

May 7, 2017

TEXT: Philippians 3:17–4:1

TITLE: Stacked Up By Faith

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

True confession: I read the wedding section of the New York Times. It's in the Style section of the Sunday paper, and there is always an essay or two about love and marriage. This past Sunday in that section I stumbled upon this quote: *Human beings are works in progress that mistakenly think they're finished.*¹ Now those are words that will preach—especially in the season of Easter and in today's rapidly changing world. We are all works in progress. The problem, though, is that we think we're finished—we think how we are today will be precisely how we'll be tomorrow. Thankfully, God knows we are works in progress. That's the deeper message of Easter—that we are not complete and finished on our own. Change happens. Resurrection happens. God acts to finish, rearrange and help us see with fresh eyes what is most true about ourselves, our lives, and our world. More about this in a moment.

This morning I've had you do two exercises in thinking about yourself. I've called them "stacking exercises" because they start from a basic, fundamental reality and stack up personal details about yourself until a description of your whole being emerges. The first was a general stack moving from your birth to your family, your ethnicity, and your place in the global village of the world. The second was a more religious stack—moving again from your birth to your baptism and participation in a church, a denomination, and the global church of Jesus Christ. For all of us, these stacks are largely situated in America—being a Pittsburgher, a Pennsylvanian, a friend or member of ELPC, and part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). But there are other stacks in your life that are not bound to American soil nor limited to the borders of the United States.

For example, think about your financial stack. You have some money—which you likely keep in one of the local banks. I have accounts at Citizens Bank because it's close to the church. Until recently Citizens Bank was part of the Royal Bank of Scotland. If I travel abroad, I can put my debit card into almost any ATM and draw out money in the local currency. So although I'm a Pittsburgher with a Citizens bank account, through my money I'm also linked to Scotland and ultimately can live as a citizen of the world.

Another example: How many of you have Smart phones with internet access on them? You have a technology stack, which moves from your username and password to the equipment giving your access to the internet (phone, computer) then on to the program and I.P. address that connects you to the web—then up to the Cloud that links you with others through e-mail or YouTube or Facebook—

¹ Daniel Gilbert, TED talk "The Psychology of Your Future Self," quoted NY Times Modern Love essay, April 23, 2017.

all of which is available to you almost universally, whether you're here in the U.S. or somewhere out there as a citizen of the world.

Why is this important? Thinking about the “stacks” of our lives helps answer the questions “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” Who are you? Well, you’ve answered that in terms of your family and ethnic identity—and your church identity—but you also have lots of other identities: a financial one, an internet one, a work history one, a medical one. It may be clear to you who you are, but to others and to the world, it can be a complicated question to answer.

I recently read a book that talked about the growing market for passports—how some people with a lot of wealth are able to literally buy passports from different countries, such as small nations in the Caribbean like St. Kitts. These people may have been born in Sudan or Syria or Uzbekistan, but those countries’ passports may not let you travel as freely as you wish. One solution is to simply buy another passport—gaining citizenship in another country—and use that document to freely travel in the European Union countries, the U.S., or around the world. The book I read had a story of a man who entered Zurich using a St. Kitts passport. The passport official commented that three hours earlier, another man had come through with a St. Kitts passport and when I asked him where St. Kitts was, he didn’t know.

Who are you? Where do you belong? The answers to those questions are changing in today’s world. Some people are global citizens—citizens of the world. What used to define us is no longer the case for thousands of people today—millions if you consider the plight of refugees and migrants, people who cannot go back to the land in which they were born and now exist in refugee camps or lead undocumented lives in foreign lands—without real identities, without real homes any more.

The good news of Easter—and the good news of scripture found in Paul’s letter to the Philippians offers a helpful, hopeful way to think about who we are and to whom we belong. We first heard Paul’s self-description of himself—his “stack” of credentials: circumcised as a Jew when eight days old, of the tribe of Benjamin, serving as a trained Pharisee, and blameless under the ancient Law of Moses. Yet Paul regarded that entire stack, that identity, as worthless because of the different identity that came to him as a follower of Jesus Christ.

In the second reading from Philippians, Paul describes a different stack for his life. He is still a child of the Jewish people, a trained scholar of the Law of Moses, a person seeking to love God with his whole heart, mind, soul and strength. But now he has come to know about Jesus the Resurrected One—and the good news that Christ has made him his own. Suddenly Paul’s identity isn’t tied to a land or a language or a passport. It is now a stack transformed by the loving identity of Christ—which connects Paul to all the others whom Christ has claimed

and on to the global vision of the Kingdom of God, God's hopes for all humanity for all time—yesterday, today, tomorrow, and eternity.

That's why in the third reading from Philippians, Paul wants us to re-think our stacks after his example. He said, *"Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me. To live according to other examples, especially those ways that are as enemies of the cross of Christ is to move toward destruction and brokenness. Yet in Christ, our citizenship is in heaven, where we are united with a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ—who transforms our bodies and lives of humiliation so they will conform to his body of glory and power and love."*

As I said at the beginning: Human beings are works in progress that mistakenly think they are finished. We are too prone to defining things by our own categories or the world's categories. God in Christ disrupts those stacks (topple blocks) and false identities, and calls us to start over—this time seeing ourselves as followers of Christ, redeemed children of a resurrection Savior, whose citizenship is of heaven and in heaven. Paul's last words that we heard today were these: *My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.*

Start by including the risen Christ in your self-definition—in the answer to your questions about who you are and where you belong. Stand firm in this identity and rejoice—for the one who was dead is alive and with us now until the end of the age. Thanks be to God!