

There was once a mother with two boys. They loved her pancakes. And on this morning she was making her pancakes. Yet while she was cooking, they kept arguing about who was going to get the first pancake. These two boys, not yet in school, not only were arguing, but they started pushing and shoving each other, trying to be first in line to get the first pancake.

The mother became exasperated with her children and finally said, "Boys, calm down! I want to ask you a question. If Jesus were here with us this morning, what do you think he would say?" No answer came from the boys. "Well," she said, "I'll tell you what he would say. He would say, 'please let my brother have the first pancake; I can wait.'"

In reply, the older of the two boys turned to his brother and said, "Why don't *you* be Jesus today?"

I love that story. The mother was out of sorts and she wanted to teach her children about sharing. But obviously, they were still more interested in getting the pancakes they wanted. They were more interested in getting what they wanted and not catching the lesson of faith.

Unfortunately, we live in a world where there are many people who are feeling out of sorts. Something isn't going well in their lives, and they really aren't interested in learning the lessons of faith that can help us through the challenges we face.

Do you ever feel out of sorts? Do you ever feel as if something isn't quite right? If so, what do you do? Are you willing to turn to God and learn some lessons of faith? Or do you just ignore them and try and deal with it on your own?

Today, our scripture is written to a people who are feeling out of sorts. Life has become a challenge for them as they face some tough times because of some kind of persecution.

Many people in the church are simply walking away from the faith because of these persecutions and challenges. This letter is written to help them (and us) turn to God and discover our identity anew in Jesus Christ.

Today, we are beginning a new sermon series called *Who Are We? Reclaiming an Identity*. During the next six weeks, we are going to talk about our mission statement as a church. We are going to look at how we can allow this statement to guide our church, and also each one of us as people of God, who make up this church.

Turn to your bulleting and locate our mission statement. Let's read it together. *The Mission of Sun Prairie United Methodist Church is to invite and welcome people to be committed and passionate followers of Jesus Christ through worship, through spiritual growth, through fellowship, through service to others.*

The basis to all of this begins with understanding clearly who we are. We are *In Jesus*. But what exactly does that mean?

When I was in high school, my dad loved to tell me as I was heading out of the house for an evening of fun, "Scott, remember who you are!"

I hated it when he said those words. Because all I really wanted to do was to go out and have fun. I wanted to go out and be anonymous. I wanted to go out and just do what I wanted.

When he said that to me, it forced me to remember that I have an identity. I was part of a family. I was connected. I couldn't just go off and do what I wanted. Because if I did, word just might

get back to my dad. I was reminded that my identity was part of a larger family, a larger community. For the longest time, I saw that as repressive. In time, though, I have come to see that as a gift.

If we can claim our identity as followers of Jesus, it can actually help us face whatever challenges that come our way. The gift is to see that we are not alone. Because we belong to God, we belong to each other. Because we can find our identity in Jesus, we can actually choose to live for something bigger than ourselves.

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the One who called you out of darkness into this wondrous light.*

The author of this letter invites us to find our identity through Jesus. That doesn't mean we get to lord it over others or force them to our way of thinking. But it does mean that we get to live with this understanding that I am living with others for a purpose. And that purpose is to share the grace of God we have experienced with others. We don't have to live life alone.

Many of you know well the name of Jackie Robinson. He was one of the greatest baseball players of all time. He was the first African American to play in the major leagues. He broke the color barrier, and because of that he lived under incredible pressure. Bigotry screamed at him from every direction. Prejudicial insults came his way daily. He received all kinds of hate mail and all kinds of death threats.

One day he received a particularly disturbing telephone call with a violent threat, just before he took to the field. It unnerved him. That day, Jackie Robinson was so shaken by the pressure and the threats that he lost his focus, and for one of the few times in his life, he was having a bad game. He struck out with the bases loaded.

Then shortly after, he made a fielding error at second base. The crowd began to boo him unmercifully.

Pee Wee Reese, his teammate, called time-out. He went over and put his arm around Jackie Robinson and said, "Jackie, let me tell you something. I believe in you. You are the greatest ballplayer I have ever seen. You can do it. I know that. And I know something else: One of these days you are going into the Hall of Fame. So, hold your head up high . . . and play ball like only you can do it." A few innings later, Jackie Robinson got the hit that won the game for his team, the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Some years later, when Jackie Robinson was inducted into baseball's Hall of Fame, he remembered that moment: "Pee Wee Reese was my friend," he said. "He believed in me. He saved my life and my career that day. He reminded me that we are in this together. We were a team. When I had lost confidence and Pee Wee picked me up with his words of encouragement. He gave me hope when all hope was gone."

Friends that is what we are called to do. We are called to remember who we are and to whom we belong. We are called to help each other remember that we don't have to live life alone.

The next time life becomes a challenge, and you find yourself tempted to give up, remember, *once you were not a people, now you are God's people: Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* We belong to One who loves us and who will not let us go.

Thanks be to God.

Amen