

Ephesians 2, 11 through 18 says this: Therefore remember that at one time, you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands, remember remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the Commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off has been brought near by the blood of Christ, for he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. By abolishing the law of Commandments expressed in ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father."

One of the strange things, one of the strange things about being a Christian is that you can sincerely believe the gospel. And you can be living in obedience. And yet still encounter moments or even seasons of life where you live like you somehow don't know the gospel or don't believe it in its fullness. Maybe this is true for us from time to time, whether you know about that or can think about that today or you can point to a previous season of your life. But maybe these phrases resonate with you. You can believe that you're forgiven by a gracious God, but you still, maybe you're living like you're on thin ice. Maybe you're watching over your shoulder. Maybe you feel like you're walking on eggshells. Maybe you feel a little bit of imposter syndrome of I know that I'm supposed to say I'm forgiven, but am I living like I'm forgiven? Maybe that resonates with you. You can believe that you're loved by a benevolent Father, that you are called beloved by him, and somehow you still have the capacity to feel disposable or feel immense self loathing. Now, I'm not talking about self awareness as a sinner. Self defacing, but I'm talking about, more seriously, self loathing, right? That feeling of being disposable. How do we reconcile those things?

Maybe instead, you can believe that you belong and have been adopted into God's family. We sang that in the second verse of the first worship song. Instead of orphans being called sons and daughters. And yet still, you or I, we live like we're auditioning. We live like we're earning a spot in his story. We're not living like what we know or what we've sung about it.

And I suppose that at least one of us in this room or maybe yourself from time to time, you've been witty enough to think, well, my belief was just true enough. If my belief was true enough or my convictions were strong enough, I wouldn't waffle back to the school. If I were a person of this conviction that I so believe in to hold to, I would stand up in the face of these things. I wouldn't be caught up in these seemingly paradoxical realities. But that thought crosses my mind as well. And in those moments, I'm reminded of the dad from Mark 9. The dad who seeks out Jesus to help his son, who is possessed by an impure spirit. The dad who says, But Jesus, if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us. Jesus replies to him and says, "If you can, everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately then, the boy's father explains, "I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief." It's that example that grounds me to the reality that the paradoxes that we live in make us human. They don't make us less Christian somehow or less capable of being a faithful Christ-follower.

I'll put a pin in that thought for a moment and come back to it in a few seconds. One of the best parts of my job here at the Cairn University is getting to sit across a table for coffee over lunch in my office, wherever it is on campus. Getting to sit across from many of you students who, and most of you are smart and capable, but all of you are faithful. And yet absolutely, even in the light of being smart and capable and faithful, as I talk with many of you, absolutely exhausted from trying to hold yourselves together. It's a great burden of just doing that on a day in and day out basis, whether it's the first Friday of the year of the semester, or it's the 15th Friday of the semester. It seems to be true. And you are that way not because you don't love God and you aren't seeing your strength being renewed on even a day to day basis, but not because you're somehow failing in your spiritual life or otherwise, but because you're carrying an invisible pressure to prove something. Perhaps you think it's to God, perhaps you think it's to others, perhaps you think it's to yourself.

And underneath that pressure is almost always invariably the same question. Whether we say it out loud, whether it remains the quiet part or is it hard to say out loud, I don't know. But who am I really?

Who am I really, though? And what makes me worth keeping? The text that we read today is from Ephesians 2:11-18, and Paul begins it with a command that sounds simple and it's a little bit youth-pastory, you'll forgive me. But the first thing we ought to do is remember. Remember who we are. Therefore, remember one of the central practices of the Christian life, in some ways, is remembering. Because one of the great dangers of the Christian life is forgetting, forgetting who we were, certainly forgetting us, what God has done. And forgetting who we are now because of that.

Paul says, remember that at one time you were, and those verses would go on to say things like this, at one time you were separated, at one time you were alienated. Strangers without hope and without God. It's not just bad behavior or circumstances, that's identity, and it's not just any identity, it's lost identity. Just a few verses earlier, Paul gives us, and again, also a very youth pastor. But it fits. And you've heard Christians see and to bark on this before. Paul gives two words that are pretty important. Don't just remember this and who we were but God, right? But God, being rich in mercy, made us alive together with Christ raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places. I think that's verse four, before we started our text. Notice the tense of that phrase, right? That's not future tense, even though that is to be true. It's present reality. God being rich in mercy made us alive together with Christ, raised us up with him and heeded us with him in the heavenly places. I think that's verse four, before we started our text. Notice the tense of that frame, right? That's not future tense. Even though that is to be true, it's present reality. God being rich in mercy made us alive together with Christ, raise us up with him and be with him in the heavenly place. That's right now. So you are already then reconciled to God. You have already been brought near. You are no longer a stranger, you are no longer an outsider. In fact, the text goes so far as to say that you are a fellow citizen. Not just a fellow citizen, not just something that sounds remotely civic or political, but instead quite personal, even more than personal, perhaps intimate, a member of God's household. With the same access to the Father as every other believer. That's a very different paradigm instead of reality. Christianity is not just about forgiveness. It's about a total change of status. And this text here in Ephesians says very well to outline what that total change status means and should look like for us and what we might be and do well to remember in our lives together, in our lives living in community with one another. It's not just that in Christ, we get cleaned up and optically we look a little bit better. That's good ethics, that's humanism, it's nice to be kind, it's good to be a good neighbor, things like that, that's fine and good. But no, it's not just getting cleaned up for the sake of being cleaned up, it's being fully repositioned before a Holy God. God doesn't just tolerate us and who we are, we've been adopted. It's the knowledge of who we are in fullness, the good and the bad. We don't just get rescued, we get seated with Christ in heavenly places. It's not just rescued and put over here, it's no, put into a place of prominence, and that's right now.

I want to pause for a moment and I just defined what I mean by identity. It's the word that gets thrown around a lot. Here's how I'm talking about it this morning. Identity is the most important thing about you, in some ways, and the thing that you most want others to know about you. It's not just what you say about yourself. It's not the things that you project to those that are around you. It's not in and of itself. It's what you protect. It's what you're afraid to lose. It's what you're trying to prove. Going back to where I'm sitting across from you sometimes, those are the things I think on when I think about identity. And yet, if we're honest, we often still live like the old self or the old person doing some of that forgetting, don't we? The one who is not remembered, but in fact has forgotten. Why? Why are we doing that? What is that? What is that about us? We can't get it through our skulls to remember this very important thing that repositions. Because while God changes our status before him instantly, thanks to the work of Jesus, right? He doesn't instantly rewire our habits. Our brains take time, our hearts take time.

Over the winter break at, it's not even going to break at all the time, at bedtime for Ezra, we do somewhere in between two, three or four books, and recently he's taken to this book he got to the Book Fair back in the fall. It's a children's book by a guy named Nick Selleck. It's witty, it's funny, it's funny illustrations. It's called *The Brain: It's Kinda a Big Deal*. And it's very scientific. And he's the only four-year-old I know that knows he doesn't sustain the frontal lobe and the temporal lobe and the occipital lobe and the insular lobe. He likes to say that or try to say them. It teaches us, the book does, we go through it together through some wit and humor. What is our brain even for? What is it even doing? It's helping us to breathe. We don't even know that it's doing that. It's helping our heart to Beat,

we don't even know that it's doing that. Muscle memory, how those things work. Neurons, neural pathways, synapses, these are all things that I'm reading about in this book with Esda on pretty much Nightly Bay.

Why did he like it? I don't know. I pray he'll be a scientist. That'd be fine. And so with this children's book that I've read over and over for the last 40 or 50 days, I've become somewhat of an expert on neuroscience. No, but seriously, I don't need to get all the way into the science to be able to explain this, right? Neuroscience shows it shows us that our brains form patterns through repetition. Whether you could say that phrase, you knew it, whether you knew it or not, right? Each thought, each emotion that we have, each response that we have to stimuli, it creates some type of neural pathway, connections that become automatic for us over time. I think back to a story of when I was in the house that I was growing up in. I was maybe three years old. It's one of my earliest memories I can think of. But come My mom was cooking something in the kitchen and we had the electric coils on the stove and you can already know where this is going. It's glowing red. It's very, it looks fantastic. As a three year old, you're like, what is that?

And as a three year old, you reach up to be like, Let's figure it out. Because your brain hasn't responded to the stimuli of like, I know what it means for something to smell hot. I know when metal is hot because I can smell it. I know when something is red, I shouldn't probably touch that. I didn't have that yet. That pathway wasn't yet formed. And so I did touch it and had a nice scar of the coils on my hand as a three-year-old and lost my mind, right? That's a fun story to talk about how this works in our brains, but we're doing this all the time as 18, 19, 20-year-olds and going further as 30-some-year-old, 40-some-year-old, and it can be your entire life. This is how our brains work. In some examples of these neural pathways, sure, muscle memory, right? That's trite, so that's mundane. It's very maybe in athletics, you talk about that or in terms of dexterity, you want muscle memory to be something that you have, to have a certain way to be technically sound or technically good at certain things. But don't miss the fact that that's how you can be fully loved by God, fully secure in Christ, you still feel panicked when someone criticizes you.

That's actually the same set of pathways that are at work, right? I can know my status before God I can be fully loved and understand that. I can feel that security. And yet in the face of criticism or strong confrontation, I don't just feel panicked, but maybe I respond a certain way. Recoil, defense, whatever that is. Feeling defensive when someone challenges you, feeling unseen even in the presence of 600 others on a day to day basis. These reactions are not sinful in and of themselves, certainly not. But they are, and this is what I'll call them, they are reflexes that we have from old patterns of identity. Regardless of when you came to know Christ in your life, there's some aspect of this. We have these reflexes from old patterns of identity. There are old fears, our old misalignments, our old messages that we've absorbed, perhaps even from the enemy, about who we were and what we had to do to survive. And that's very different in touching a set of hot coils on the stove. Those run a little bit deeper. Those will stick with you very differently. So maybe it is when you receive criticism, your body reacts before your theology does.

That's normal. And yet, something worth looking into. Somewhere in your story, criticism, it meant something. It meant danger. It meant rejection or maybe even shame. So now, without even choosing it, we do what? We defend, we withdraw, or we shut down. It's not rebellion. That's training and it's old identity reflexes.

Think on some of those things for you. It might not be criticism, it might be something else. What are those neural pathways of substance for you in your life that have formed? I want us to think on that, but I don't necessarily want us to dwell too long on about it, because I also want to talk about what our hope is moving forward. The hope is this, God doesn't just reconcile us to himself and praise God, he has done that, but he also reconciles us to one another. Ephesians 2, as we read, calls us one new humanity, not just improved individuals. Community I know it's the thing that I will just get up here and talk about every time, and I will not apologize for it. Community is God's tool for helping us practice new identity reflection. Community is God's retraining environment.

If you want to talk about it that way, that's how my brain thought about it. And we can put trust in that

because we see the Triune God existing community before time began. We can put trust in that because God, the Father, entrusts Jesus to the community of the family, obedient created by Mary and Joseph. We can put trust in that because we see Jesus at the outside of his ministry call 12 disciples to follow him, learn from him, serve from him, and be in community with him. The mere establishment of the church is an affirmation of community as God's design. As we heard from Dr. Williams on Monday, the covenant of marriage, another example, the sending of the Holy spirit at Pentecost and even back in the Ephesians, our text, are being seated with Christ in heavenly places. These are all examples of community and why it makes very much sense for us to see it as a retraining environment for us to practice the building of new identity Reflecting. Community is a default setting for God. It should also be for us. So don't let current context of culture or society, American dream necessarily, don't let that cement anything different into your brains.

They're a big deal. To be clear, strong biblical work ethic is good, but rugged individualism, independence at all costs, and being a self-sufficient superhuman is not the setting that God designed for you. It's not the setting that God designed for me. It's what community is for, for some level of interdependence on one another. In healthy community then, we learn new ways to respond. We learn to perhaps pause instead of reacting. And in a world of 24-hour news cycles and tragedies and unprecedented events, perhaps even multiple times a week, we would do well to learn to pause and to not react, but to respond in community together. How might that benefit us today? We might learn in healthy community to give grace instead of judgment. Judgment's easy. Our brains turn to this immediately. It's very simple for us to know what is fair and unfair, what somebody deserves and what they don't deserve. That's a snap judgment, we call it that. Giving grace takes discipline. That's where if we go back to the phrase from earlier, that's where we be putting our theology in front of our actual physiological reaction to something. To give grace before giving judgment over something could be something worth considering.

In healthy community, we might learn to receive correction instead of that recoil, that reflex. This idea that receiving correction is a form of confrontation, and confrontation I want no parts of because it means that I'm in the wrong. Brothers and sisters, What are we even doing here if not receiving correction? What is class? What is courses to take and degrees to earn except for, I don't know everything. I need help in learning what I don't know. Would you please correct me along the way? If we need to put our money where our mouth is, put discipleship right next to that, right next to the importance of classes. It's the very same thing. We don't know everything. We need that correction. We should be hungry for it But if every time we're met with it, coming from different directions, or if it's not delivered just the right way, and we recoil and withdraw and shut down, we miss out on the great benefit of that which is biblical community. In healthy community, we learn to depend instead of isolate. It's the effective idea of being that super efficient, super human.

The way that I learned this recently was, I recall one of my first messages as a dean of students to you guys was in some ways teaching on, but also processing my son's hearing loss, him being deaf, that being an aspect of his identity. And I go back and look into it and I still stand by the message. But I've also learned a lot in the last 18 months or 24 months about what that means for him and what it means for our family. Well, one of the ways that I've had to learn about healthy community and learning to depend on people instead of isolating is through him, is through Ezra. There's an aspect of his identity in his deafness that I will never be able to share with him for all intents and purposes, I don't necessarily know, but I don't think I'll be able to identify in that with him. I've had to learn to depend on communities that I am not familiar with, people who are not. It's not genetic. I don't have family members I can turn to and say, hey, would you be able to spend some time with us and talk with me about this? I didn't have someone to turn to in that regard. My church didn't have somebody who was that way. And so it became communities in and around his schooling and in and around community groups around schooling, deaf and hard of hearing groups, community groups, and then Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, his teachers and the staff who were there who began to teach me, as they were deaf people themselves, what that meant for their identity. And in that dependence that I've had on them, because there's that reality where being a hearing parent of a deaf child, there will be moments, if not at four years old, as he continues to grow up, where I may not have what he needs in a given moment, not just simply to affirm that identity in him or say that everything is going to be okay, but rather to say, I know what you're going through. I know what it means for you this way. I

know the frustration you're experiencing. I don't have that. I can't do that for him. I need to depend on someone else to mentor, to go ahead, to hopefully disciple him in those ways. That's been a very humbling experience, and it's actually in community then changed my entire theology on disability, because in the deaf community, and I said it already three times this morning, it's okay to say, there's no problem, but in the deaf community, genuinely, they don't necessarily talk exclusively about hearing loss, they genuinely talk about deaf gain. That rocked my world. That's what I've been thinking about for 18 months is, how is that even possible?

As someone who hears, I can't imagine a world without sounds. And yet that dependence I needed on that community taught me very much so about that very real reality. It's not just a tongue in cheek thing that we say to feel better about, well, I'm differently abled and I can't hear. And so let's call it death gain to make ourselves feel. It's genuine. It's real. There are things that the deaf community has through American sign language and through a world without sound that I couldn't even fathom when I first encountered this idea. My dependence on that community taught me that. If I were to have isolated Ezra and say, well, this is hard needs to learn about as well. Let's pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and we'll figure out as a family how we're going to tackle this. But we're not going to lean in anything. It's like we're just going to hope for the best medicine, the best technology to get us where we're going. That's not illogical, but to have closed ourselves off from all that is here would have prevented us from maybe being able to unlock something further down the road for Ezra and for his identity, and to be clear, just one aspect of his identity in terms of his death. I use that simply as an illustration to talk about a form of healthy community I've found in the last 18 months. Healthy community learns to depend on one another instead of to isolate.

I wonder what those things are for you. I wonder what those might look like. I wonder what doors or windows God is opening right now that you're discerning, should I walk through it? Should I peer through and see what's on the other side? But in healthy community, we learn new ways to respond. In other words, through all these things, we rehearse living out our true identity to one another. We remind each other who we are. We remind each other of what God has already declared over our lives. And I hope that the social fabric of our community, that's part of every single day for you guys. I hope that the relationships that you are building, people talk all the time about the strong community that we have here, what it's like to feel like I'm a part of a family, and what it's I like to have, when you talk to alumni, I almost say the same thing, the friends and the relationships that I've built here are transformative.

Those are people who I carry with me even after I'm gone, and it's true. I hope that those relationships and conversations that happen over coffee and around tables and in rooms and in classes and in hallways. I hope those are ones where we are reminding each other who we are. I hope there are ones where we're explicitly going out of our way to remind each other of what God has already declared over our lives because it's important we not forget. It's important we help each other to remember in that regard. I think about my friend Andrew. Some of you may know Andrew Allers, who worked here for 10 years. He just wrapped up his time. A couple of weeks ago, he moved on to a new opportunity that he and his family are excited to them. He had his last day of work last Friday. And we were roommates in college and my kids call him Uncle Andrew, and we're very close. A sad day for me in some ways, but on his last day, we sat down and just took 15 minutes and to one another had a chance to do exactly this, to remind each other of who we are and to remind each other of what God has already spoken over us.

And the deep encouragement that came out of that moment, not just to say thanks to him for his service to care and for his time that he spent and invested. He kept a low profile. Many of you may not even know him necessarily. But in that moment as a friend, to have that when someone who knows you at that level of intimacy can speak that over you, imagine what it's like to be in communion in prayer with God and And we're not going to have that happen in the same way. Let's not grow weary of doing these things together. Let's make it the fabric of our everyday conversations. Let's make it part of the fabric of our prayer lives as well.

Our community isn't perfect. We know that because you're living. It never will be. We will never achieve that. In the same way we can't be superhuman, our community can't be something that it's

not, which is human. But it is the context where old pathways can save and new ones can take root. I really believe that. I believe it because I've experienced it. And maybe you've experienced it and you have these places in your life that you think of. And maybe for me, it's Christian summer camp and summer camp staff and people who were instrumental in my life, pouring into my spiritual journey, my spiritual formation. And it was always something for me, what is it about that community? What is it about that place? And I always thought it was, forgive me, I always thought it was the beauty of creation or the magic of being out in the woods and cabins and being away from electricity and Wi-Fi to an extent. To an extent. But the real reason has to do with these things. It was healthy community centered on these things of learning to pause instead of reacting, learning to give grace instead of judgment, learning to receive correction instead of recoil, learning to depend instead of to isolate, reminding each other who we are and reminding what God has said about us. That's why it holds that place in my mind. What are those places for you? And what would it take for this place to be that a place for you as you move forward?

I want to pause now and give you a few questions that you can reflect on this week. What are we going to take from this? As we think on what are those old reflexes we have, the myth of the alignments that we have as we think about our old aspects of identity, and we think about trying to build new ones, let's reflect a little bit on that. In what situations do I still react from an old misalign identity? What are the things that are said? Who are the people that might be involved? It's not necessarily that something is triggering. That's not one way to think about this. But what are those things that when this is part of the equation, I know I'm going to react from one of those old misaligned aspects of my identity.

Second, how do I invite others into my true identity in Christ? You have to sit and think about that one for a second. How do I invite others into my true identity in Christ? Here's a follow-up. How do I help remind them of theirs? Have we considered that? Are we doing that? Third, where am I clinging to things like independent? Where am I clinging to things like pridefulness? Instead of practicing dependence and reconciliation to one another, Where am I just not even evaluated that the people that are right around me might be a way that God is trying to answer some of the things I'm praying about?

And not even because I don't want to help, I don't even know that I need to help because of my reliance on my own pride, my own independent. And last, who in my life helps me remember these things? Who in my life helps me remember that I am beloved, I am seated with Christ in heavenly places and I belong Who are those fellow citizens that help remind you of those things in your life? And should you be spending some more time with them, if that's the type of conversation or things that they're speaking over you, maybe.

I want to ask these questions for you to have answers here and now, and write them down and figure it all out. Reflection is the first step in this retraining process, retraining your heart and your mind in Christ. Our status was changed instantly, praise God. But in this work of retraining, it's going to be an ongoing process. It's not just the formation and the ongoing formation of your executive functioning in your frontal lobe that will happen up through the age of 25 for some of us. It's the retraining of in community, what that looks like in discipleship, in academia, in our studies, and in our calling to sermon to what God is going to place this in.

Let me close then by bringing us full circle. I said earlier that one of the strange things about being a Christian is that you can believe the gospel and still live like it is not quite true. Here's the difference, you don't have to live in that old story with those old reflexes anymore. You don't have to live like you are a stranger because you're not, and God says so. You don't have to live like you're auditioning. You don't have to prove your worth to God. And you really don't have to prove your worth to anybody else in many ways, because it's already been spoken. It's already been said. That work is done. You are already reconciled. We know that from the people. You are already loved. You are already a fellow citizen, a member of God's household. You are seated with Christ in heavenly places. What does that do? You're mental face, your mental emotional space. What peace does that give? Identity isn't something we have to earn. It isn't something that we have to work harder for. It is something we get to remember and then walk in every day. So this week, wherever you go, wherever you meet,

especially if you're early on in your time at Cairn, you are just beginning to engage with the community that is around you. However old patterns might be arising and causing you consternation or frustration. Remember that your identity is the most important thing about you and the thing you most want others to know about you. So let your life and hopefully let our community then reflect those by your heaven's presence.

Lord, we thank you for what you have spoken through your word. We thank you that we are not far off, that we are not strangers, that you have given us eternal hope in you, that you have seated us with Christ in heavenly places. Lord, I pray that these trees would bubble to the surface for each one who is here and hearing this now. I pray that as we learn, even, what in this spring 2026 semester, when we learn what community is going to look like, if we navigate new schedules, new pathways from class to class, new activities as an involvement. If we think on what community looks like, Lord, I pray that it would be one that does this retraining, that it does this remembering together, that we would speak truth and encouragement over one another's lives about who we are, our giftedness, the things that you have given and provided to us so graciously.

Lord, we thank you for that. I pray that we would be quick to remind one another of the ways that we see God at work for people's lives in our community. And Lord, I also pray that we would be quick to reverse the things that you have spoken over us. That we be quick to remind one another our standing before you and how you have repositioned us totally in all aspects of our lives. Lord, I pray for this community. I pray it would be a faithful one. I pray for the weekend that is in front of us. I pray it would give us rest. I pray it would give us refreshment as we look toward a new week of this spring semester. We pray these things in your name. Amen.