

Under the Influence – Avoiding Identity Theft
Ephesians 5: 15-20
Don Lincoln

One morning 5 weeks ago, I received emails from a few church members asking if I had sent them an email asking them to contact me, as I was in need of a favor. If they responded to that email, the reply from “me” informed them my phone wasn’t working correctly, and I needed them to purchase an iTunes gift card for me to give to a cancer patient I was going to visit. The email even had a scripture quote at the bottom underneath “Pastor Don.” Most recipients got suspicious eventually; although a couple got pretty far down the road before they realized it wasn’t from me!

My first thought was “Wow – the perfect sermon illustration for my sermon on **Avoiding Identity Theft!** Not really! My first thought was “DANG, I’ve been hacked!” After emailing for 25 years - starting with AOL in 1993 – and never, ever, ever having been hacked, it has finally happened **TO ME!** I Can’t believe it!

After a little technical forensic work, it was clear I had NOT been hacked. Nobody had my password; nobody accessed my account; nobody sent emails to my contact list – that’s what happens when you get hacked. Someone took my email address – dlincoln@westminsterpc.org – and crafted a new gmail address - dlincoln.westminster@gmail.com - disguised to look like it could be from me – and sent emails to members listed as ministry contacts on Westminster’s website. (Of course, assuming they would be glad to do a favor for me!) I hadn’t been “hacked” or broken into. I had been hijacked. My identity stolen.

So – we sent a congregation-wide email informing you this had taken place and not to respond. It happened to a half dozen pastors in the Presbytery, a couple other pastors in town – it wasn’t just Presbyterians – and happened to me again a few weeks later.

You know the worst part of it? Wasn’t that it happened. It was that some people actually **THOUGHT** I had been **HACKED!** Not hijacked but **HACKED! ME!** Technically savvy ME! That does something to your email pride!! Thought I had been careless with my account, loose with my password, not careful with my internet usage, or had let down my firewall or not updated my computer’s protection. People emailed and said “Don, you’ve been hacked. You need to change your email, change your password, get a new account.” NO!! I’m not sloppy like that!!! That’s not ME!! I’ve not be hacked – I’ve been hijacked. There’s a difference.

Talk about Identity theft. Proud me.

“Be careful then,” the Apostle writes. “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.”

Ain’t it the truth. Just last week we had a phone call on our home phone, which showed up on caller ID as Comcast. The caller identified himself as a Comcast technician, and informed me our home internet connection was being used by 11 different IP addresses, and he needed me

to get on my computer, let him access it over the internet, and remove those users. I hung up and called Comcast directly. Guess what? It wasn't them.

"Be careful then....because the days are evil." Individually, nationally, globally – identity theft is on the rise. Folks pretending to be something or someone they aren't, and fooling a lot of people. And it's not going to get better. "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise."

Avoiding identity theft is one of our largest present-day challenges. Credit cards, ATMs, online ordering – door-to-door scams – people posing as your grandson traveling in Europe who needs cash wired to him because his wallet was stolen. We've all heard it....but we haven't heard it ALL. I had no clue how our title to this sermon series – Identity Theft – how really true it was going to feel by the time we got here.

As I looked at the text this week, some new thoughts came to me. Even despite the email and the Comcast phone call, the reality is a lot of the time, we're not just victims of identity theft. Sometimes we're the **perpetrators** of identity theft. Paul highlights in this text one very personal and very common way our identities are stolen. "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit." Filled with the spirit means the HOLY SPIRIT – not distilled spirits!

Scripture is pretty clear on drunkenness. Isaiah condemns the priests who stagger and reel from their wine. Habakkuk says wine is a betrayer. Proverbs calls wine a mocker that leads one astray.

Notice I said too much wine. Paul says drunkenness in today's text from Ephesians. I am not condemning – nor does Scripture condemn – drinking.

Of course, not everyone agrees on that. There is the old story about the country preacher preaching on the sin of drinking, who says, "Throw all the whiskey in the river when you get home – it's Satan's tool. Throw all the wine in the river – all the beer in the river. Throw it all in the river." And when the preacher calls out for a closing hymn, a disgruntled parishioner in the back says, "How about '**Shall We Gather At the River**'?"

Scripture does not declare outright that drinking is wrong. Jesus' very first miracle was at a wedding in Cana. And He made plenty of wine there. Jesus uses the image of new wine bursting old wineskins as He talks about the life and vitality of a new covenant. Jesus was familiar with new wine. There is a verse in Psalms about "wine making the heart glad;" which, in moderation, your cardiologist might agree with.

But the reality is, you and I know from society today, and yesterday, and doubtless tomorrow, that too much wine does not always make the heart glad. Too much wine – what Paul calls drunkenness – is never a good recipe. It's bad for marriages – for jobs – for health – for driving....

Drunkenness steals your identity. It definitely doesn't make you wise. It can make you say stupid things. Make you DO stupid things. Make you sorry the next day for how you feel and what you don't remember. STEALS your gifted, creative, rational mind – takes away YOUR identity and substitutes something else. And the potential for addiction and dependence is real. More real in some than others. Some families know it all too well. Stolen identities of generations in some households.

“Be careful then how you live,” Paul says, “not as unwise people, but wise!”

But – there’s another identity theft that came to mind. Not where we’re the victims of email scams or internet scams or phone scams or neighborhood scams; or those who fall prey to the way alcohol can steal our wisdom, our joy, our life, our livelihood.

It’s the way you and I steal the identity of others.....

There was a retired Presbyterian minister who left with us a couple file cabinets of sermons he had collected over the years, and I read through one of the old sermons from the late 50s. It’s a pastor I knew in Charlotte, NC. I was shocked to read the opening of his sermon. Here’s how he starts:

“The Irish, as you know, always love a good fight, and they are very unhappy when they are not part of a fight that is going on. You remember during WWII they were neutral. And that distressed a good many Irishmen. One of them was heard to say, “Yes. I know we are neutral. But who are we neutral against?”

I read it again, and thought, “From the pulpit?” In a sermon? Really? The Irish love a good fight? Every one of them?

Talk about identity theft. That’s like any sentence that begins with the word “All” and applies it to a category of God’s children. All Irish are..... All Mexicans are..... All Presbyterians are..... All Republicans are..... All welfare recipients are..... All Muslims are..... All Christians.....

How many of us are guilty of identity theft by such generalizations, categorizing folks as if we can describe them en masse? Generalizations which often lead to bigotry, or prejudice or worse. Watch this powerful video some of us saw at the Global Leadership Summit about cultural intelligence:

SHOW VIDEO – Ken Tanaka’s “What Kind of Asian Are You?”¹

(Young Adult Caucasian Man stops running to talk with an Young Adult Asian Woman who is stretching in preparation for a run alongside the road.)

Man: Hi, there.

Woman: Hi!

Man: Nice day, huh?

Woman: Yeah, finally, right?

Man: Where are you from? Your English is perfect.

Woman: San Diego. We speak English there.

*Man: No, no. (starting to speak very slowly and distinctly). **Where...are....you....from?***

Woman: Well, I was born in Orange County but I never actually lived there.

Man: I mean before that.

Woman: Before I was born?

Man: Where are your people from?

Woman: *Well, my great-grandma was from Seoul.*

Man: *Korean! I knew it. I was like, "She's either Japanese or Korean...." But I was leaning more towards Korean.*

Woman: *Amazing.*

Man: *Yeah. (clasps hands, bows low, and tries to offer a greeting in Korean). There's a really good teriyaki barbecue place near my apartment. I actually really like kimchi.*

Woman: *Cool. What about you? Where are you from?*

Man: *San Francisco.*

Woman: ***But...where....are....you....from?** (trying to imitate him asking the same question earlier)*

Man: *I'm just American.*

Woman: *Really? You're Native American?*

Man: *No. Regular American. (pause as she looks at him). Oh, well, I guess my grandparents are from England.*

Woman: *Oh, well. (Starting to imitate a very British accent) Hello, Guv'nor! What's all this then? Top-o-the-mornin' to ya. Like a spot of tea? Double, double, toil and trouble. Beware Jack the Ripper. Bloody hell. Hip, hip, cheerio!! (Talking normal again) I think your people's fish and chips are amazing!*

Man: *You're weird!*

Woman: *Really? I'm weird? Must be a Korean thing!*

Young Man then goes running off again.

Last week Pastor Jennie read chapter four, where Paul says, "Speak the truth in love; put away falsehood; speak truth to your neighbors for we are members of one another." In other words we belong together. Which is why the end of this chapter talks about singing Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs together – the things we do in community. "Let no evil come out of your mouth, Paul says."

.....the things we say to and about one another – and how **WE** steal identities.....and what havoc that wreaks in the world.....

"Be careful," the Apostle says. "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil." Did you catch that phrase in there – "Make the most of the time?"

In the Greek, literally a marketplace phrase. Grab-all-the-bargains-on-the-table-while-they're-right-there-in-front-of-you! Redeem the time. Utilize the time. Don't waste the time. Don't miss the time.

What would happen if every moment of our lives reflected the love of Christ with everyone we met. So that people would say, “Those Christians....”

.....and follow it with, “there’s something about their mercy, and their kindness, and their love.....”

....as opposed to – “Aren’t they mean-spirited, or divisive, or exclusive, or prejudice, or judgmental?”

What if we were known in the world for claiming and observing everyone’s identity as a child of God and show every one of them kindness, mercy and love.....?

May it be so. Amen.

1. What Kind of Asian Are You? Authorization purchased from Ken Tanaka to show his video during worship. It can be found on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWynJkN5HbQ>