

“Identity Politics”

Sermon – October 4, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

Like Jesus, the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates left no writings himself.

It was his star student, Plato, who recorded a series of dialogues of Socrates with others by which we know of him.

In one of the dialogues, Socrates has one of his companions ask the famous rhetorician [ret-AH-rishen] Gorgias, “Who are you?”

Socrates doesn’t settle for a superficial response but pushes beyond it to really get at the heart of who the other person really thinks they are.

How does he identify himself?

This is in line with Socrates’ mandate of self-examination and understanding one’s true role and moral standing in society. Socrates charge to his students was, “Know thyself.”

Today’s lectionary passages deal with identity. And politics.

In Genesis 17 God made his covenant with Abram, changed his name to Abraham, and then as a physical sign of the covenant required that Abraham and subsequent males must be circumcised. This then becomes the literal identity marker for descendants of Abraham in particular the descendants of Jacob whom God renamed Israel.

In today’s epistle lesson from Philippians 3:4-14 Paul is discussing what are the requirements to become a follower of Christ, particularly circumcision, a discussion of which I borrow from Ryan Schellenberg, Professor of New Testament of Biblical Studies at Methodist Theological School in Ohio.

In the prior verse that our lectionary leaves out, Paul begins this discussion saying, “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!” The last part can also be translated as “false circumcision.”

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The implication is clear: Beware the workers of evil and their false circumcision. Other Christian teachers have apparently been inviting gentile followers of Christ to be circumcised in accordance with God’s command to Abraham. As Paul’s heated language makes plain, he does not want such teachers to be listened to in Philippi.

It is tempting to view the dispute between Paul and his circumcising rivals as a debate about how Jewish the gospel of Christ should be. Paul says he counts everything as loss—circumcision, Israelite identity, kinship with the tribe of Benjamin, legal observance, and so on. Paul’s language has often been understood as “out with Judaism, in with Christ.”

When Paul was writing, though, no one could have envisioned a Christian gospel that was not also an invitation to join the people of Israel—least of all Paul. The question Paul and his rivals were debating is not *whether* gentile believers should become part of the family of Abraham, but *how*.

Here it is telling that Paul reserves the term “circumcision” for those on his side of the dispute when he says in verse 3, “For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh.” True circumcision, Paul implies, is a matter of the heart and the spirit, not of the flesh.

The basic idea was not a new one, nor was it unique to followers of Christ.

Deuteronomy (30:6), too, had envisioned a circumcision of the heart marking a people who wholeheartedly love and serve their God.

Jeremiah picked up Deuteronomy’s image and supplemented it with his own: a new covenant, written on Israel’s heart (4:4; 31:31–34).

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Clearly, then, when Paul alludes to a spiritual circumcision, he is not criticizing Jews or repudiating Judaism. He is, rather, reiterating and extending an old prophetic dream. Paul believes that Jeremiah’s vision of a new covenant and a circumcision of the heart has now been fulfilled in Christ. To circumcise gentiles now would mean failing to recognize the new thing God has done. In Christ, God has already purified gentile hearts by faith and grafted believers into the people of Israel. Why initiate adoption proceedings for those who are already Abraham’s children (as Paul writes in Galatians 3:7)?

The problem with the message of Paul’s rival teachers, then, is not that it is somehow too Jewish. The problem is that circumcision isn’t Christ. To require it makes it an empty gesture, only for show.

We can apply the same analysis to the various trappings of Christian cultural identity. For example, to conflate racial or LGBTQ+ identity with devotion to Christ is quite literally to put one’s confidence in the flesh. Such things are worthless—“rubbish,” as Paul puts it—compared to the knowledge of Christ.

The gospel lesson further drives home the question of identity and “know thyself.”

Jesus tells a parable about tenants in a vineyard who turn on the owner (or house manager) and kill his slaves when the owner sends his slaves to collect the harvest and then the owner’s son when he comes.

Of course, when asked what the owner will do when he comes, the chief priests and Pharisees say, “He will put them to death and get good tenants.” Jesus then obliquely refers to himself as the son in the parable and, quoting Psalm 118, that he is the cornerstone that is rejected by the

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builders, that is the religious leaders. He then bluntly tells them in verse 43, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.”

And the thing is that the religious leaders don’t deny Jesus’ characterization, they don’t repent. They simply think, “How can we get rid of this guy because the people love him?” If they were asked, “Who are you?”, they probably would reply, “We are descendants of Abraham who keep the traditions and make others do the same.” What they probably wouldn’t admit, perhaps even to themselves, is their desire to keep the status quo and power over others even if it means compromising with the Romans.

Identity is important, particularly you are underrepresented and lost in the sea of the majority. That’s why Jesus calls out the marginalized, giving identity to the poor, the children, the widows, the infirmed.

But when you use your identity, particularly if you are the majority group, like say, oh, I don’t know, rich, white males in America, to oppress and suppress others, that is what Jesus is preaching against.

Even on an individual basis, if you proclaim to be a good Christian, but are blithely hurting others, you do not know thyself.

It reminds me of a meme on Facebook that my friend Mike Crawshaw’s brother Dennis told me Friday when I was in Ohio, “Jesus loves you, but everyone else thinks you’re an a...,um, thinks you’re a jerk.”

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, it is good for us to have our identities but connected as members of the same body, that is the body of Christ. No one is above another. We are all to work together to “produce the fruit of the kingdom.”

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But as the past 2,000 years has shown and particularly our current political climate today, it is not easy to do that but is easy to give up. So, I leave you with Paul’s declaration for himself from the end of today’s passage that we can each adopt as well, “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

In the name of the God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.