

## **CLAIMING YOUR PLACE**

If you spend any time on Social media, you may have noticed that a trend developed several years back. There are a series of quizzes you can take- at least on Facebook, which is the only social media I do- that will give you answers to questions you that didn't know you had. For example, "Which Harry Potter Character Are You?" I didn't know I had that question. I didn't know I needed to know, which Harry Potter Character I was, but that might be one quiz. "What Kind of kind of animal are you?" I thought I was a Homo Sapiens, but hey, some people may think differently, I don't know. That might be another quiz. If you click on the links to those quizzes they will take you to a series of questions- usually about 10- and the computer will assign a result based upon your answers. Then you have the option to post the results to your Facebook Page.

I don't usually spend a lot of time on these particular quizzes. However, there was one time when I was on Facebook and I noticed that one of my High School buddies, a guy named Mike Evans, had taken one of these quizzes. This quiz was to answer the question, "To which Ancient Civilization do you belong?" He had posted his results. It turns out he was supposed to be a Viking. That result sort of surprised me. I wouldn't have picked that result for him, but that's what the computer assigned him.

Now, I have always loved history, so I took this quiz. I don't know about Mike's results, but mine were dead on. According to the computer, I was supposed to be Roman. I proudly posted that result on my Facebook page.

As I read this week's passage I remembered this incident because it points, I think, to an important aspect of human behavior. We humans seem to have a need to find our place. In the great cosmic scheme of things who we are is a big deal. I know that for some people that question is very hard. Some people search their entire lives; some people never quite figure it out; some people struggle with that question

It's a question as old as humanity itself. This question shows up again and again in Scripture. For example, we might remember the incident where James and John asked to be seated on his left and his right when he comes into his Kingdom. They're very concerned with who they are- what's their place on the Kingdom. In the following verses Jesus has to tell them, "I'm sorry. I can't do that. That's for my Father in Heaven to decide." Then he begins to wash the feet of the Disciples and tells them, "If you want to be first, you need to be a servant."

The thing is, as important as it seems to be to us to know our own place, we also seem to want to put others in their place. Of course, invariably, we think our place is better than the place of others. It would seem to be a part of our nature to compare ourselves to others. That's not really a virtue in my book, by the way. "Don't associate with that person, they come from the wrong place." "Stay away

from them; they come from a bad family. They don't make as much money as you do. They don't go to church like you do," and so forth and so on.

I want to point out that if it's natural for us today to worry about place, it's logical to assume that it was a big deal in the Ancient World as well. What the historical and anthropological evidence tells us is that not only was social status a big deal in the Ancient World; it was a much bigger deal back then than it is today. Social status and community reputation were literally a matter of life and death in Jesus' day.

This dynamic of knowing your place created all kinds of theological controversy in the early church. The very earliest church was formed of two distinct groups. In the very earliest church, it's important to note, both of these groups were Jewish. Non- Jews only the joined the church in large numbers later. Originally Christianity was a movement among devout Jews.

The first group was the Jews who lived in Palestine who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. As devout, ultra- orthodox Jews they found their identity in two places. First, they were members of the Nation of Israel. Typically this meant an actual genetic lineage to one of the original twelve tribes. They were Jews by birth. Even to this day, devout Jews believe that if your mother is Jewish, you are yourself a member of the Nation of Israel.

Secondly, they found their identity as the people who kept God's law. What made them distinct from the rest of the world was that they were a covenantal people. God's law made them who they were- distinct from all other people.

Scripture makes clear, in the New Testament as well as the Old, that God recognizes this covenant. God has honored this covenant throughout history. This covenant is sacred.

There was also a stigma among the devout Jews in Palestine of that day, against association with people who were not Jews. Now, I don't think the intent was to divide. It wasn't a case of "we're better than you are," in most cases. It was more a matter of being able to keep the Law. If you ate dinner at the home of a non- Jew, for example, you had no way to know for sure that you were keeping kosher. If you spent time around non- Jews, you couldn't be sure that you were of keeping the purity laws properly. So, I think that's what the stigma about association with others was. So that first group is the group of Jews that lived in and around the Holy Land.

Then there is another group. The Jews of Jesus' day were not confined to the Holy Land. They had spread out all over what we would call today the Roman Empire. Many of these Jews were a little less rigid. They had printed a copy of the Old Testament, but there's wasn't in Hebrew, it was in Greek. Many of them spoke Greek either as a first language or a second. Their customs were more in keeping

with the local customs in the area where they lived. They were more accepting of outsiders, many of whom were uncircumcised and not part of the Nation of Israel.

This diversity caused a very real theological controversy in the early church. The Jewish Christians in Palestine held that to become a Christian one must be a Jew first, because God's covenant was with the Nation of Israel. The Diaspora Jews- that is, the Jews who had spread throughout the Roman Empire, held that Jesus' death and crucifixion and resurrection represented a new covenant. Anyone who wished could immediately become a Christian- without first becoming a devout Jew. We take that for granted today, but this was a big controversy in the early church. This was a big argument.

What do subsequent theologians say? Well, there are basically two ways that classic theology has dealt with this divide. One position is what's called the dual covenant theory. The theory goes like this. Jesus does represent a new covenant, but that doesn't invalidate the first covenant. The first covenant still holds. Most Christians today consider this a heresy. I don't know about that but I do have some theological reservations with that view.

The second theological view is supersessionism. This view says that the new covenant in Jesus Christ supersedes and replaces the Old Covenant. Under this view it is the responsibility of the Jews- and anyone else for that matter- to convert. In no other way, do they have any hope of salvation.

Paul seems to be suggesting something a little different here. Paul clearly rejects here the supersessionist view when he says, "I ask then, has God rejected his People? May it never be! ... God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew." Those are not my words- they come straight from the Apostle Paul!

He points to Elijah who asked for the unfaithful to be destroyed, but God had a different plan. God said he had kept for himself a remnant- 7000 people who have remained faithful. In verse five Paul says, "In the same way then, there has come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice."

So what do I think? Well, I think that all this talk of who is in and who is out is inappropriate- for me or for anyone else. It's okay to generalize on theological thought I guess, but as I understand it my place is as a beloved child of God. I don't need to figure out who is in and who is out. I can leave that to God. That's God's choice!

Throughout my life I have told people that the bible says you should not judge others. For a while, I got the response, "Well, you can be a fruit picker." Let me tell you what they mean by that. If you look in Galatians 5, there's a list that's given by the author of Galatians that he calls the fruits of the spirit. Love, Peace, Joy, patience, kindness, gentleness, self- control: these are the fruits of the spirit. What

people mean is that you can use that list as a means to get around the injunction not to judge. You deal with people according to the fruits of the spirit.

I have a problem with that. I use that list as a yardstick to measure myself- not to measure others. The question I have is, Am I being loving? Am I being joyful? Am I being patient? I have to say, very often the answer is no. Patience is a continual struggle for me. Am. I being gentle? Am I being kind? Am I acting with self- control? I don't want to admit how often I'm not. I use that list as a yardstick to measure myself.

It's dangerous, in my opinion, to use that list as a yardstick to measure others, because I can't begin to tell you how many times I have misjudged people in my life. We need to be careful about using this list as a yardstick to measure others. There's plenty of room to measure ourselves with it.

So, this notion of trying to figure out who fits where is inappropriate. God loves all of us! I don't need to figure out who is in and who is out. I need to figure out what it means to be a child of God, and measure myself by that yardstick. How can I communicate to people what it really means to be a member of this family if I'm not working towards that myself?

At heart, I'm a very simple man. I'm not a great theologian. Nor am I a great teacher. Heck, I don't know if I'm even a good preacher. I can't tell you for sure what Paul had on his mind. That's been debated by people who are a whole lot smarter than I am- and a whole lot better educated on the Scripture. What I do know is that as inadequate as I am, I am a beloved child of God. That's my place. That's where I belong.

You also are beloved children. Whatever weaknesses or foibles you may think you have; however inadequate you may think you are; you are a beloved child of God. You belong. This is who you are at your very core-even if you don't know it: even if you don't feel it. You are a beloved child of God. The thing about being part of a family is that you never have to wonder about who you are. You can be who you are because you are accepted. You belong. I belong. The people that we've been judging belong too.

That's what the family of God is like. The Grace of Jesus Christ is sufficient for us to claim our place as beloved children. That sets us free to be the disciples that Christ called us to be.