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Title: This Is Us: Loved

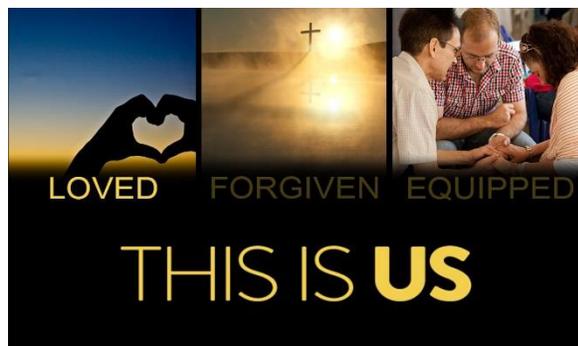
Date: August 5 & 6, 2017

Preaching: Senior Associate Minister Ryan Hazen

Scripture: [Romans 8:38-39](#)

Text: [1 John 4:7-16](#)

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Today, we begin a three-week sermon series entitled THIS IS US. While our motivation for the title of the series comes from the hit NBC TV series of the same name, you won't be lost if you've never seen an episode or even if you've never heard of it. I would however, recommend it if you've not seen it. I'm not much of a TV person

but I've been streaming past episodes and find it to be a powerful show. If you haven't seen it, it follows three siblings and their parents, an Anglo hippee-ish couple. During the delivery of triplets in 1980, one of the three triplets died. While still at the hospital, an African-American baby was left at a fire station and ended up in the same hospital nursery as the other two babies. The parents end up adopting the abandoned baby and these three "triplets" grow up together.

The show is about the struggles of life that each faces as they stake out their own identity with flashbacks to their childhood. The show honestly deals with everyday problems in families and as individuals – issues of death and dealing with life's tragedies, race and racism, obesity, relationships, competition, blended families and the search for happiness. It is from this search for identity that Dustin Hite, our Promise Road Campus Pastor, and I thought we could search together in these three weeks for our identity as Christians. We've boiled it down to three overarching points on which we can hang our hat – perhaps oversimplified but still, we believe, correct - we are loved, we are forgiven and we are equipped. Today, for me, the very bedrock of our identity as a Christian – WE ARE LOVED.

Maybe we should first start with the importance of identity. My guess is that almost every person in this room carries some form of government issued photo ID. If you drove here today, I (and the police officers who are members of the congregation) hope that you have a valid driver's license. Beginning October 1, 2020, if you do not have the more stringent form of ID

known as a REAL ID compliant license, you will not be allowed to board a commercial flight or enter certain federal buildings.

Identification is important. IDs tell others who we are. While we usually think of our driver's license as our primary ID, there are other forms as well – there are passports and student IDs. Around here, we encourage you to wear name tags because they are one way that we are more hospitable as a congregation. Name tags tell others who we are and allow others to have a starting point in a relationship as we support one another.

We all have names that, when combined with a date of birth and a social security number and a password that we can never remember, will get us access to our bank or our doctor or our Amazon Prime account. But names, as special as they are, don't tell the whole story. There are 35 other Ryan Hazen's on Facebook alone (and, interestingly, I don't know any of them). I make number 36. The other 35 aren't me.

So who are you? What is your identity? Many people define themselves by their profession or by their children or parents or other relationships that may serve to connect you with someone else. I'm Will and Matt's dad. I'm Ruth's husband. Growing up in Ottawa, Kansas, everyone knew Junior Hazen, my dad. He was active in the small town and worked for a utility company that took him into a majority of the homes in Ottawa. Everybody knew Junior. For my life in Ottawa, my first 18 years, I was Junior's son. In high school, it was a blessing and a curse. And even when I go back for a visit, even though he's been gone for 20 years, I'm still Junior's son.

But who are you really? Some of you don't like that question because you don't like what you see. Unfortunately, if you look in the mirror and see mostly the bad stuff about yourself, you have convinced yourself that God sees you that way, too. Others don't like the question because it brings up more pain, sometimes because of the way others have treated you, sometimes, sadly, because of the way the church has treated you, and sometimes because of the way you have treated yourself.

Others, perhaps, don't mind the question so much – maybe because we've accepted who we are and are reasonably comfortable in our own skin and with our understanding of our identity. We know there are places of sin and places of pain but we've found ways of carrying on in spite of those. Through the struggles of life, we have a sense of who we are and try to live the life that is ours.

Whatever your reaction to the question, it is an important one to ask, even if it is uncomfortable. How you see yourself has an awful lot to do with how

you live your life. When we understand who we are in the light of God, it transforms how we see just about everything including the stuff we see that we don't like, the stuff we see that hurts and even the things we've come to accept. Knowing how our identity as Christians shape us is a critical starting point for knowing how we live as children of God.

I believe that Christian identity has to start with the fact that we are loved. When you think no one else in the whole world loves you, you are still loved. You are loved by someone who is the very definition of love. You see, the point is not simply that God loves, but that God IS love. Do you hear the difference? Love is not merely one of his attributes, but is God's very nature. We heard it read earlier in worship. "And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God and God remains in them."

The fact that you are loved not just by someone but by the one who IS love is the climax of the first section of Romans that is our text for today. In verse 35, just before I started reading for today, Paul asks one of many rhetorical questions. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Paul is not saying that there are not things that happen to the people of God that cause us to feel separated from God. We are afflicted with all sorts of issues. We can go through all kinds of afflictions, hardships, and tribulations. But these things do not separate us from the love of Christ. When we go through afflictions we may feel like God has left us and that we are outside of God's love. But the assurance is that we know this is not true. These things cannot separate us from the love of Christ.

Distress and anguish cannot separate us from the love of Christ. Persecution for the cause of Christ does not separate us from the love of Christ. Persecution does not mean that we are doing something wrong or that God has left us. Famine or hunger does not separate us from the love of Christ. Fitting along with this is nakedness. Not having food or not having clothing does not mean that we are separated from the love of Christ. Our lives being put into danger does not mean that we are separated from the love of Christ.

Even death does not mean that we are separated from the love of Christ. We could make a more contemporary list. If you've been bullied, you are not separated. If you've lost a job, if you cannot speak a certain language, you are not separated - not sickness, not cancer, not diseases, not syndromes can separate us from the love of Christ. These are things that can affect followers of Jesus. But suffering does not mean that we have been separated from God's love or that God is no longer for us. Paul's answer is clear in verse 37: "No. No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him

who loved us." It does not matter what happens to us, we still win. There is no condemnation and we are not separated from the love of Christ.

Verses 38-39 that I read drive this point even deeper. There is nothing that will be able to separate us from the love of God. Not death or all the mistakes we make in this life is able to separate us from God's love. No spiritual beings or physical powers can separate us from the love of Christ. Nothing currently happening now or anything that will happen in the future is able to separate us from the love of Christ. There is not one power that can separate us for God has power over all. God's love is greater than the vastness of the universe. Nothing in the world above or the world below can separate us from God's love. Nothing else in all the creation can separate us from the love of Christ. Do we feel the force of Paul's words? NOTHING, NOTHING, NOTHING can separate us from the love of God.

Paul is reassuring the Roman church that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. There was suffering and affliction and persecution and anyone could start to question – does God still love me – have I done something to put me outside of God's love? Paul in these verses offers the Romans good news. He reassures the Roman church that living out their callings as disciples of Jesus brings with it the assurance that God is at work for good in all that happens, that in the process they are being conformed to the image of Jesus and that they will be glorified and loved without regard for the circumstance of the moment.

God in Christ Jesus has given us a new identity. If we are but willing to leave our baggage behind and believe that we are loved by the one who is love, God can do great things with us.

There is the story of the beggar who lived near the king's palace. One day he saw a proclamation posted outside the palace gate. The king was giving a great dinner. Anyone dressed in royal garments would be welcome. The beggar went on his way. He looked at the rags he was wearing and sighed. Slowly an idea crept into his mind. He made his way back to the palace. He approached the guard at the gate. "Please sir, I would like to speak to the king." "Wait here," the guard replied.

In a few minutes, he was brought before the king. "What do you want?" the king asked. "Yes, your majesty. I want so much to attend the banquet, but I have no royal robes to wear. Please sir, if I may be so bold, may I have one of your old garments so that I, too, may come to the banquet?" The beggar was trembling in fear of what the king might do. "You have been wise in

coming to me," the king said. He called to his son, the young prince. "Take this man to your room and array him in some of your clothes."

The prince did as he was told and soon the beggar was standing before a mirror, clothed in garments that he had never dared to even hope for. "You are now eligible to attend the king's banquet tomorrow night," said the prince. "But even more important, you will never need any other clothes. These garments will last forever." The beggar dropped to his knees. "Oh, thank you," he cried. But as he started to leave, he looked back at his pile of dirty rags on the floor. He hesitated. What if the prince was wrong? What if he would need his old clothes again? Quickly he gathered them up.

The banquet was far greater than he had ever imagined, but he couldn't enjoy himself, as he should. He had made a small bundle of his old rags and it kept falling off his lap. The food was passed quickly and the beggar missed some of the greatest delicacies. Time proved that the prince was right. No one came to ask for the royal clothes. Still the poor beggar was doubtful, clinging on to his old rags. As time passed people seemed to forget the royal robes he was wearing. They saw only the little bundle of filthy rags that he clung to wherever he went. They even spoke of him as the old man with the rags.

Many weeks later as he lay dying, the king visited him. The beggar saw the sad look on the king's face when he looked at the small bundle of rags by the bed. Suddenly the beggar remembered the prince's words and he realized that his bundle of rags had cost him a lifetime of joy. He cried bitterly at his foolishness to hold on to those old rags. ¹

Who am I, and what is my purpose. A question that so many ask, but very few ever find the answer. Just like the old beggar we come to Christ and we are given a new identity, one that proclaims we are LOVED, but we hold on to what the world tells us about whether we are good enough for love. In that time, we lose out on so much of what God has planned for our lives. Today, through Paul's words from Romans, my prayer is that you may be encouraged, and then take it and apply it to your life and leave with a different outlook on your life, after you find out who you are, and know that beyond all else you are LOVED by the one who is LOVE. It is your identity as Christian. Carry it with you. Allow others to see who you really are because of your relationship with Christ.

¹ Story of beggar found in article by Chad Bolfa dated October 23, 2008 at www.sermoncentral.com. Article titled, "Who Am I? And What is My Purpose?"