Identity and Purpose

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 1:1-2

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It is a joy to be back with you. On June 11, I left on Sabbatical with my wife, Chris. We spent time in Cape Cod and Bethany Beach. We visited family in Massachusetts, Ohio and Pennsylvania. We worshipped in Baptist, Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian and non-denominational churches, even a Protestant monastic community.

I devoted myself to two projects this summer: resting and writing. As for resting, I did not wear a tie or set my alarm once. I took evenings and weekends off. It’s fun to live like the rest of you for a change. I took this picture of a glorious sunset on Cape Cod Bay with my phone. We enjoyed extended time with family, especially our five grandchildren. So many funny moments—water balloons, ocean crabs and memorable one-liners come to mind. There were serious moments also. Travelling with my father to visit my sister in an Alzheimer’s facility was sobering.

As for writing, I began by reading over 13 years of sermons to clarify what really matters to me. I kept coming back to the one question people ask me more than any other right now—how have I managed to say in one church so long? I decided to lean into this question and write about the advantages of staying put. I have titled it, *Staying Put to Expand Your Influence: Seven Benefits of Long-Term Ministry*, and I’m shopping it to publishers even as we speak. I want to challenge the mobility myth so rampant in our culture. Staying put matters in most everything we do:
family, friendships, church and job. I also prepared 40 blogs to use in ministry this year.

I am grateful for this church, most especially our Elders, who afforded me this opportunity to write and recharge my spiritual battery. I appreciate so many staff who covered in my absence. Do we have an awesome staff or what?

We celebrate reaching our five million dollar Ignite goal, even exceeding it by 75,000 and counting. Our local mission and retooling our building plans are well underway. We have already cut our debt in half and expect to eliminate it before the end of this three-year campaign.

This fall, we are focusing on the question: “Who do you think you are?” After choosing this tag line, I learned that “Who do you think you are?” is also a popular British TV-series that has migrated to the states. British celebrities learn surprising, extraordinary and moving aspects of their family tree. I’m good with that! We are members of God’s forever family.

Ephesians will be our text for these next twelve Sundays. This letter has two central themes of identity and purpose. Identity concerns itself with the proverbial “Who am I” question while purpose addresses a related “Why am I here?” question. I am not what other people say I am. I am who God says I am.
Identity and purpose also matter big time to our church. Who we are in Christ and what he calls us to do have central importance to our mission.

Now, to Ephesians itself. The letter begins, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God to the saints at Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:1). Paul identifies himself right from the outset as the sender and the saints at Ephesus as the receivers. I regard this method as far superior to our writing style of identifying the recipient’s name at the beginning and the sender’s name at the end.

Paul identifies himself as an apostle by the will of God. There are 14 people with the designation “apostle” in the New Testament. Jesus had 12 apostles, minus Judas who defected and Matthias who took his place. Paul brings the number to 14. Apostles act as envoys or ambassadors. They are not at liberty to make up policies for their king or president as they go along. They communicate what their commander-in-chief wants conveyed.

The recipients of this letter are “saints in Ephesus.” Paul visits Ephesus (modern Turkey) during his second missionary journey in 52AD (Acts 18). Paul leaves a married couple, Priscilla and Aquila in charge of this new church to resume his missionary travels. He returns to Ephesus during his third missionary journey and remains there for three years (Acts 19). He leaves Ephesus for Rome. There the Roman government places him under house arrest, where he writes this prison epistle in 60-62AD.
Saint may confuse you since we often equate this word with a special designation of Christians in the Catholic Church who exhibit extraordinary acts of faith. Saint or holy in the Biblical sense means to be set apart for God’s service. Saints are people set apart to carry on Christ’s mission in the world. We are the saints at VPC.

Now to verse 2: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 1:2). Such greetings were common in first century letters. Plato often began his letters with the salutation “Do well” and Epicurus wrote “Good health.” Paul’s greeting is rich with theological content, “Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Eight of Paul’s 13 letters begin with this same grace and peace greeting. Grace is God’s undeserved, unmerited favor for us. Peace, from the Hebrew word shalom, means wholeness and well-being. Grace and peace share a symbiotic relationship with each other. They function in a direct cause and effect relationship.

The universal law of cause and effect states that every effect has a cause just as every cause has an effect. If I fail to prepare a sermon and preach a lousy message, failing to prepare is the cause and a lousy sermon is the effect. If I receive a ticket for driving 55 mph in a 25 zone, my speeding is the cause and a ticket is the effect.
When it comes to salvation, grace is the cause and peace is the effect. The cause of our salvation is God’s grace in Jesus Christ and the effect is peace. So many people want the effect (peace) without the cause (grace). No, grace is the cause and peace is the effect.

Paul’s letters typically address some controversy in a local church. There is no dispute that prompts this Ephesians letter. Paul writes to encourage the faithful. In chapter 3 we read, “I ask you not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you.” Some believers in Ephesus are discouraged that Paul has languished so long under house arrest. Do not be discouraged, he tells them. His imprisonment affords Paul the opportunity to witness to the Imperial Guards assigned to him. His incarceration can becomes the impetus for other believers to pick up the slack (Philippians 13-14).

We come to the “so-what” portion of this sermon. What difference does this sermon make in my life? Three words come to mind.

First, a word of encouragement. There are two primary reasons why we meet together Sunday morning: to worship God and offer encouragement to each other. You will not likely receive much encouragement to live the Christian life out there but you will receive it in here. The word “encourage” appears 105 times in the New Testament. Encourage is a compound English word consisting of the
prefix “en” meaning “to put into” added to “courage,” so literally, the word means to put courage into someone else.

Maybe you need a word of encouragement today. Encouragement to keep going. Encouragement as you begin your job in earnest again or return to school after summer recess. Some of you need encouragement after sending a child to elementary school or off to college. You need encouragement in the face of health concerns or family tensions. God may want you to put courage into someone else today.

Second, a word about establishing new habits. Fall is a great time to reset our lives. It is an ideal season of the year to create or resume healthy spiritual habits.

How long does it take to establish a new habit? The popular answer is 21 days. The 21-day theory originated with a plastic surgeon in the 1950s. He observed that after surgery it took his patients 21 days to replace an old mental image of their bodies with a new one. This 21-day theory has become something of urban legend. Researchers at University College (London) have debunked this myth. They determined it takes on average 66 days to create a new habit. I know, 21 days sounds more appealing, but it may explain why new habits do not take effect after only a few weeks.

Tomorrow is September 11, a date that will live in infamy. If you count 66 days from 9/11, you arrive at Nov.15. Why not join us over the next 66 days in the habit of reading the
Bible and centering your day in prayer. You might consider joining a group to foster spiritual friendship or invest in a mission effort.

Why not begin by reading Ephesians this week. Read chapter 1 on Monday, chapter 2 on Tuesday and you will finish the letter by Saturday. You can do this! Ephesians contains all of 155 verses and 2400 words. Yet, let me caution you here. Next Sunday’s reading, verses 3-14 is one glorious run-on sentence consisting of 202 Greek words. As a long-time student of the Bible, I can attest that this book will grow on you. You start to read it and before you know it, this book is reading you. It will speak into your life. The primary reason we read the Bible is so God can form Christ in us.

Third, a word about grace and peace. If you want peace (and who doesn’t), start with grace. Grace is the cause and peace is the effect. Consider this sermon as God’s invitation to you to receive God’s gift of grace in Jesus Christ. You cannot earn or buy this grace-gift. Grace is God’s gift we receive in faith. Today might be the first time you have ever considered receiving God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

If you have received God’s grace-gift, lean into grace this fall. Resolve to become more gracious and less irritable, more good-natured and less sarcastic, more grace-filled and less nit-picky. Grace is the cause and peace is the effect.

Become all-in for Christ this fall. Decide to go Christ’s way. Resolve to become a real disciple, not a Sunday-only pretend kind of Christian, but the real deal, a true believer. Whatever it takes and whatever it costs, I will follow You. Decide, from this day forward, to love the Lord and love the people, to serve the Lord and serve the people.