

This Is Who I Am

November 16, 2008

Year A: Twenty-seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

1 Thes. 5:1-11 (NRSV)

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

There was a little old lady, who every morning stepped onto her front porch, raised her arms to the sky, and shouted: "PRAISE THE 'LORD!'"

One day an atheist moved into the house next door. He became irritated at the little old lady. Every morning he'd step onto his front porch after her and yell: "THERE IS NO LORD!"

Time passed with the two of them carrying on this way every day.

One morning, in the middle of winter, the little old lady stepped onto her front porch and shouted: "PRAISE THE LORD! Please Lord, I have no food and I am starving, provide for me, oh Lord!"

The next morning she stepped out onto her porch and there were two huge bags of groceries sitting there. "PRAISE THE LORD!" she cried out. "HE HAS PROVIDED GROCERIES FOR ME!"

The atheist neighbor jumped out of the hedges and shouted: "THERE IS NO LORD; I BOUGHT THOSE GROCERIES!!"

The little old lady threw her arms into the air and shouted: "PRAISE THE LORD! HE HAS PROVIDED ME WITH GROCERIES AND MADE THE DEVIL PAY FOR THEM!"¹

What does it mean to be a Christian? I think we are always looking for that *some thing* that makes us unique, different, set apart. Now I want to put a

¹ Received from sarahjo@gpcom.net. Origin unknown.

word of caution here. I don't want you to think – "oh, pastor's going down this road."

For example have you heard the story of the man who dies and goes to heaven? He meets his guide and his given a prompt tour. First, he is show where the Baptists congregate, next he is shown the Methodists, and so on and so on. They're walking along for while when they come over the hill and the man sees barbed wire, guard dogs, mine fields, whole nine yards. The man says to his guide, "is this heaven? Why is this place here? Am I in hell?"

His guide says, "no, we are still in heaven. But can you keep your voice down. They think they are alone up here."

That illustration is an example of where I am not going! Today I want to talk about our identity. What it means to be a Christian, in particular a Christian in The United Methodist Church, especially what it means to practice our faith as a member of A Church Family that Makes a Difference.

Let me share a story with you. In the book *A Southern Belle Primer*, Marilyn Schwartz writes about the traditions, mysteries, and preparation that go into becoming a true Southern belle. One quality that every Southern belle must possess, according to Ms. Schwartz, is **SPARKLE**: that mixture of poise and vivaciousness that draws everyone's eyes and ears to her. One belle from Alabama commented that she learned to sparkle in dance class. At the tender age of six, she was chosen to be a dancing snowflake in her dance studio's production. Her teacher insisted that all the snowflakes must throw their shoulders back and project confidence. As this woman recalled, "If you drooped, all you could hope for is to be a puddle." She had never forgotten that lesson, and still threw her shoulders back when she entered a room. As she said, "Once you've been a snowflake, you will never again settle for being a puddle."²

It was June 23rd, 1963 when President John F. Kennedy stood at the Berlin wall. In a message that would ring around the world, he said, "Two thousand years ago the proudest boast was 'CIVIS ROMANUS SUM.'" (I am a citizen of Rome.) "Today" he went on, "in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is 'ICH BIN EIN BERLINER!'" President Kennedy was stating our nation's firm resolve that we would not forsake the peoples of Eastern Europe.³

Our scripture for today really goes beyond those immortal words from President Kennedy. It really is not that impressive to say, "I am a citizen of Rome." Or I am a Berliner. It really is not that impressive to say I am a Nebraskan or I am a Rotarian or I am an Eagle fan. This scripture in just a few short verses tells us that the impressive thing we can say is "I am a follower of Jesus Christ. I am a child of light."

⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober;

A child of light – what does this mean? Again we come back to this question about meaning. What does it mean to identify ourselves as a child of

² "Children of the Light." *Dynamic Preaching*. 1999.

³ *Ibid.*

light – literally, a child of God? Let's examine the issue of light. Light allows us to see. Light represents warmth. Light also provides power through solar energy. We need light to grow our plants. And we certainly learned this summer that light is usually the time when crime, like break-ins, does not occur. Light makes you feel safe.

What about God's connection with light. Listen to just a few passages here. When God created the universe, God first filled it with light (Gen. 1: 3).

God sent a pillar of fire by night to give light to the Hebrew people as they wandered in the wilderness.

In Psalm 27.1, the writer calls the Lord "my light and my salvation."

Psalm 119.105 says, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."

John 1.4-5 says, "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. . . ."⁴

This is just a sampling. There are many more scriptures just like these. The Bible is saying we are unique. We are different. We are set apart because we are children of light.

One of my favorite images about the John Wesley's theology is on his discussion about perfection. I mentioned to you before that Wesley had a unique perspective on perfection. He did not talk about perfect as in the case of something flawless, something that can not be improved upon. No, perfection was the way he described the Garden of Eden. It was a great place but it certainly was not flawless. You don't find a crafty serpent in a flawless environment; and what about a tree where you are not allowed to eat its fruit. When I think of a perfect place I can eat any thing. For Wesley, perfection has rules. There are boundaries in this state. And here is the most important thing, in perfection we find the *imago dei*. We find the image of God. When I hear Paul describe us as the child of light I think of that image of the *imago dei* – the image of God.

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? You see your image reflected back at you. Now what if we had the ability to look into a mirror and see our whole life's journey. If we were to look into that image would we see the image of God – the *imago dei*? In this mirror is it a child of light?

The story is told of a rather self-important man who made it his mission to visit the Sunday school classes in his church each week. Often teachers were a little intimidated by him sitting there in silent judgment. One young woman nervously asked him if he would like to speak a few words to the class. Of course he would like to! So he stood in front of the little ones, and he said, "Why do you suppose people call me a Christian?"

No one answered. Nobody moved.

So he asked again: "Why do you think people call me a Christian?"

Silence! Blank stares.

"Come on!" he said. "Somebody can give me an answer! Why do people call me a Christian?"

And finally one small hand worked its way hesitantly above a young head. He pointed expectantly toward the girl.

⁴ *Ibid.*

"Why do you suppose people call me a Christian?" he asked her.

"Maybe," she said with a tremor in her voice, "because they don't really know you?"⁵

Do people know us as Christians? Are we able to project this identity through our actions, with our talk, even by the way we present ourselves? This passage really makes us think about what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be a part of A Church Family that Makes a Difference, what it means to so personally identify with this mission that it entirely defines who we are.

In 1799 the famous Prussian explorer and scientist Baron Von Humboldt discovered a potent drug called curare.

On an expedition into the jungles of Venezuela, he watched an Indian hunter bring down a large animal with a single shot from his bow and arrow. The arrow had been poisoned with curare, a potion with two curious properties from the jungle plants.

Curare injected into the bloodstream, as it was when hunting animals, was deadly. It immobilized the body, attacked the vital organs, and caused death almost instantaneously.

Humboldt discovered the second property of curare in a more dramatic fashion. He became sick, and a native witch doctor forced Humboldt to drink some curare that had been diluted with water. Terrified that he was going to die, Humboldt was surprised to find that after drinking the curare, he felt significantly better. You see Curare, when it was diluted and taken orally, he discovered, could have a positive medicinal value without causing any damage to vital organs.

The key to curare's impact lies principally in the way it is taken into the human body. Injected into the bloodstream, it's a deadly killer. Ingested orally, it's a soothing muscle relaxant.⁶

Identifying with our mission to be A Church Family that Makes a Difference is like this story. We dilute the mission, not take it seriously, only half-heartedly follow our core values and it's pretty harmless. It also doesn't do anything. But if we identify with the mission of the church that it changes our whole being then it does some thing – it makes a difference in the world.

You see Paul here in this letter is making distinctions. He is saying that as children of light we are unique, we are different, we are set apart.

Now back to Wesley. There is something else he says about this process toward perfection. After the Fall – where Adam and Even were kicked out of the Garden – our desire, Wesley says, is always to get back to that state of perfection. Now you may say that this is impossible, but lets give it over to God. God's got a way and Wesley calls that grace. Grace – love, unconditional forgiveness, no matter what – we all get it, we all receive it. If Wesley was alive today he would say it's a no brainer. God just loves us so much that the gift is just there. But here's the kicker – when we receive this grace we must respond to it. That is the key to our identity.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Rice. 32.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Let's say you receive a gift of \$100,000 from a relative. You didn't earn it. You certainly weren't expecting it but you received it. Now, what you are going to do with it? Go to Las Vegas and try to gamble it for more. Buy that red sports car you've always wanted. Or maybe Merle can get those sky box seats at Memorial Stadium. Or do you use this gift to pay off some debt, invest a little, give some to the church, donate some to the college to help out needy student. It is the response to this gift of God's grace and love and forgiveness that identifies us as Christians.

⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

A physician told this story about her four-year-old daughter. On the way to preschool, the doctor had left her stethoscope on the car seat, and her little girl picked it up and began playing with it. "Be still, my heart," thought the physician. "My daughter wants to follow in my footsteps!"

Then the child spoke into the instrument: "Welcome to McDonald's. May I take your order?"⁷

We are following in Christ's footsteps. This is how we identify ourselves. We are someone willing to make a difference in the world. Look in that mirror and see the *imago dei* staring back. Be a part of something larger. Be a part of A Church Family that focuses on changing lives. And more importantly respond to this gift of grace. God loves you and me so much that we get this gift. It is our light and our response is to be that one in the mirror.

There was once a college student who was struggling in many areas of his life. He spent a great deal of his time feeling angry and frustrated. When he could stand it no longer, he went to the dim and seldom-used chapel on campus. He paced up and down the aisles, slapping the back of the empty pews. He yelled, he cried, and he raged at God.

"God you created the world. . . what could you possibly have been thinking? Look at the problems people face. Look at the pain, suffering, and hunger. Look at the neglect, the waste, the abuse. Everywhere I look, I see messed-up people, hurting people, lonely people!" The young man ranted and raved on and on.

Finally, exhausted, he sat in the front pew and looked hopelessly at the cross. Its tarnished surface reflected the dusty sunlight filtering in through the stained glass windows. "It's all such a mess! This world you created is nothing but a terrible mess! Why even I could make a world better than this one!"

And then the young man heard a voice in the silence of that dusty chapel that made his eyes open wide and his jaw drop.

⁷ *Dynamic Preaching.*

The voice said: "And that is exactly what I want you to do."⁸
Folks, look in the mirror, see the image of God, that child of light reflecting right back and let's go make a difference in this world. Amen.

⁸ Wayne Rice. *More HOT Illustrations for Youth Talks: 100 MORE attention-getting stories, parables, & anecdotes.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse. 1995.) 174.