

“So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”

Knowing who you are is an essential part of being a human being. A desire to figure this out, to learn who you truly are, is found all throughout human culture, not just the Bible. For instance, in Shakespeare’s classic work, “Hamlet,” we get the quote that perhaps you’ve heard before: “To thine own self be true.” Know who you are, and be true to that, live accordingly.

Or if you’re not too familiar with Shakespeare, you might be more familiar with the popular Disney movie that’s really a reworking of Hamlet, namely “The Lion King.” At one point in that movie, the main character, Simba, is having a moment of crisis where he doesn’t know what to do. He’s run away from home, but a friend from home has found him and told him how bad things are and that he needs to come back, but he definitely doesn’t want to. As he struggles, the spirit of his deceased father appears to him and tells him, “Remember who you are.” It is this remembrance that leads Simba to act, to return home, defeat his evil uncle, and reclaim the throne that rightfully belongs to him.

Our reading comes from John 8, and much of that chapter deals with this very question. The Jews question who Jesus is. Jesus works to show the Jews who they really are. And then we, who have been handed down this section of Holy Scripture to read and meditate upon, are led to ask ourselves, who are we?

Knowing who you are is essential for several reasons. For one, it lets you know where you’ve come from, what has brought you to this point – both the bad and the good. For another, it lets you know where you should go, what you should do. And then connected to both of these, it gives you confidence, assurance, and comfort as you walk that path.

How then, as a Christian, do you know who you are? Jesus gives the answer here in our reading: abide in His word.

God’s Word is the answer because it is the story of God’s people. It tells us where we’ve come from, what our Lord has done for us, how we have responded, what’s brought us to where we are. Throughout it, we hear of our forefathers and how they understood – or failed to understand – who they were in God.

It’s opening pages tell of Creation, the Almighty Lord using His limitless power and creativity to bring the universe into existence from nothing. And the capstone of that great work? The creation of man and woman. Humanity is the greatest part of creation, for they alone are blessed to be formed in His image. Nothing else in existence, not even the glorious angels of heaven, share in that.

And while only Adam and Eve were formed in this way, the Scriptures make clear that each person is, from the very moment of conception, the unique work of the Lord of life and love. As He leads the Psalmist to write, “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

God's Word tells us, though, that man would not remain in this perfection for long. Along came the deceiver, Satan, who asked, "Did God really say?" Though his question was, on the surface, concerning fruit from a particular tree, it really concerned Adam and Eve and who did God say they were.

Were they the lovingly created children of the Most High God, able to trust Him completely to care for them and do what was best for them, or could they be something more, something greater, be like God Himself?

Tragically, the two fail to trust God and instead listen to the serpent's idea of knowing, and through this learn shame, fear, and finally death. Those things, and all the other terrible effects of sin, are passed on to all their children, including us still today. Thus St. Paul writes in our Epistle reading, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

All the suffering, all the sadness, all the death we encounter in the life comes from who we are as sinners, living in a world broken by sin.

Yet God makes it abundantly clear in His word that we are not forgotten nor abandoned by Him, even in spite of our sin. Even as He is forced to cast Adam and Eve away from His presence in the Garden because of their sin, He promises that He will come as the Seed of the woman and crush the serpent's head and restore humanity to Himself once more.

Many years later, He comes to give that promise to a man named Abram. He tells Abram, whom He renames Abraham, that from His line will come that promised Seed, in whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Though Abraham and his wife Sarah have been unable to have children and are by that point very old, Abraham believes, and this belief, this faith, is counted to him by God as righteousness.

The Lord gives outward signs of this promise to Abraham, such as circumcision, but the key thing in Abraham is always his faith in God's promise. This faith in God's promise to send the Seed preserves Abraham and strengthens him, even when God asks very hard things of him, such as sacrificing his only son, Isaac. Abraham is faithful and obeys, and the Lord stops Abraham's knife and provides a different sacrifice.

In Abraham, we as God's people see faith, and how faith leads us to follow our Lord, to trust that His ways are best even when we don't understand them or they seem "wrong" to our human reason. We also see how our Lord preserves His people and keeps His promises to them, even when it seems impossible to us that He could do so.

God's word tells us of so many more people, so much more that goes on as God preserves His people and reminds them through prophets of who He is and who they are, but unfortunately we don't have time to fit them all into this sermon. So we'll pick up with our Gospel reading.

There, the promise made to Abraham and its fulfillment are the central point of contention. The Jews think that, because they are the biological descendants of Abraham, the promises given to Abraham and the righteousness counted to Abraham are automatically theirs. This is why they dismissively tell Jesus, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone."

They of course know their own history, how they were in fact slaves in Egypt and slaves in Babylon, and how they are currently subjects of the Roman Empire. But they think that, because they are descended from Abraham, they are eternally free, that God will receive them into His kingdom as His sons simply because of their lineage.

In this they are utterly mistaken. And they'd know this, if they would abide in God's Word, because there the truth is found. God's Word would point out that all kinds of people, all nations, would be brought into God's Kingdom, not just the Jews, and furthermore, many Gentiles already had been, like Rahab and Ruth and Uriah. Physical descent had already been shown to be irrelevant.

The thing that mattered – that still matters – is faith. It was when Abraham believed that He was counted righteous, not when He left his home for a distant land or physically sired Isaac or circumcised his son. Those actions were all born out of faith, the result of believing what God said, but it was faith in the promised Seed that saved Abraham. And the coming of that promised Seed, the Messiah, was why Abraham and his descendants were set apart by God in the first place.

Because the Jews have failed to rightly understand who they were and what made them God's people, they then head in a totally wrong and eternally destructive direction. Their confidence is in their lineage, and so they end up rejecting the promised Seed Himself.

They boast about their names being on the rolls kept in the temple, and so they reject the truth of God's word, even when the Word of God in human flesh is standing before them. They think they are free, and so they reject the One who can free eternally and instead, they remain slaves of sin and death.

In these Jews, we have a tragic example and warning. The Jews' understanding of who they are is based on their own ideas, not on the truth of God's word.

This can happen still today with those who claim the name Christian, but who don't know what that means based on God's word and instead base it on their own ideas. For some people, the idea is a cultural one.

America, they figure, is a Christian nation, and so if one is a good American citizen then they'll automatically be a good Christian. If they do what most "good" Americans do, then he'll be Christian in some sense. If they raise their children as most children in America are raised, then they'll grow up to be Christians.

God's word tells us that this is far from the truth. Just because one generation knows and fears the Lord doesn't mean that the next one will, and in fact if teaching about the Lord takes a back seat to being like the culture around you, the children will fall away. Just read the book of Judges to get a picture of this.

For other people, your identity as a Christian is purely a family thing. They count themselves as Christians because their family is or was Christian.

Grandpa was a faithful churchgoer, always reading his Bible and living out Christian virtue in his life. Grandma was a faithful Christian, constantly in prayer, helping care for others in whatever

way she could. Therefore, I must be a Christian too, even if I don't actually follow in their footsteps or live a life of faith, because surely God would want grandpa and grandma to have their whole family together in heaven.

Again, God's people have assumed this before, and God has expressly condemned it through His prophet Ezekiel. I'm not going to quote the whole eighteenth chapter to you – though it's well worth your read – but it can be well summarized in the fourth verse: "Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die."

When it comes to salvation, it ultimately doesn't matter who your parents or grandparents were. It doesn't matter if a person used to have faith if they don't anymore. What matters is if you believe – not just know, but believe – in Christ.

And again, this false understanding of who you are isn't anything new. Not only does Ezekiel condemn people in his day for it, but it's what Christ is condemning the Jews for in John 8. Yes, Abraham was righteous, but those Jews who are his biological descendants are not walking in his ways. As Jesus tells them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did."

It is through abiding in God's word that we truly understand how we are God's people. As I've already discussed, it's clear that biological descent is not God's deciding factor. The evangelist St. Matthew pointedly includes Gentiles in his genealogy of Jesus Christ. And the prophets, such as Isaiah, point out numerous times that all nations – not just the Jews or members of certain families – will be gathered into the Kingdom of God.

It is always God who chooses His people. He chose Abraham when, as Abram, he was still worshiping idols in his father's house. The Lord chose David, the youngest of Jesse's sons, to be both king of Israel and forerunner of the Messiah. He sent His glorious angel Gabriel to a humble virgin in Nazareth named Mary, and because of His grace and power all generations call her blessed.

It is always God who chooses, who uplifts, who blesses. It is God who has chosen you. Not because of your talents or gifts, though God would use them. Not because of your family, though God uses family more than anything to teach and pass on the faith. Not because you're an American, though God has blessed you by letting live in this country at this time.

God has chosen you for the same reason He has chosen all of His people throughout history: His love. He sends His Holy Spirit to work through the Word and Holy Baptism, to call you by the Gospel, to enlighten you with His gifts, to sanctify you and keep you in the true faith. He is the one who has chosen to make you His own. And His choice is always right.

This understanding, this right knowledge of who we are, gives us great confidence and assurance to follow in His footsteps. By the Holy Spirit working faith in our hearts, we are led to follow – that's what a disciple does.

Being a Christian doesn't mean thinking that, because God has chosen you, you're free to ignore the instruction of His Word and the direction of the Holy Spirit and just live however you want. Again, abiding in His Word gives plenty of examples of this. God chose to bring the people out of slavery in Egypt by His great power, but they had to live out their faith in obedience by painting their

doorposts and lintels with lambs' blood and walking across the dry bed of the Red Sea to make it to the Promised Land.

God put His great temple, where His name would dwell, in Jerusalem, but when the people decided they'd use that temple as a means of assurance and ignore the Word that was supposed to be proclaimed there, God sent the Babylonians to level Jerusalem and the splendid temple and haul the survivors away in chains.

When Christ called the first disciples from their boats to be fishers of men, they didn't say, "We'll listen to you whenever you happen to pass through, and we'll say we're your disciples to anyone who might ask, but we're not ready to give up this fishing business yet." No, they followed, with James and John even leaving their father Zebedee in the boat. The Word serves as a call to action.

The Word also serves to give confidence to those who are following, again by reminding them of who they are. Throughout the Scriptures, we are shown example after example of God being faithful to His people, never breaking His promises to them, caring for them, defending them, being with them. Even when they'd fall away, He would call them to repentance, and when they would repent, He would bring them back and restore them, again giving them His love and blessing.

The chief example of this great love and faithfulness is of course Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus came and died, not to bring "good people" to heaven – for there's no one so good that they deserve heaven, but instead to wipe away the sins of evil people – all humanity – so that they could be brought into heaven by faith in Him.

He and He alone sets free from the slavery to sin; no one and nothing else can do this. Those who are joined to Christ are given everlasting life, such that whatever happens in this short life, even suffering and tribulation as God's people have always endured, an eternity of peace and joy with all God's people in paradise awaits. And no force in all creation can take this away.

This is the confidence that led Luther and the other reformers to set about on their task of calling the church again to the Word of God. It was an extremely hard task – sometimes seemingly impossible – but they worked in the confidence that the God who had always been faithful to His people throughout the ages would be faithful to them as well.

If God has chosen to work through obscure shepherds and sojourners, backwater carpenters and fishermen, then He could certainly work through a monk in a small monastery in a remote town in Saxony. And work God did!

We are heirs of that great work – the Reformation – and even greater, we are the people of God. His promises in Scripture are His promises for us. His faithfulness to His saints of old is His faithfulness to us. His Gospel call to Jews and Gentiles is His call to us and for us to proclaim.

We do all this, following in the footsteps of Christ as His disciples, and are blessed with confidence as we do it, because we are the people of God. We know this because, as we abide in His Word, He tells us it. He tells us that, as we know His truth, we are set free.

In this celebration of the Reformation, and every day, abide in His Word. For abiding in His Word, you will know who you are.

In His holy name, amen.