

“West Side Story”

God at the Movies 2022: Pt.4

[Trailer 2:14]

Our film this morning was nominated for 7 Academy Awards, bringing home only one, the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress. A deserving performance by Anita Dubose, who – in my opinion - was a more memorable character than either of the two leads. And in a instance of “life imitating art” it was a fitting win for another reason. CNN, opened their article with “Ariana DeBose...made history as the first openly queer woman of color to win in the category.” That’s a lot of adjectives! But again, that’s fitting in support of a movie that is all about identity. What it is, how you find it, and why we constantly fight over it.

When the original *West Side Story* was first performed on Broadway in 1957 and brought to the big screen four years later, it was unique. The idea of harnessing the epic tragedy of Romeo and Juliet to contemporary issues of juvenile delinquency and ethnic tolerance was very modern. Of course, by the time I was growing up in the 80’s, that ground was being covered by “A very special episode of *Different Strokes*”. It’s not quite as novel anymore. Although likely just as needed.

By the way, it’s not a coincidence that both of those shows shared a same urban environment. In fact, I was thinking as I wrote this about how many of my favorite shows – and I mean starting with *Sesame Street* – have been set in New York City. I must confess, that as the t-shirt says, I love New York. Of course, having been there a whopping *three* times in 50 years, I also must confess that what I really love is the *idea* of New York!

A lot of that comes from an idyllic weekend that Deanna and I spent there years ago – perfect fall weather, three Broadway shows, great food, the museums, strolling through Central Park – it was everything the rom-coms promised! Of course, it’s not lost on me that the *reason* it was so special is we didn’t actually live there. Didn’t have kids to take to school, jobs to work, mortgage to pay, even groceries to shop for. Real life makes everything more complex – even Broadway musicals.

In fact, the place we fell in love with on our trip was the Upper West Side. We literally took a “You’ve Got Mail” location tour. We still fantasize about what it would be like to have an apartment on a little street by the park that runs along the Hudson. But even the Upper West Side is more of a dream than a reality.

I've told you before I love jazz music. One of the high temples of the genre is Jazz at Lincoln Center run by my boyhood hero, Wynton Marsalis. In fact the whole 16-acre complex that makes up The Lincoln Center for the Performance Arts – Columbus and W. 62nd street - is a pinnacle of American culture – and thus, American civilization. But as the opening images of our film remind, this jewel of the arts was built on the rubble of the slums. That is historically accurate; in fact the 1950's "Lincoln Square Development Plan" included "The Mayors Slum Clearance Committee."

The fact of the matter is, all cities are built on bones. Any of us who have lived in Austin more than a couple decades can attest to that. But that's the nature of cities. I read an essay this week that said, "Peel back the city to the time of its foundation. Peel back the corpses piled on corpses, the generations of violence. Peel it back to the bare ground of origin, and all we would find is the first grave of a founding murder. The city is built on death, all the way down. A city of bones."

And of course that is true of civilizations as well. You don't have a civilization without a great city – Babylon, Athens, Jerusalem, Rome, Paris, London, New York. All built on bones. One people group builds on the foundation of the one that came before. But because the land is so value, nobody waits until the previous group has left before they start building...and that of course, leads to tensions.

We see that tension in our film before a word is ever spoken. Whistling, dancing and aggressive snapping! But the tension is on display. A group of boys gather into a parade of sorts marching through the neighborhood with cans of paint? But why? Is it beautification day? Are they trying to earn some community service credits to bolster their college entrance applications? Not exactly. Let's take a look...**[Paint :38]**

And there is the underlying tension for our film; our Montagues and Capulets - "two households, both alike in dignity" – and with Mercutio by Act III, we'll be left calling down "a plague" on both of them. Two rival street gangs, the Jets and the Sharks. It happened fast, so I don't know if you noticed that they took down a sign for "Cocina Criolla" to reveal one for an Irish Pub that had existed underneath.

It's the lower class descendants of white immigrants fighting the more recent working class Puerto Rican immigrants over territory that's about to belong to upper class families of all stripes anyway. Of course, both the musical and films avoid the historical fact that the actual San Juan Hill neighborhood that was bulldozed to make room for progress was, in the 50's, actually a majority black neighborhood.

The question of “who’s turf is this anyway?” is as old as time itself. And boy has it created trouble. I recently read a book by Pulitzer Prize winning author Anne Applebaum on the rising growth of authoritarianism in the western world and the subsequent threat to democratic values. And she has a chapter on how the power of nostalgia plays a large part in shaping it.

The meaning of nostalgia is plain from the two words that comprise it – plain in Greek that is. *Algos* means “aching” and *nostos* means to “return home”. So the word was coined by a 17th century Swiss medical student to describe mercenary soldiers away at war who longed to return home. We’ve all experienced this – and more the older we get. Applebaum points out that there are two main types of nostalgia. **Reflective nostalgia** is an “idealized memory of a desired past often described ironically or playfully.”

Anika and I went to a record convention last week at the Palmer Center. Wall to wall vinyl albums, cassettes, and posters of a bygone era. I paid \$10 for an album by Poi Dog Pondering – a local band I saw perform at the UT Union Ballroom in 1991. Later, at home on the couch, I listened to it and remembered how much better everything was when I was in college! That’s reflective nostalgia.

But there’s another – more problematic - form. **Restorative nostalgia** implies “an effort to revive the past – but without acknowledging that the desired and idealized past never existed, therefore it cannot be restored.” If I could actually go back to 1991, I would discover that it was no bed of roses – and neither is *this* moment...when I idealize *it* 30 years from now. I don’t *really* want to go back to a world with no digital music. Or internet or email or cellphones or HD TVs!

And whether they actually believe it or not, restorative nostalgia is a primary tool for fascist control and always has been. From the later Caesars campaigns to restore “the glory of Rome” to Putin’s war in the Ukraine to restore the Russian Empire of old. Applebaum says these “mythmakers”, “Don’t recognize their own fictions about the past for what they are. They are not interested in a nuanced past, in a world in which great leaders were flawed men, in which famous military victories had lethal side effects. They don’t acknowledge that the past might have had its drawbacks. They want the cartoon version of history, and more importantly, they want to live in it, right now.” [Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 74]

So never mind that the Dutch took Manhattan from the Native Americans, the British took it from the Dutch, the British harassed the German immigrants that settled after them. The Germans harassed the Italians that next came to their Burroughs. The Italians fought with the upstart Irish. No, “this is *our* soil – always has been – and how dare these Puerto Ricans (or insert any ethnic group here) try to take it from us?!”

Because after all, how can we know who *we* are, if we don’t have a *them* to contrast with? As I said *West Side Story* is a story about identify. The very first word we here in the movie – after the dancing and the snapping – is “Jets”. And the Jets are more than a brand or a fan base. Oh no, listen to a bit of this song and tell me if you get just how serious it is. [**Jets :38**]. See when you’re a Jet, you can know who you are. You can be better than who you are; “Little boy you’re a man, little man you’re a king.”

After this song, the gang’s leader, Riff, confronts his predecessor and friend Romeo – I mean Tony – who is recently released from prison and thus avoiding his old gang in hopes of building a better, cleaner future for himself. And Riff says, “You know, I don’t know who I am and who cares who I am? But what’s left after everything else is the Jets. My guys who are just like me.” How do we know who we are? This is the fundamental issue of the human race.

I’m reading a book right now called “The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self” – I’m not sure how I feel about it yet. But it’s an attempt to explore human history to see how we got to a place where sexuality, specifically, is such a key part of our identity – heterosexual, homosexual, or what have you. Something that would have been unfathomable just a few generations ago. Not because they thought it was wrong, but because they just wouldn’t have understood the question.

Historically, how have people determined who they were? Talking about the western world mainly. Plato and Aristotle first defined “**Political** human” as opposed to “idiotic human” - that’s what they called our primitive species. When you’re just hunting and gathering for survival, you don’t have a whole lot of spare time to philosophize about the nature of life. As many of *us* discovered last winter when we spent half our day melting snow to flush toilets!

But once you gather into cities and specialize labor tasks, that frees up some citizens to think about how to organize the society – the *polis* – which is where “political” comes from. So for the Greeks, and later Roman’s, one found identity in the activities that engaged in civic community life. Thus Cicero’s famous phrase, *civis romanus sum!* Who are you? “I am a Roman citizen!”

Eventually political man gave way to a second major type, “**Religious** human”. A person from the Middle Ages found their identity from their involvement in religious activities - going to mass, celebrating feast days, taking part in pilgrimages, etc. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is the classic representation of this identity. Think about it, the church was the tallest building in any town, and the only way to tell the time was via the steeple bells. So the church literally dominated your sense of time and place.

Well, in historical progression, religious man was eventually displaced by a third type, what he calls, “**Economic** human” – the individual who finds their sense of self in trade, production, or making money.” Who am I? I am a butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker. But Karl Marx was right about at least part of capitalism’s habit of constantly shifting societies’ means of production. It’s too unstable of a category to build a long-term identity on. After all, if in 1995, you were the greatest travel agent in town, that’s not even a job you can make a living at any more.

But starting in the 20th century with Sigmund Freud and the birth of the therapeutic age, the way we find our identity has rapidly shifted from an *external* view – the forum, the church, the factory – to an *internal* view. Who I truly am is who *I decide* I am. We now live in the age of “**Psychological** human”.

Now, when Frank Sinatra sings, “I gotta be me!” We all go “Yeah! Let’s each be me.” Instead of what they would have said in every other generation in human history, “Oh my, don’t be a “me” that’ll get you killed. Be an “us”, like the rest of us.”

And technology has rapidly advanced our ability to be a me. Even Chairman Frank had to get a corporate record contract to sing his songs of individual freedom – a corporate machine that controlled every element of his life. Today, you can write you own songs, post them to YouTube from your bedroom and become a Justin Bieber. And no corporation can tell you what to do...just millions and millions of likes, dislikes and social media comments on the internet. Now anyone can be a movie maker...and anyone can be a movie *critic*.

Is it any wonder that we live in an age of anxiety as well? We tell children, “You are free...to pick your school, your career, your friends, your spouse, your politics, your religion, your nationality, your personality, your morality, your gender...” And then we act surprised when they are crippled by stress. A 2018 study of American universities – pre-pandemic! – found that during the last year, 43% of undergraduates “felt so depressed that it was difficult to function.” And 64% said they “felt overwhelming anxiety.”

Now, there's one way to respond to that; "See, that's what freedom gets you, a social collapse from Bach to Biebs! Life was so much better when..." Naw, that's just phony-baloney restorative nostalgia – the dictators friend. Yes, if I were born a Sicilian peasant in 1372, I wouldn't stress out about which school I went to. What I did, where I lived, how I worshipped and who I loved would have all be determined for me. And yeah, I probably wouldn't need Xanax...but I don't want to go back to that.

Every age of human existence has been plagued with problems. At least in *this* one, expressing yourself doesn't gets you burned at the stake, just doxed on Twitter – which if your identity is all in your head anyway, may be a form of psychological death. But all of these "ages of men" have had the same problem when it comes to identity. All of them define the "me" against the "you". The "us" against the "them." I am who I am, over and against "the other". Athenians vs Spartans, Catholics vs. Protestants, Farmers vs, Bankers.

It's been this way from the beginning. Genesis chapters one and two; Adam and Eve get their identity in relationship to God; loving Creator and loved creatures. Genesis chapter three, humans fall away from God's perfect plan – now he gets his identity from his work and she from her family.

Genesis chapter four, the twisted fruits of the work/family identity result in violence. The first murder. Why did Cain kill his brother, Abel? In his book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, Yale theologian Miroslav Volf calls it a "false identity."

On the surface, the two brothers are equal; born of the same parents, each engaged in respectable occupations, one the keeper of sheep and the other a tiller of soil. And they both offer equally appropriate sacrifices to God. Yet, the surface level equality hides something darker underneath, something that has shaped their relationship from the outset. Eve greeted the birth of her first son with a proud exclamation and gave him a name of honor – Cain means "one who provides".

The birth of the second son is treated as an afterthought, even in the Biblical text – "Oh yeah, later came Abel". Whose name means "vapor" or "nothingness". So Volf points out that from birth, Cain's identity was constructed in relation to Abel. He was great...in relation to Abel. In other words, Cain got his sense of worth from being superior to his brother.

However, when God accepted Abel's sacrifice and rejected Cain's – and we're not told why that was – it meant that suddenly Abel was ascending, beginning to pass him even. And Cain had to deny that reality because his self-esteem was built on being better than Abel. So Volf says that the subsequent murder did not stem from irrepressible violent rage, but rather was the result of the cold logic of “a perverted self in order to maintain it's own false identity.”

Here's what he writes, “It was governed by a faultless logic, provided Caine's premises were right. Premise 1: ‘If Abel is who God declared him to be, then I am not who I understand myself to be.’ Premise 2: I am who I understand myself to be.’ Premise 3: ‘I cannot change God's declaration about Abel.’ Conclusion: ‘Therefore Abel cannot continue to be.’” (*Exclusion and Embrace*, 95). Thus the murder.

God spared Cain's life for his grievous sin, but he banished him to be a wanderer on the earth. And the next thing it says Cain did was “build a city”. The first recorded city in the Bible...is built on bones. See, when your identity is based on being superior to others, it will always produce hostility.

Let's go to the New Testament and think about the Apostle Peter. A simple fisherman who became the first pope. But in between...oh my. He was a mess. And it all had to do with his quest for identity.

You see, Peter's identity, like Cain, was based on the assumption that he was better than the other disciples. In fact, he thought he was the best follower that Jesus could ever have. Listen to his boast in **Matthew 26:33**, “*Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.”*” And Jesus laughs at him and says, “Oh Peter, buddy, you're going to be the first one to deny you even know me when the going get's rough.

Which is of course what happens. Jesus is arrested and Peter three times denies – with curses – that he is a follower of Jesus. Later, after the resurrection, there's a touching moment on the beach where Jesus restores Peter, and he starts by asking him a telling question, **John 21:15**, “*When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”*”

The telling thing is the modifier –“more than these”. Peter was not basing his identity on Jesus' love for him, but on his great love for Jesus. And so if you get your identity from being the most passionate follower of Jesus, then you will have to get angry and even violent toward someone who opposes your Lord. When Jesus was arrested, not only was Peter the only one who denied him, but he was the only disciple who did violence. He got a sword and cut off someone's ear.

That was Peter, claiming to be the greatest and most faithful follower of Jesus, doing the very *opposite* of what Jesus was doing. Jesus was dying for his enemies saying, “Father forgive them.” But because Peter, like Cain, based his identity on his performance – on being more enlightened and spiritual than these infidels – he had to attack the very people Jesus was seeking to save. When a false identity is threatened, the result is *always* hostility.

Always. Even with the Jets and the Sharks. A rumble ensues – over a love story ironically – angry words turn to punches turn to knives. When it’s over, the two rival leaders lay dead and – as the last one to wield the knife - lover boy Tony’s hope for the future with it. As the song says: “Life can be bright in America/If you can fight in America.” What lingers after this “West Side Story” is a darkness that seems to belong more to our own angry, tribal moment than to the relatively optimistic ’50s or early ’60s.

I think the underlying issues of this film – and the stories of Cain and Peter – hit uncomfortably close to home for American Christians today. Modern philosophy and anthropology talk about creating an identity through “othering.”

When we “other” a group or people, we treat them as alien and strange, and we stress what we see as their weakness and evils in an effort to prove to ourselves and others how superior we are by contrast. A classic biblical example of this is the man in Jesus’ parable who prays at the temple, (**Luke 18:11**) “~~The Pharisee~~ stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.’”

Here is a man quite literally “othering”. He creates a positive identity as noble, good and true by contrasting himself with – and showing contempt for – others. As any therapist worth their salt will point out, when you create an identity by despising other individuals or groups, it makes you dependent in many ways on them. Ironically, “the other” becomes part of who you are. You need for them to stay in their place and to fit your stereotypes of them.

And if something threatens your one dimensional, negative view of them, it shakes your very foundations. This is what brought Cain to kill Abel, and why Peter responded violently as well. Their false identity was shaken, and rather than change it and give it another foundation, they lashed out at the people who were endangering it.

Now, you can “other” anybody; just visit a typical American High School. But historically there have been three big ones; class, race and gender. All three of them are quite clearly depicted in this movie, by the way. And they are at the fore-front of the culture wars today. Rural farm values vs. urban elite values. Both toxic masculinity and radical feminism define themselves more by what they’re not – “soft!”, “knuckle-dragger!” – than by what unite them. And of course, we’re at the point when simple “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus” debates seem like quaint nostalgia. There’s a lot more planets involved now!

And race? Take your pick. Whether round 50 of the repercussions of America’s great founding sin of slavery, or the hatred and distrust of ethnic immigrants and foreigners which takes place in every nation of the world. Class, race and gender. Quick history lesson: when this country was founded who were the only Americans routinely permitted to vote? White...male...landowners. Class, race and gender. It’s a problem. And if we don’t get it under control, it will burn everything down. Ask the French Revolution. Ask the Haitian Race Wars. Ask the Sharks and the Jets.

Is there an answer? Well, I’m no politician so I can’t be of much help there. But I am a pastor and a theologian and I do think God has given us an answer in His Word - both the Word that is Jesus Christ come physically into our world, and in the collection of writings called the Bible that tell his story. Now, I’ll tell you up front, that the global church historically has gotten this wrong way more than it’s gotten it right. But that’s just because – like Peter – many Christian’s may have the right doctrine, but they have not sorted out the true source of their identity.

Let me read to you from Paul’s letter to the church at Galatia, **Galatians 3:26-27**, “*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*” I grew up in a church with a lot of tension over what women should wear and what men should wear. Dresses, pants, shorts, ties, length and style of hair. My wife worked for a season in our denominational headquarters and they once had a fashion show during chapel to demonstrate appropriate adherence to the dress code – for professional adults! I was in seminary at the time and I wanted to write a paper called, “The Open-Toed Shoe: A Theological Crisis”

I heard sermons in youth group on how to dress at the pool during summer camp. You know what I *never* heard preached when it came to these issues? “Hey men, women, whatever the current standards of dress your culture says identifies you...you are clothed with Christ. That’s what matters. Not all this temporary noise. Your identity, above anything else, is “children of God”. And then comes the kicker. This is the whole deal. This is the answer.

V.28 “*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” What did we say are the big three historic categories of “othering”? Class, “slave nor free”. Race, “Jew nor Gentile”. Gender, “male and female”. Well there they are! Problem solved, let’s go home!

Why have we not solved these issues as Christians by now? Why has – in many cases – the Church actually made these issues worse over the years? And if you don’t believe me, just wade into the issue of “women in ministry” on my Twitter feed...if you dare! It’s because we don’t work out the second part of the verse. We stop at “you are all one!” That’s modern liberal democratic values – everybody is just like everybody else. No, that’s not what it says.

“For you are all one...*in Christ Jesus.*” It’s the “in Christ Jesus” part that will set us free. That’s what God – when He created human beings – God didn’t create us to be political men and women or religious men and women or economic men and women or psychological men and women. Those are all false identities. He created us – everyone of us regardless of class, gender or race – to be “one in Christ Jesus.” When we put our faith in Christ, that’s to become our dominant identity.

But what does that mean? Plenty of people claim to be “in Christ” – like Peter – and then turn around and do very un-Christlike things. Well, it’s all in how we define that identity. Do we define it ourselves? Or do we let Christ define it for us?

See, there’s a liberal way and a conservative way of defining that identity for ourselves, and they both miss. The more liberal or progressive way says if I can’t get all the change I want – right now – then the gospel must not “work”. To be sure, the waters of justice tend to run slow against the banks of human history

Have you ever wondered why, if the Bible intends to be so egalitarian, it doesn’t spell it out more directly? You know, where is the verse that says, “Thou shalt not enslave a fellow human made in God’s image”? Why were so many Southern slave holders able to find verses to support their oppression? How come it doesn’t just say men and women are equal? Why are there some verses that seem to allow for the subjugation of women?

Well, it's because the Bible is both more pragmatic and more idealistic than we realize. First of all, the Bible is pragmatic. Jesus' goal was to free the human race from the enemy of *death* – because without that, social justice isn't really going to amount to much. Yay, you got 70 years of freedom and now you're dead forever. No, Jesus knew the real freedom lay *after* this life. And so practically speaking, if Jesus, Paul, the early apostles had openly worked to end slavery, patriarchy, class oppression – and I absolutely believe that they were *subtly* working for those things. But to do it openly would have ruined the economy in a survival based system. They simply weren't ready.

Just like between the Old Testament and the New, there is a progression to human ethics. Imagine if God didn't want us to pollute the world with fossil fuels – maybe that's not a great plan for that stewardship of the earth He assigned us in the Garden of Eden. If you just suddenly pulled the plug on that cold turkey, it would mean the deaths of people. People wouldn't survive the winter. Industries would collapse – industries that people rely on for their living. That system is so engrained and enmeshed in our lives and economy systems – you don't cut that wire easily or without consequence.

So don't make the mistake of thinking that because God doesn't respond to your oppressive system *right now*...that He doesn't care about the oppression. That's what tripped up those early followers who abandoned Jesus when it appeared he wasn't going to overthrow the hated Roman Empire the way *they* wanted him to. We have to let God move in His time.

But then that can directly lead to a swing too far the other way, to the conservative way of defining identity. And that's to say, if God doesn't overthrow a system right now, then He must endorse that system. So the inequality between men and women, slave and master, rich and poor that *does* appear in Scripture, well then it must be ok. That the traditional systems – which tend to run on just those identity distinctions - are the “godly” way.

Absolutely not, don't forget that not only is the Bible pragmatic, but it's also incredibly idealistic. It's saying that when the Kingdom of God finally reigns – on earth and it is in Heaven – there will not be *any* of these distinctions. Conservative people tend to be ok with oppressive systems...because they are the ones that generally benefit. But don't forget in the Kingdom coming, the last will be first and the first will be last.

Ultimately – and I do me the *divine* ultimately – none of these differences are going to matter. We will all be awash in the immediate, present, love of Christ. So pragmatic and idealistic at the same time – hold the tension. Yes, not everything in the human race is the way it's supposed to be and we can't fix all of it on our own, or even in our own time. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't *try*. That we just give up and wait for heaven. Remember, there will be no sickness in heaven, no disease. Which if you think about it means doctors will be out of work in heaven...but that doesn't mean we don't need them *now*. So hold the tension between pragmatism and idealism.

Jesus frustrated people on both sides of that spectrum. To the zealots he wasn't working fast enough! To the fundamentalists he was making too many changes! Only Jesus gets to set the definition for what it means to have your identity *in him*. And let me tell you what it looks like to be in his gang. To be in his tribe. Look who he hung out with. His enemies tried to slander him with the moniker, “the friend of sinners”, but Jesus wore it like a badge. He said in **Matthew 9:13**, “*For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*”

The more you are aware of your failures and your limitations – your sin – the closer you will be to Jesus. And the more righteous you think you are...the further away from him you will be. Doesn't that sound upside down? But think about it, if you get your value, your identity, from measuring yourself against other people, you're going to be either proud or miserable.

You'll have to decide that some people are *below* you. “I would never do that.” And that will fill you with pride and if they ever threaten your place above them, you will get hostile – just like Cain. Oh you may just murder them in your heart – which Jesus was just as bad. But you never know.

Or you'll decide that certain people are clearly *above* you – more educated, wealthier, better looking, bigger house, whatever the social currency is – and you will be depressed because you don't measure up. You'll be miserable. But you'll also be secretly resentful. And let them slip up just a bit and you'll *pounce*. Because just like you'll be hostile to the ones below that you disdain, you'll be hostile to the ones above that you begrudge.

The gospel identity is completely different. It is based on substitution – the great exchange whereby on the cross, Jesus exchanged *his* perfect righteousness for *our* miserable sinfulness. This means on the one hand, I’m so bad that Jesus had to be substituted for me. There’s no other way. But on the other hand, I’m so valued and so loved that Jesus would willingly substitute himself for me. We say the gospel humbles you to the ground and lifts you to the heavens at the same time.

And when you see who you are in Christ, you’re neither proud or miserable. You’re safe in the accepting arms of Jesus. So then it doesn’t much matter what other people think of you. “Oh, you don’t like me because I’m a Jew? That’s OK, Christ loves me.” “Oh, you think I’m worthless because I’m a slave? That’s OK, Jesus thinks I’m so valuable he gave everything for me.” “You think I can’t do that because I’m a woman? Well Jesus says I have the full inheritance rights of any son – son of a King even - so I’m just not that bothered by your opinion anymore.”

So you see how getting your identity from Christ is the most confidence building thing you can have? Not by fighting with others to carve out an identity politically or religiously or economically or even psychologically, but by embracing the embrace of Christ in spite of whatever else you are.

Compare Peter’s insecure boasting – “I love you more!” – with Paul’s confidence in **1 Timothy 1:15**, “*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.*” Not “was” the worst, “am the worst”. But he’s not groveling or insecure. This is actually near the end of Paul’s life when by all accounts he’s one of the most amazing Christians who’s ever lived. No, knowing he’s a terrible sinner just draws him closer to Jesus (which means he will actually sin *less*). It’s the upside down way of the kingdom.

Ok, last thing, “But Anthony, is this realistic. I mean it sounds spiritual, I guess. But if I don’t hold up a certain image of strength, won’t people run all over me.” That critique is very active in Christianity at the moment. You know one of the people who has thought me the most about this has been Manhattan pastor, Tim Keller. I’ve often quoted from him.

Tim understands the gospel as well as anyone I’ve ever known. And he has lived it out in the mean streets of New York City for 30 years. He’s retired now and has terminal cancer, but that hasn’t stopped him from reaching out to the secular world with a loving and kind presentation of gospel truth.

And he is getting *crucified* for it on social media...by Christians! There was an article in a Christian magazine just last week by a pastor on why he had turned away from Keller – remember, Tim’s preaching the same gospel I am, so this is important. If you agree with his criticism of Tim, it is equally true of me.

He writes, “I began to observe that our politics and culture had changed. I began to feel differently about our surrounding secular culture, and noticed that its attitude toward Christianity was not what it once had been... Now we live in the “negative world,” in which...Christian morality is expressly repudiated and traditional Christian views are perceived as undermining the social good.”

“As I observed the attitude of our surrounding culture change, I was no longer so confident that the evangelistic framework I had gleaned from Keller would provide sufficient guidance for the cultural and political moment. A lot of former fanboys like me are coming to similar conclusions. **The evangelistic desire to minimize offense to gain a hearing for the gospel can obscure what our political moment requires.**” (*First Things*, “How I evolved on Tim Keller” James Wood, 5/6/22)

“What our political moment requires.” That’s putting your political moment above the gospel of Jesus Christ. I will refer you back to the message on *Belfast* and religious violence that we started the series with. You’re saying that Jesus way won’t get me to the dominant position in society I want. It won’t help me overcome those nasty Sharks. Please understand the choice that is before you – before everyone of us – it’s either Jesus’ way, or the world’s way. Either Jesus got it right...or Cain did.

My favorite song in *West Side Story* – and that’s saying a lot – is the beautifully tragic “Somewhere”, sung here by Rita Moreno. It’s a montage of loss after she learns of the deaths in the gang brawls and what it means for the future of these young people she loves. In the original 1961 movie it’s sung by Maria as she holds Tony’s lifeless body in her arms – he has been shot to avenge the death of the Sharks leader who Tony stabbed to avenge the death of the Jet’s leader who was stabbed...well, you get the picture. It’s a haunting song of hope in the midst of tragedy. **[Somewhere 1:20]**

“We’ll find a new way of living...a new way of forgiving....somewhere there’s a place for us”. Do you believe that? That’s the promise, but you have to chose. Let me show you what Paul writes immediately after that bit about “one in Christ”. **Galatians 3:29**, “*If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.*”

What was the promise that Abraham received? We're going to talk more about this during our summer series, but **Hebrews 11:8, 10** says, "*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going...For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*"

You know Cain appears just a few chapters before Abraham – with his city built on bones and blood. But that's *not* the city that Abraham is looking for. By faith, he believed there was another city. You know the problem with the culture wars? It's like any contest for cultural supremacy, one civilization builds on the rubble of the one that came before. Which is why we have to decide which culture we're going to throw our allegiance. For the gospel following Christ it has to be with Jesus and his ways.

Because as Abraham discovered, there will be another city whose foundation is God's. It is not based on the bodies of any cultures that came before. The only dead body beneath the foundation of that city is the crucified corpse of Jesus Christ. The chief cornerstone. And spoiler alert his body is not even there anymore. The new city is founded not on exclusion, but on embrace.

In the new city we are all one...because we deserve to be? Because we have built the best identify for ourselves? – no, because we are "in Jesus Christ." In the new city, Jesus Christ embraces the trans teen who makes their progressive notion of gender their identity because that's how they know they are an authentic self and are accepted in their tribe. And at the same time, Jesus Christ embraces the conservative grandfather who makes his traditional notion of gender his identity because that's how he knows he is a righteous individual and is accepted in his tribe.

In that city there is room for Sharks and Jets, Jews and gentiles, slaves and masters, men and women, and a million other identity distinctions. If what...? If by faith you have been baptized with Christ and are clothed in Christ. Your sin is taken care of – that's over at the cross – all that's left is your pride.

So we have to choose our city. Cain's? With its blood and tragedy? Or the city that Abraham was looking for. The Bible starts in a garden, but it ends in a city. And while we won't experience it fully yet, the ethics of that kingdom can start right now. Love your enemy and forgive as you have been forgiven. And you'll find that there is indeed a place for us. For *all* of us.

Let's pray...