

## **Identity, Ministry, and the People of God**

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Principal, Vice-Provost, Director, faculty, graduands, honored guests, chers amis: let me begin by acknowledging that it is indeed a very great privilege to address the 164<sup>th</sup> convocation of this College, with its long history of preparing faithful servants of Jesus Christ. Knox College is an institution to which I am much indebted for my education, and my vocation, and I am delighted to be with you tonight.

I should also like to bring warm greetings from the Board, Faculty, staff, and students of The Presbyterian College, Montreal, and congratulate those whose achievements we celebrate here tonight. This is a significant moment in your life as you are about to become graduates of this College. Tonight will mark who you are - your identity – and what you will do – your ministry. And it is those twin themes of identity and ministry about which I wish to speak tonight.

I begin with a story. As Leith Anderson tells it, Sergei Krikalev knew who he was. He was a highly privileged Soviet cosmonaut. He had “convictions, stability, success, fame, and fortune. He was a member of the Communist Party, a citizen of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and a follower of Soviet President Michal Gorbachev. He lived in Leningrad and he earned a lucrative 500 rubles a month.”<sup>1</sup>

But in 1991 everything changed for Krikalev. In April of that year he “was launched into space to orbit the earth for four months.” While he was in orbit, however, huge changes occurred. The nation he had left behind collapsed. As a result, the Soviet space agency was in disarray. “More frightening, however, was the failure of the technical system that was to bring the cosmonaut back to earth. With no means of returning to earth, Krikalev had to stay in orbit for a total of ten months.”

“Imagine how he must have felt when he finally came home and stepped on solid ground for the first time in nearly a year.” He was, without a doubt, relieved to be home safely. But home was not the same. His country no longer existed.

“Michal Gorbachev had been replaced by a previously marginal politician named Boris Yeltsin,” who had become president of the new nation of Russia. The Communist Party was out of power and disrepute. “Krikalev’s hometown of Leningrad had been renamed St. Petersburg. His 500 ruble salary, significantly reduced by inflation, could now barely buy a hamburger at the local McDonald’s.

Krikalev must have felt an incredible sense of disorientation. He must have wondered where he was, who he was, whose he was, and what he ought to do. How was he going to live his life in this strange new world within which he found himself?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Leith Anderson, *Winning the Values War in a Changing Culture*, Bethany House, 1994, pp.11-12

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.11-12.

Being a person of faith in our world today often feels a lot like that. The church is, as we all know, experiencing an incredible sense of disorientation and dislocation in a rapidly changing culture. Those of us engaged in church leadership feel this acutely. Those of you who graduate tonight will face challenges in ministry that we hardly imagined when I graduated twenty-seven years ago. Things are not the way they used to be, and it ought to make us ask hard questions about where we are, who we are, whose we are, and what we ought to be and become and do, questions about identity and ministry.

We are not, however, the first people of faith to feel this way. And we certainly won't be the last. In the text that was read earlier, 1 Peter 2, we hear about a suffering church that was struggling to come to terms with its faith and life in the midst of challenging times. This letter was written to a group of Christians, and their leaders, who lived in Asia Minor, which is part of modern Turkey.

They lived and moved and had their being every day as residents of regions like Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. They were a diverse group with one thing in common: they had become followers of God's crucified Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. They had confessed him as Lord, and through his life, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension their lives had been transformed.

They were citizens of the empire, to be sure, but they now had an identity centered in Jesus Christ. As people of faith they were sometimes discouraged, sometimes disillusioned, and sometimes disoriented. It was as if they both belonged – and didn't belong – at one and the same time. They lived, to use Augustine's language, in both "the City of God and the City of Man."

If faced with writing a letter to these churches today we might be tempted to offer up all kinds of practical advice. That's why our shelves are filled with books like twelve steps to successful Christian ministry; or ten ways to grow a church; or the seven habits of highly effective leaders.

But in the midst of this situation, 1 Peter does not dish up pious platitudes, strategic plans, innovative programs, or revised mission statements. Something more important is happening here. These readers are reminded who they are, and whose they are. With words that reflect the richness of the imagery of the Hebrew Bible, the text says they are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. Once they were not a people, but now they are a people: their identity is rooted in God.

They had received mercy, they had received a gift, a gift that had not simply changed their lives, but had given them new life. This new life in Christ made them who they were. They didn't do anything to earn this. By grace, God had called them to participate in Christ. Their identity as God's people, therefore, had nothing to do with what they had done – or not done – and everything to do with what God had done – and was doing – in their midst.

In short, it was not about them – it was about God – and God’s saving purposes in the world – the mission of God - into which they had been incorporated. Their identity as God’s people threw them back out into God’s world as people of faith, hope, and love.

The church in the western world, many argue, is going through a kind of an “identity crisis.” Some people describe our time as post-Christian, or post-Christendom, or postmodern in order to get at this. The church, it is argued, is in exile; people of faith are described as “resident aliens.”<sup>3</sup>

I live in a city and region of Canada where identity is constantly on the political and social radar screen. Every day I walk through Montreal from the Bell Center to the university campus and I know that I am an Anglophone in a francophone culture; a Protestant in an historically Catholic society; a Christian in an increasingly religiously pluralistic world; and a Leafs fan in a city where the Habs reign. I live in a vibrant city in which the Christian movement finds itself amidst a mixture of languages, cultures, creeds, and aspirations. What is the church called to be and to do in this context?

In his recent book Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes our time as “A Secular Age.” Western culture, he says, is not simply characterized by a decline of certain beliefs and institutions, it is characterized by a total change in our experience of the world. We have moved, he argues, “from a world in which unbelief was virtually impossible, to a world in which it is easy, even inescapable.” Faith is now one option among many, and an embattled one at that.<sup>4</sup>

At such a time, and in such circumstances, we are often tempted to anxiety, uncertainty, and insecurity. We are tempted to shrink back from the world, to romanticize the past, or to lash out in fear.

In his book *Exclusion and Embrace* Yale theologian Miroslav Volf argues that we do not find our identity by retreating inward, but by participating in God’s identity as God’s people. When we see ourselves as having been incorporated into the self-giving love of the triune God; as having been embraced by the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross; and as having been welcomed by the open arms of a parent receiving a prodigal: then we know we belong. We know that God has made room for us, and we thereby make room for others. And this is the beginning of ministry.<sup>5</sup>

At a critical period in the life of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, Walter Bryden, who was both a professor and principal of this College, urged the church not to retreat into sentimentality for things Scottish, or our polity, or our liturgy, or even our theology. In other words: not to retreat into ourselves. He urged the church to find itself anew under the Judging-Saving Word of God, Jesus Christ and him crucified, and to engage the world as God’s people.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the work of Douglas John Hall or Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007)

<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) pp. 17,29

It is this Word - the Word who creates, contests, and accosts us – who also sustains us and saves us in ministry during times of disillusionment, discouragement, and disorientation. Such robust faith enables us to trust in Christ even when it appears the church is more often than not on the losing side.

One of my favourite stories is about the worst defeat suffered by any team in the history of sport. It happened during a college football game in the 1930s. Cumberland College lost this particular game by a score of 222 to 0. After about three quarters of the game, when the score had begun to mount, and the team was dramatically demoralized, there came a moment in one of the few plays when Cumberland College had the ball, that the ball was snapped back to the quarterback, who immediately fumbled it. The opposing linesmen came charging in, the ball was trickling around in the backfield, and quarterback screamed to the half-back: “Pick up the ball and run with it.” The halfback, a scrawny freshman, looked down at the ball, and then took one look at the hulking lineman who was charging at him, and he said to the quarterback: “You pick it up, stupid. You dropped it.”<sup>6</sup>

As I travel across the church and talk to ministers and elders and church members, I can tell you that many people feel this way about the church. Someone has fumbled the ball. Let someone else pick up the church. Let someone else run with it. And if the church is nothing more than a quaint gathering of religiously minded folks, at sea in a rapidly changing culture, they probably have every right to feel that way.

But tonight, as you graduate, you are being called to pick up the ball and run with it. You are being invited to lead the church to be the church. To help us remember who we are: a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that we might declare the praises of the One who called us out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.

Calvin put it this way in the *Institutes*: “We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us...We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves in all that is ours...We belong to God: let us therefore live for God and die for God. We belong to God: let God’s wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We belong to God: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward God as our only lawful goal.”<sup>7</sup>

To the graduating class of Knox College of 2008 I say this: be who you are as God’s people. You are not your own. You belong to Christ. This is your hope, in life, in ministry, and in death. May God grant you the grace to become what you have already been declared to be in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> I picked up this story a few years ago, but have been unable to track down its source.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Westminster Press, 1960), Book III, Chapter 7, Par.1, p. 690