

“Pronoun--Us”

Today we continue in this message series we started a couple of weeks ago. It's called "Pronoun" and in it we've been looking at some of the powerful pronouns in our lives. Pronouns that God definitely has something to say about. We talked about the pronoun "they". God is always wanting to do a construction project in our lives and when he does, the right they are there to support and encourage us, but the wrong they always show up to do just the opposite. We need to listen to the right they because they keep us above the fray.

Last week we looked at the pronoun "you". We asked the question, "What is the true view of you?" I had a treadmill up here on stage to get us thinking about some of the things we do to figure out if we matter, things that really get us nowhere. We talked about how to get off those treadmills that go nowhere and start a real journey with God through Jesus Christ. That's how you get a true view of you.

So today, I want us to look at the pronoun "**Us**". Now, let me warn you, that we're going into some dangerous territory today. What's dangerous about it? Because if there is an "us", there's a "them". If there's us, there's them. It's dangerous because it's real easy to slip into judgmentalism. Some of us are eager to jump to the conclusion that if we're an "us", then we can look down on all the rest of them. Listen, that should never be the case for Christ-followers! I've said often that Jesus was the one person who ever lived who didn't see the categories we use for people. He didn't see rich or poor, white-collar or blue-collar, sophisticated or unsophisticated. He didn't see people as intellectually superior or inferior. He didn't see men and women, or young and old. He saw people as either lost or found and he loved them both.

So we're going to talk about "us" and "them" but as we do, we do this with hearts and minds of deepest love.

First of all, let's answer the question, who are "us"? I'm talking about Christ-followers now. This "us" is anybody who has chosen, by their own free will, to be in relationship with God through Jesus Christ. "Us" is those people who have said with their words, "**Us...those who have chosen to give up ownership of their lives.**" "I choose to be yours, Jesus. I choose to hand over ownership rights of my life to you."

"Us" is those people who not only choose to hand the ownership of their lives to Christ, but they also chose to be in relationship with him, to listen to him, to be obedient to him. "**Us...those who live what they believe.**" It's not just in what we **believe**, it's in how we **behave**. It's what we do with our time, what we do with our money, what we do with our bodies and in our relationships.

The disciple Peter gives us a good description of us. He says people who have chosen to become Christ-followers are, "**a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy...Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us...**" (1 Peter 2:9-12, NIV).

That's us. A royal priesthood. "**Us...a royal priesthood.**" Don't get hung up on that word, "priesthood." The Latin word for priest is pontifex which means bridge-builder. "**Priest = Bridge-builder**" Christ-followers are bridge-builders. We choose to follow Christ, not just so we can know the God who made us. We don't follow Christ just so we can go to heaven when we die. We don't follow Christ and connect to God just so we can find answers and direction for our own lives. We follow Christ and let our lives be bridges that others can walk across to meet God too. That's us, bridge-builders.

I get my heart broken real good once in awhile when Christians forget this. A person will connect to God through Christ and experience that closeness, experience joy and renewal, and then try to find ways to keep people out, instead of drawing others in. My heart gets broken when I hear about Christians bashing somebody because of their political orientation, or their financial orientation, or their sexual orientation. Just last week a staff member heard a Christian leader say that he wanted to hit homosexuals. That breaks my heart. That's not us. How is that bridge-building? How does that help anyone to experience the love of God in

Christ Jesus? How does that live out the command in scripture that tells us, **“As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18, NIV).**

I’m not the smartest man in the world, but I’m pretty sure that no one will ever be degraded into or beaten into, a life-changing relationship with Christ. Us, we’re bridge-builders.

Peter tells us that we are people who have been called out of the darkness and into the light. **“Us...people of light”** This means that we don’t have to feel our way through the darkness in life; we don’t have to guess at life any more. We don’t have to assume what meaning we have. When a person comes to Christ he or she encounters the goodness of God. That means we have a standard to measure all our actions and motives by. That’s the standard of Jesus’ life and teachings. That’s the light of truth of God. We don’t have to stumble around in the darkness. That’s us, people of light.

Peter then tell us that once we were not a people, but now we’re the people of God. The Christ-follower is one who is called out of a life of insignificance to a life of real significance. **“Us...people of significance.”** You have your day job, and along with that, your real job. Now, your day job and your real job might be one and the same. But for a lot of people they’re not. Typically your day job is the job you do to provide for your necessities; to provide for your family. But your real job is that thing that gives your life significance because you’ve chosen to be a Christ-follower.

I bet I could call a dozen people up here right now and interview them spontaneously and they could tell me about their day job, but they would also tell me that their real job is the one that gives them significance. Maybe their day job is as a clerk or doctor, but their real job is being a mom or dad and being that light to their family. Some would say that their day job is delivering things, but their real job is being a light to their neighbors, or welcoming people at church on Sunday, or helping with children’s ministries. We have lives of significance because we’re us. That’s us, people of significance.

Peter tells us that that we’re to be people of goodness, **“Us...people of goodness.”** so that when anybody says something bad about us, no one will believe them. That’s us. But the word “goodness” needs to be unpacked. Being good is not about doing the right things and avoiding the wrong things. That’s legalism—that’s not us. Goodness as Christ-followers is all about seeing people the way God sees them and putting love into action.

One sociologist, Rodney Stark, asks the question in his book, how and why did the number of Christ-followers grow so fast in the beginning? For Christianity to reach the size that it did in the time it did, it had to have grown 40 percent a decade for 300 years. That’s in a time before mass communication, before the printing press, before most people on earth could read and write. How and why did Christianity spread so quickly? Stark sums it up this way: early followers of Jesus were more compassionate than others around them. They out-loved others. They out-served others.

Some examples: In 165 A.D. an epidemic (probably smallpox) spread like wildfire throughout the Roman Empire. Within 15 years one quarter to one third of the entire population within the empire had died. The same thing happened in 251 when another epidemic swept through.

Unlike their pagan neighbors, Christians took care of each other and they took care of people who were not Christ-followers during those plague times. And many of them lost their lives by trying to help others. The Roman Emperor Julian wrote that Christians “support not only their poor, but ours as well.”

Those early Christians, part of “us”, not only helped the sick but they showed the goodness of God in lots of other ways. Stark writes: “To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachment. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis of social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.” That’s us. People living out goodness in the face of human suffering and need. Even when it’s not convenient, even when it costs us something. That’s us.

Let's talk about "them". If there's an "us", there's a "them". If the "us" is those who have chosen to follow Christ. "Them" are those who have not yet chosen to follow Christ. Again, this is not about judging anybody. Paul tells us in Romans that, **"There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus"** (Rom 3:22-24, NIV).

Everybody is a sinner! Paul says that there is no difference. The only difference between us and them is that we have encountered and accepted God's free gift of salvation. And that's not anything **we** did, we can't boast about that, it was **God's** work, we just encountered that and accepted it. That's us. Them, well, our job is to authentically tell them about Christ, and show them what life looks like when a person chooses to follow. **If we're really being us, our lives will be all about them.** Them...the people Jesus spent most of his time with. Them...the least, the last and the lost. Them...because each of us was one of them, and we'd better never forget that.

A while back I was given a book by Dave Burchett called *When Bad Christians Happen to Good People*. I highly recommend it; we've got it in our bookstore. I think Burchett gives us a picture of what "us" can be when he talks about a sinner-sensitive church. Burchett says that when he was a teenager he brought a girlfriend to his church. She was not a Christian; she didn't know the unspoken rules of that church and wore a strapless dress. In her mind she was wearing her best dress to church; in the mind of a bunch of people in the church, she was scandalous. From the moment they walked in they felt the laser-beam stares of people burning into them.

Burchett says that this would not happen in the sinner-sensitive church. I like his description of the sinner-sensitive church. It would be a place where everyone is made to feel welcomed and loved. The sinner-sensitive church would model nonjudgmental attitudes. Issues like having tattoos, body piercings, weird hair, or ugly shoes would not necessarily denote demon possession. The sinner-sensitive church would pledge not to gossip because we would realize that it's only by the grace of God that we are not the current targets. It would be a church that would value every spiritual, physical and financial gift no matter how big or small. It would be a church that would reach out, touch and care for one another sacrificially because we know that we all fall down in life and in our Christian walk.

In the sinner-sensitive church we would have executives holding hands in prayer with laborers and not thinking twice about it. Blacks and whites and Hispanics and others would break bread together because we are all sinners in the eyes of a color-blind God.

The sinner-sensitive church would give freely out of a profound gratitude to a God who somehow saw fit to give us an undeserved chance. It would practice the prodigal son ministry, **running** to welcome those returning from mistakes and bad decisions and sin. Our members would get involved in other people's lives. We would hold each other accountable to godly standards. Marriage would be cherished. Families would have a community of support during problems. Singles would have a safe place to live out their faith and meet others.

The sinner-sensitive church would rejoice in the company of other spiritual travelers and make it a priority that no one ever felt alone. We would make each other feel valuable but, on occasion, a little uncomfortable. Being comfortable in church is not the primary goal. I'm not always comfortable at the dentist's office. Sometimes I arrive in pain because I've neglected to do what I should have done. The staff always makes me feel welcome and cared for. Then the dentist confronts me with the truth, "You've let this go too long, and I must hurt you (a little) in order to heal you." That would be the truth.

The sinner-sensitive church wouldn't back off the truth either. Decay in our souls needs to be addressed. We'll tell one another the truth and explain that the process might be a little painful. But we'd also take part in ongoing preventive maintenance and help one another deal with problems as soon as possible, before they become even more painful and expensive to fix.

The sinner-sensitive church would worship with enthusiasm whether singing wonderful old hymns or edgy new songs, because both are praising the God worthy of praise. The sinner-sensitive church would be so excited about God's grace that the incredible news of the gospel would be as much a part of who we are as our jobs and families.

We're not there yet, but I believe that a church like that is possible. And a church that decides to be that way and works and sacrifices to make it happen, will see it happen.

Here at Saint Paul's, I really think we're making great strides toward that picture, but we've got a ways to go until that's "us".

My wife and I got this email from Allison Curci. She was a part of Saint Paul's for 4 years as a single mother. She moved to Minnesota last week. She wrote, "Jane and Aaron. I want to thank you (and the entire congregation) for being such a blessing in our lives. I am so happy that St. Paul's was the place where Lizzie began her lifelong walk with God. Those that have worked with her are wonderful and caring people and I couldn't have asked for a better influence on her life.

"As for me, I came to St. Paul's at a time in my life that was very hard. I was at a crossroads in my life; I had just separated from my husband and I was an emotional wreck. If God hadn't led me to St. Paul's, I'm not sure where I would be now. The warm welcome that I received from you and the congregation helped with the healing process so much. I don't think that any of us realize just what kind of impact we make on others. No one knew, when I began going there that I was dealing with so much, that every night I prayed that the Lord would let me die because I hurt so much. All of the kind words and the wonderful sermons helped me to realize that I am strong and I could make it through. And I did.

"So thank you again for being there at such a crucial time in our lives. I am just one example of what can happen if we live out the mission of St. Paul's. I am looking forward to carrying the lessons I learned and the love I received to my new church home, wherever that may be. Thanks again and God bless. Allison and Lizzie."

That's us at our best. The "us" we're becoming stands for something. **"Us...people of..." Radical hospitality. Passionate worship. Intentional faith development. Risk-taking mission and serve. Extravagant generosity.** I hope we stand for truths that don't change and at the same time welcome people who don't see things the way we do. I hope that we will welcome everybody, no matter where they've been or what they've done. We're not in the judging business, we're in the business of introducing people to Jesus Christ, and we let him do the rest. We're in the business of loving as Christ loved us. That's us. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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