

We Are What We Are Becoming

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters,
of the good news that I proclaimed to you,
which you in turn received, in which also you stand,
through which also you are being saved,
if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you
unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance
what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins
in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried,
and that he was raised on the third day
in accordance with the scriptures,
and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers
and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive,
though some have died.

Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

For I am the least of the apostles,
unfit to be called an apostle,
because I persecuted the church of God.

But by the grace of God I am what I am,
and God's grace toward me has not been in vain.

On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them
though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Whether then it was I or they,
so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

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February 9, 2025

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

Rev. Mike would like to begin today by saying (mostly, so later you won't have to) that Rev. Mike is really grasping at straws when it comes to this morning's sermon. *Rev. Mike* knows it you and, soon enough, and all of *you* will come to know it as well. However, as Rev. Mike's old homiletics professor at Princeton would often say, if you have a dog for a sermon, and you know it, then walk it proudly. Let the dog walking begin.

For those of you who are unaware, or have yet to be personally blessed to discover, our own Beth Hayes is an *Early Morning Texter*. Which, if the sitcom *Seinfeld* was still being produced in this age of cell phones, would surely become yet another category of human being joining the likes of the *Low Talker*, *Close Talker*, *High Talker*, *Long Talker*, *Double-Dipper*, and those who insist on speaking of themselves in the third person. Rev. Mike loves *Seinfeld*. But enough of that, Rev. Mike has a dog to walk.

II.

In Beth's defense, and she is absolutely correct about this, if you choose to leave your ringer on or forgot to avail yourself of the phone's "Do Not Disturb" mode you cannot complain when people text you at odd hours. However, given my job, I rarely feel as if I have those options. Hence, once or twice a week I get a text from Beth in the wee hours. Thankfully, I am a morning person and Beth is rarely frivolous in her reasons for texting.

Friday morning Beth sent me a link to the NCTW article about Kate Ewy winning a silver medal in figure skating last weekend at the Empire State Games. I said, "*I know. Kate texted me after she won, and I shared it with the congregation at the start of worship last Sunday.*" Of course, at that point Beth was in the kitchen supervising Jim Franklin as he made all the sandwiches for the Annual Meeting. Beth texted back, "*We really do need a speaker in the kitchen.*" I replied, "*It is wired for it. On the wall below passthrough window facing FH.*" To which she said, "*So not a huge project? I'll investigate. I bet we have a guy for that.*"

III.

Once again, Beth is correct. Precisely because I tend to be *that* guy, I quickly texted back, “*You could also just open the stream on your phone and play it on a bluetooth speaker.*” To which she said, “*Seriously? Me? I like being technologically challenged. I could easily adopt the Amish way of life. For real. Whitney (her daughter) says if my car came with a car starter I would choose not to use it.*” I said, “*Well, you could learn. Easily.*” She emphatically responded, “*I don’t WANT to. I rebel at change of any sort.*”

Just as my text conversation with Beth ended, Linda came down to the kitchen for a cup of coffee fresh off her morning ride on the bike she has set up on the trainer in Arlo’s old bedroom (making it a stationary bike in winter). I said, “*How was the ride?*” She said, “*I worked really hard to stay in one place.*” Each of these stories got me pondering the common adage that people don’t change.

IV.

Today’s scripture reading from chapter 15 of the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth is a reminder to that congregation of the Gospel that he proclaimed to them: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. This is the Good News which they received, in which they stand, and through which they are being saved, if they will only hold firmly to that message unless, of course (and here is the kicker) they have come to believe in vain. Paul then goes on to list, chronologically, all those to whom the risen Christ appeared beginning with Cephas, then “the 12,” then more than five hundred sisters and brothers, then to all the apostles then, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to Paul.

V.

What struck me most about today’s scripture reading was Paul’s understanding of who he is based on from whence he had come and the changes made *to* him, and *by* him so has to culminate in his statement, “by the grace of God I am what I am.” Now, let us be clear, for a significant period of his life, Paul was a *very* bad dude; his fame as an inquisitor was notorious far and wide. In the book of Acts (9:13) we read “how much evil he had done to Christ’s saints at Jerusalem.” In his letters to the Galatians (1:13) and Philippians (3:6) Paul, himself, remembers how he had “persecuted the

Church of God and wasted it.” In his first letter to Timothy (1:13) Paul calls himself, “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious.” And, in today’s scripture reading, Paul writes of his own self-understanding as “the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” As I said, bad with a capitol “B.”

VI.

Whether Paul intended to or not, his phrase, “I am what I am” harkens us back to the answer God gives to Moses when, after having been instructed to go to Pharaoh and bring God’s people out of Egypt. Moses says to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is God’s name?’ what shall I say to them?” God answers Moses by saying, “I am who I Am,” tell them that “‘I Am’ has sent you.” Though a more accurate translation from the Hebrew is, “I Am being who I Am being.”

What I would like to suggest to us today, is that *our* identity as people of faith, individually and corporately, is a combination of both. By the grace of God we are who we are and have been created to *be*. At the same time, though, we are also who we are *being* because we *choose* to be about the business of becoming that person.

VII.

While *some* of us don’t WANT to change and rebel at change of *any* sort, and *others* work really hard to stay in one place, the greater truth is we *all* have the potential for change. Moreover, if the Apostle Paul is any guide, each of has the potential for *profound* change.

We all look back our lives, to the things done and left undone, to the roads left untaken, to the decisions we regret and the bad choices we have made, to the misfortunes that befell us, to things that might have been, to the pain we have caused or the pain that has been caused in us, and determine that whatever our future might have been or could have been has, now, been rendered forever moot and utterly impossible. Worse, such thoughts, experiences, and connections entrap us in a persistent cycle or controlling narrative which only serves to limit not only the future we might imagine for ourselves but, moreover, our motivation to *strive* for a future which is in no way bound by our past.

VIII.

However, the power of God is such as to overcome any and all of this. To work through, beyond, and with those skeletons we *all* keep in our closets, to maximize even the smallest percentages and overcome the longest odds so that we might change, and be changed. While it may be true that by the grace of God we *are* what we are, who we might be *becoming* is a function of what grace may *yet* allow, and the share of such grace which we might come to allow for ourselves. It all depends on the category of human being to which we choose to belong. Specifically, do we wish to understand ourselves in the first person or the third person?

To illustrate the point, I'm going to pull out one of the skeletons from my own closet. Though I'm certainly not embarrassed by it, this is a story I have shared with only a few, and certainly never from the pulpit. Unlike my dog mushing days, this comes from a very difficult and painful period in my life. Which, I believe, is what makes it is so poignant.

IX.

I would share with you this morning a moment of realization I had sitting on a bench by a payphone at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum located west of Tucson, and the story of how I came to be there. Some months earlier I had said good-bye to the two yoked churches I was serving around Olean NY. This was my first call after seminary and I had a wonderful experience at each church; particularly so at one of them. After five years, each church had grown and were engaged in active, vital ministries. So much so, that together the two churches had become *far* more than one pastor could handle; even this pastor. Moreover, I had become overwhelmed by the sadness I encountered, culminating in a string of excruciatingly difficult pastoral situations having to with sickness and death.

At the same time, my first marriage was ending. My first wife and I were both aware of this, but neither of us knew what to do about it, and I did not know if I possessed the strength to bear what I knew in my heart was coming.

X.

So, by mutual agreement, I purchased a 3/4 ton Chevy van, ripped out all the seats, built a bed in the back, hitched up my pop-up camper and, 28 years ago this very week, I left on a solo vision quest to rest, heal, search my heart,

and discern my future. My journey took me south along the Blue Ridge Mountain Parkway, down to Florida, across the panhandle and along the coast through Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, across the width of Texas, into New Mexico where I spent Easter morning in Carlsbad Cavern, had short stays at Ghost Ranch and Taos, meandered through Northern New Mexico and Arizona, spent time on the Navaho Reservation visiting several Presbyterian Churches there, stopped off at the Grand Canyon, made my way to Southern California, then down into Mexico proper and the Baja Peninsula, turned around and was working my way back east across southern Arizona when I stopped for lunch at Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum near Tucson.

XI.

As clearly as if it happened yesterday, I remember sitting there on that bench having the realization that I needed to stop seeing myself in the third person. To stop worrying about what anyone else thought of Mike, how other's perceived Mike and, much more importantly, who Mike thought "Mike" *had* to be or, even, who Mike hoped "Mike" *could* be. None of which, as it turns out, was ever really real in the first place.

Instead, I simply needed to be who I am by the grace of God, with all my imperfections and inadequacies, and start living my life in the first person in order that such grace might allow me to *become* the person I might *yet* be. In other words, I was just a dog like every other dog. I now knew it, so I decided I had to be my *own* dog and start walking myself proudly. Not with arrogance or bravado, but with an honest and hard-won humility that allowed me to lay down the burdens I had carried with me the entire length and width of the country.

XII.

To be clear, this does not make me special anymore than it did the Apostle Paul who, I'm sure, had the same kind of realization; along with the millions of others who have lived this life down through the history of the world. However, if one never comes to such a realization, in whatever form and through whatever circumstances, I would submit that the faith in which one has come to believe is in vain. If we remained locked into the same sad story we keep telling ourselves, and don't free ourselves to be the person we are becoming through God's grace, we empty the cross of its transformative power to forgive, heal, and overcome the world.

To have a faith so as to believe that Christ died for our sins, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day, is to discover the freedom Christ has won for us on the cross to grasp at what we once thought were only straws, but which now has become the striving for a future which is in no way bound by our past. While it might be true that people don't change, the truth of the Cross is that there is *no* change that grace cannot bring if we will only allow such grace into our lives and embrace that grace for ourselves. We are what we are becoming. This is the Good News which we have received, in which we stand, and through which we are being saved. Amen.