

Luke 22:14-23

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

Sermon

What does it mean to be a part of White Lick Presbyterian? When we are at our best, how might you identify our congregation to other and maybe to yourselves? Identity is a funny thing to think about in an organization that you are already a part of, but I believe that knowing one's identity is key to living out a healthy life together as this little church in the wildwood. And that is just where I want to begin, with that nickname that has been passed down for many generations now, the church in the wildwood.

The nickname comes from the song that we sang as we gathered this morning, a song that this congregation has sung for many years now. The song was based off of a poem written by William Pitts in 1857, and though White Lick was six years old at the time, Pitts' poem was about a vision he had as he traveled through Bradford Iowa. He had stopped in Bradford to change horses on the carriage and as he waited he found himself entranced by the beauty of a wooded valley. At the time there was no church present, but he envisioned a small country church perfectly placed in that spot. When Pitts returned to the town five years later, he was surprised to find that a church was being constructed in the very spot where his vision was.

And though the poem and song were not written for us, it has come to be a description of who we are. So what does it mean to be the little church in the wildwood? I think it says something about our location, about our traditions, and about our relationships. So let's unpack that a bit.

Church in the wildwood. On a day like today, that description seems awfully good as we worship here among the trees that surround us. Location becomes important to our identity. Not only that we are located among the trees, but that we are located just a bit off the beaten path, a rural setting yet still among the booming communities around us. When people hear our name, they should think about our setting as a place to come away for a bit, away from the city and from the neighborhoods and find a place to rest, to retreat, to be rejuvenated and sent back into the world. The beauty of this location, of the springing of life in God's creation around us and of the changing seasons. Driving up to the church is its own adventure; during the spring seeing the trees just begin to bud, in the summer seeing deer and wild turkey along the way, in the fall seeing the bright colors of the changing leaves, and in the winter having a crystal archway of ice and snow in the trees. White Lick is located in a picturesque place where the beauty of God's creation helps all who come to worship our creator.

This nickname is also about traditions. The tradition of singing our songs and sharing our prayer. The tradition of hospitality and service. We choose to keep a traditional worship style, even as we find new ways to live into our traditions including worshipping in this space (outdoors). One new member shared with me that they enjoyed coming to White Lick because it reminded them of what church felt like growing up. That is our traditions that give a sense of rootedness in our history. We have one foot firmly planted in this history, in the ways we have done things now for many years. And yet we are

also facing forward and looking to the future, looking to step forward with our other foot, into our communities, into service, and into the places that God continues to call us.

Finally, in the nickname itself, little is the adjective that describes the church. In this day and age of super-sized meals and mega churches, our culture still puts a value on size stating that bigger is better. Yet at White Lick, we see things a bit differently. We are a small congregation, we always have been and at our core that is part of our identity. There is nothing wrong with being a smaller congregation. It means that we have a better ability to form relationships with one another, to care for and celebrate one another along our journey, to share our lives within a community. In other words, we value knowing and being known. Being a smaller congregation is another way of saying that we are a relational congregation. Why do we eat together after worship? Why do we go to baseball games or have picnics? Why do we share our prayers on yellow cards each Sunday? It is because of this core identity of relationships.

Jesus sat with his small group of apostles in an upper room, at a passover table. At that moment, in that sacrament, identity was formed, not only for the apostles but for the church that they would form. The relationships, locations, and traditions at that moment continue to give meaning and purpose to God's church today. As we come to his table today, may we be rejuvenated by God's grace, may we be drawn together in love with each who come to the table and with those whom we are called to take the table of grace and hospitality to in our communities. For we are the Church in the Wildwood, may our identity call us to deeper faith and service. Amen