

“A New Identity?”—Genesis 17:3-7

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “A New Identity?”, is Genesis 17:3-7 → *God said to Abram, “Behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

How would you identify yourself? Our identity can be defined in various ways depending upon the context or situation. It’s one thing to be identified on your driver’s license by gender, height and the color of our eyes . . . (did you celebrate that day of renewal when you didn’t have to give them your weight anymore?) . . . and quite another thing to be identified by your personality, job, family association, talents and so forth. While one reveals your physical characteristics which do not change all that drastically, the others reveal

perceptions of you which can be in constant change and flux, sometimes to the extent of producing an “identity crisis.”

What about your identity changing as a result of a change in your name? Perhaps the married women in our culture can testify to this identity change. Gone are the years when a woman lost her first name upon marriage and really did take on the name of her husband, so much so that when someone failed to refer to her as Mrs. David Suelzle others didn't know the person to whom she was referring! However, this type of name change does reflect the concepts of identity which Abram and Sarai . . . or should I say Abraham and Sarah . . . encountered in our text. Those concepts are relationship and covenant, both of which are reflected in a marriage.

Whenever a person encounters the LORD's covenant, changes will take place in his life which have a lasting affect upon his identity. It proved true for Abraham and Sarah. Our text records the LORD reiterating His covenant with Abram seventy-four years after making His initial covenant with him. In verse 6 Yahweh said He would make Abram so *exceedingly fruitful* that *nations and kings would come from* him. Really? Abram could have probably envisioned this with his son Ishmael, the product of he and Sarai trying to take charge of God's covenant, only to mess things up royally! This is why it is important to receive the LORD's covenant promise **only by faith in Yahweh, the great**

miracle worker! It would have to be God's doing since Sarai was still barren at eighty-nine years old!

Notice the promise given by the LORD in verse 7 → *I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an **everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*** The LORD expressed His desire for relationship with people as He originally intended it to be from the beginning with the creation of Adam and Eve! It harkens back to what Yahweh originally promised Abram in Genesis 12:3 → *in you **all the families of the earth** shall be blessed.* This covenant was not just for Abram . . . it is for you as well! And it's about a relationship with the LORD that lasts forever!

The purpose for the LORD's covenant with people is to produce change in their lives and identity. I know, I know! We're Lutheran and change is one of those words that doesn't flow easily off our tongues. However, covenants demand change, whether they are covenants of marriage, contractual agreements or simple promises. They are meant to produce action and action always produces change of one kind or another. The wonderful part of the LORD's covenant with you is that **He will do the changing as well!** Did you notice the words of the LORD in the text? *I will make you . . . I will establish . . .* God makes the initiative, promises His blessings and makes it happen! It

happens on the basis of His identity in steadfast love!

Notice the changes involved for Abram and Sarai . . . or should I say Abraham and Sarah . . . as they follow the LORD by faith. They left their family along with it's idolatrous religion. They moved to a land unbeknownst to them and once at their destination they had to leave it to live in Egypt because of a famine. Abram had to circumcise all the males in his household and now starting a family with Abram a hundred years old and Sarai at the age of ninety? And you thought the changes required of you by God's covenant were hard! That's what happens when the LORD acts in your life with His grace and you follow Him by faith. Change in your identity and activities is inevitable!

Abram and Sarai's identity changed in another rather simple manner—God gave them different names. Abram's name was changes to Abraham and Sarai's name was changed to Sarah (cf. Genesis 17:15). This name change so affected their identity that after this point in their life Abram is always referred to as Abraham. This identity change would be reflected in every area of the lives! They would constantly be aware of this new identity every time they heard their names spoken or had to sign their names. The name change was a visible sign connected with His covenant as a constant, ever-present reminder of His **grace** and the reason for obedience to His Will and Word. When you encounter God's grace and respond in faith not only is change in

your identity inevitable, it will affect every area of your life!

The most important change expressed in this covenant is the change which needs to take place in the heart and life of every person through faith in the descendant coming from Abraham's lineage—Jesus! This too is based upon a very unfortunate change which took place years before in the lives of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden—losing the eternal relationship with the LORD by disobeying Him. This change was so impacting that everything you and I do is tainted by sinfulness and rebellion. Think of the last time you bound yourself in a covenant relationship only to discover fighting a rebellious attitude towards submitting to the agreed upon terms. This sinfulness is so deeply ingrained in your human nature that you will not be able to free yourself from it. Adam and Eve couldn't and neither can you.

Again, the LORD, faithful to His identity in steadfast love for all human beings, covenanted with us enslaved sinners in Genesis 3:15 when He said to the devil: ***I will** put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; **He will** crush your head, and you will strike His heel.* (NIV) The covenant reiterated to Abraham in our text is simply a continuation of the original promise of a Savior Who would defeat satan's power and free us from the power of sin, death and the devil once and for all! Through faith in the Person & Work of Jesus Christ your "identity crisis" in sin and rebellion has

been broken so that you can live a new *everlasting* identity in perfect relationship with Yahweh!!

Yahweh has also provided visible signs connected with the fulfillment of His covenant so that those signs would be reminders of His **grace** and the reason for our obedience to His Will and Word. For instance, Colossians 2:11-12 says: *In Jesus you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God, Who raised Him from the dead.* Baptism is connected with the sign of the covenant given to Abraham, giving you a whole new identity in life! This covenant has been fulfilled in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the benefits to which baptism connects us and which the Lord's Supper conveys to us. Remember Jesus' words while instituting the Lord's Supper recorded in Luke 22:19? *This cup that is poured out for you is **the new covenant in My blood.***

This new covenant in Christ gives you a new identity which will be reflected through your words and actions. It produces the most important change necessary in your life—the change from sinful rebellion to a desire to live in obedience to the LORD through faith in Jesus, the Christ! According to Jeremiah 33:15-16, it also involves a new name. Referring to the day when

the LORD would bring about His salvation in Christ He promised: *In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David* (referring to Jesus descended from the lineage of King David), *and **He shall** execute justice and righteousness in the land . . . And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”*

The change from rebellion in sin to faith in Jesus Christ will affect all of our living! This new identity changes the perspective of every area of our lives! We are given a new name in Christ with a new identity not to reveal some righteousness of our own making in new behavior but rather to reveal the righteousness of Jesus which the Holy Spirit produces in all who repent and believe in Him! Amen.

*The nations shall see your righteousness,
and all the kings your glory,
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.*

(Jeremiah 62:2)