partying and having a good time and living life up to the fullest. Then his money ran out and a famine came and all his friends deserted him and he found himself feeding pigs. He was sitting there in the mud feeding pigs and he was looking at the slop he was feeding the pigs and saying "Oh, I wish I could have a little bit of that." If you've ever seen pig slop, you know what kind of a state this guy was in to even consider wanting some of that stuff. He realizes it himself and he says "You know what, if I just go back home, even the lowliest servant in my father's house is treated better than this. Lives a better life than this. So, I'm going to go back home and hope that I can become one of his hired hands." And so, he goes back home and while he is a long way off, the father has been watching for him, he runs out and gives him a big hug. He calls his servant and says "Start preparing a great feast" and they bring out three things to him: they bring out some sandals and a robe and a ring. And by doing that the father is doing more than just saying, your clothes smell like pigs we need to get you something better. No, there is symbolism in the three things they brought. The sandals they brought out, the servants didn't wear sandals. So by giving him sandals, he's saying "You know, I'm not taking you back as a servant, you're coming back as something more important to me." And the robe would be something that you would give an honoured guest or perhaps someone else that you were welcoming in and so that was a sign of welcome and acceptance. But the ring. The ring was the signet ring that you would give and only family got the ring. And so, when the boy comes home the first thing the father does, he says "I'm going to give you this ring to show that you are family. That you are part of this family."

In Galatians, Paul writes this and says, in Gal. 4:4-7:

"But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts. The Spirit who cries out 'Abba Father'. So you are no longer a slave but a son and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. You are not only a citizen of Heaven, you are an heir of God and when we return to Christ, our identity is restored and we are once again called God's Children."

John marvels at it and says this: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called Children of God. 1John 3:1. And that is what we are. The reason the whole world does not know us is that they don’t know Him. John says “that’s why things don’t quite fit here. That’s why things don’t feel quite right here, because you were never meant to feel at home in this world because you are a citizen of Heaven. You were not meant to feel quite at home in this family, because you are an heir of God and until you reclaim that identity and allow God’s Spirit to reshape you into the person you were designed to be, things will never feel quite right. But the promise of Jesus is: To all who come to Him, to all who put their lives in Hands, they will be reborn.

John writes at the beginning of his Gospel talking about Jesus, in John 1:9-13:

“The One who is the true light who gives light to everyone, was coming into the World. He came into the very world He created but the world didn’t recognize Him. He came to His own people, and even they rejected Him. But to all who believed in Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become Children of God. They are reborn, not with physical rebirth, resulting from human passion or plan, but birth that comes from God.”

I hope that you will join us through the next several weeks as we explore further, what exactly that is going to mean to us in our daily life.