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Emanuel's Lutheran Church, Bellevue, PA
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Hebrews 10:11-25

Our identities

Who are you? No, I don't mean your name. Consider your answer in another way. At your core, who are you?

Many of us would respond with our jobs. Family relationships—father, widow, child. Perhaps things about yourself that you delight in most: a Steelers fan, a fisherman, a musician. No matter what we choose, our answers are important. They reflect the orientation of our lives.

When I think about my own identity, the obvious things come to mind. Pastor, mother, wife, daughter. The next is much more hidden. When I was a young adult, an unexpected experience changed my life. I was in a serious car accident. I suffered severe traumatic brain injury, which required a helicopter flight to the nearby trauma hospital. After two and a half weeks in hospitals, and longer in therapy, life returned to normal. though "normal" was totally different. There were changes in my health that required me to live differently. The longest lasting change was in perspective. If circumstances were altered, I could have died. Or been severely, mentally handicapped. I know that many of you have had to face these

kinds of losses. We may have the same eyes, but life does not look the same through them. For me, colors were brighter, Time was more precious.

Our senses of identity change how we see the world. How we understand our relationships. How we spend our time. That's part of what's so traumatic—or wonderful—about our major life events. All of life changes very quickly.

God's final sacrifice

Our passage from Hebrews focuses on a life-changing event that happened long ago. It affects all of our lives, even if we don't think about it often.

God's offering of Christ to humanity changed our world. Even as a baby, his divine presence on earth changed us. He made it possible for people to have a more intimate relationship with God. They could see and hear and know God in new ways. Jesus was indeed one of us. He experienced many of the trappings of humanity. Temptation, betrayal, suffering, death.

In that journey, Jesus, the God-and-human, forged a new covenant with us. This one who suffered and died at the hands of human sin, conquered death. The power of Jesus' resurrection exploded into our world in the Holy Spirit. She pours out upon us, Cleansing us in the waters of baptism, Wrapping us in forgiveness.

Along with our many other answers about who we are, we are forgiven people. God came to us as one of our own. Drew us close. Forgave us for all the sin we have done—and all that we will do. God relieves us of the burden of our guilt. We may question many things about our lives. But one thing we can trust is God's unconditional love for us.

The author of Hebrews says that this sacrificial act of God, offering God's very self, changes us. The unending burden of our guilt and shame died with Jesus on the cross. When we receive God's forgiveness, we are set free. Free to live as redeemed people. That changes our priorities. Changes how we view our worlds. Changes how we understand ourselves.

The Advice of Hebrews

In response to God's gift, the author of Hebrews encourages us to include specific practices in our lives. We are challenged to come together in groups of worship and fellowship, like this one. The rest of the author's advice could be understood as a guide for our church. We are to encourage each other in the faith. To hold fast to our confession, of our forgiven relationship with God. When God has reached into our lives in such a loving way, we are to name it for others. This invites us into an ongoing journey of prayerful education in the faith. To deepen our

understandings of what we believe, and how that fits into our lives. Right now, Emanuel's leaders are trying to strengthen how we do this together. Improving our children's Sunday School. Offering ways for adults and teenagers to grow in their faith and understanding. Please let me know if you sense a call to be a central part of these ministries.

The writer of Hebrews challenges us to provoke one another to love and good deeds. Emanuel's describes its identity in the mission statement that appears in our newsletter. "Emanuel's Evangelical Lutheran Church is a family of believers who open its doors to all people, welcomes them to eat and share fellowship, and takes strength in serving her neighbors." For years, Emanuel's has been seeking to follow the advice of the writer of Hebrews.

As I visit members of this congregation, I delight in hearing the ways that you all do good in our world. We have members who volunteer in the prisons and hospitals, for meals on wheels and at food banks, with scouting and schools. I continue to hear tales of how Emanuel's has served as a home for service to the north boroughs. Hosting North Hills Community Outreach. Offering the St. Afterschool program. I am sure there are more tales—and I look forward to hearing them. Our service as individuals and as a congregation are signs of God's

forgiveness in our lives. The character of our relationships witnesses to God's love and forgiveness for us all. I look forward to seeing what ways God calls us to love and serve our neighbors at this time in our history.

As forgiven disciples, our relationships with others are also transformed. God frees us to give just as we have received. We are freed to live lives marked by forgiveness. God's gift of forgiveness prepares us to seek forgiveness when we hurt others. And to forgive others who have wronged us and be reconciled.

This all sounds great theoretically. But many of us don't really believe that God has forgiven us for wrongs we have done. And we all know Christians who seem to have a hard time forgiving others. It may seem impossible to do these things in the real world. Our world—and we—are filled with pride and egos, grudges and law suits. Yet God's action in our lives makes what seems impossible, possible. We are cleansed by the Spirit. Sanctified for service. God strengthens us to do what we don't really want to do. God enables us to act with love in the face of opposition. This speaks to our congregation as we heal from some of our recent divisions. God is blessing us, that we may live faithfully as God's forgiven people.

At our cores, we are a people, loved and forgiven by God. It is this shared identity that draws us together at Emanuel's. To be supported by one another as we

forgive, serve and learn. To be blessed by God as we worship, pray and sing praises.

I give thanks that you are here. Join me in praying for our church, that we may live God's love and forgiveness for the world. Amen.