

Remembering Who We Are  
I Corinthians 1:1-9, 2 Corinthians 13:11

Back when I was starting out in the ministry, I had occasion to umpire a youth baseball game. Controversial play, involving interference, I called the batter out, correctly, mind you, and out from the dugout came the coach, his face beet red. The coach. John Mitchell. Reverend John Mitchell. Methodist minister John Mitchell. My golfing buddy John Mitchell. And he didst begin to rant.

Eric, how could you call him out? He then suggested that I look through my glasses once in a while, or perhaps get them changed. He went on. If I had had an egg with me, I would have fried it on his forehead. Instead, I said, "Look at yourself. John Mitchell. Christian. Pastor.."

At that he stopped, shook his head, and said. You're right. I'm sorry. It's just that your call was so bad it made me forget.

Folks, this is one reason we gather every Sunday, this Lord's Day, this Day in which we celebrate again and again that Jesus is risen from the dead. We gather to remember who we are. People called by Jesus Christ to be his body, his eyes, his ears, his hands, his heart, in the world today.

Because it is easy to forget. Time was, half a century ago, that merely to live in America helped us to remember who we are. Stores were closed on Sunday, because it is the Lord's Day. Prayers were prayed before school, and in the name of Jesus Christ. No one ever thought what a Jewish kid or a Muslim kid might think about that; it was our culture. In mill towns all over the South, a new plant

manager would come to town and he would be asked, "What church will you join?" Never, "Will you join a church." Of course he would. It was expected.

The downside, of course to the typical church of the fifties was that it was culture more than Christ that seemed to define the church's mission. Stuff like race relations and feeding the hungry were not at the forefront. Women had their roles defined, not by God's calling, but rather by their society.

But now, to be Christian is less and less popular in our society. Society has moved on to other Gods, to entertainment and material stuff and preoccupation with self, as the defining values of life.

Which makes it all the more important that we remember who we

are. We no longer can count on the society, on the schools and media to do our work for us. We are in a culture that no longer exalts the Christian faith. If you don't believe me, just watch network or cable TV for a night or two.

But this shouldn't discourage us, because this is exactly how the church began. It was a minority movement, making its way in a culture that believed in other Gods, namely the gods of Rome itself. But it made its way, because the church always remembered who it was.

And so it was in Corinth. Paul wrote many letters to Corinth, two of which are preserved and our now Scripture. He was sometimes affirming of them, sometimes he lashed out at them, but he always loved them. He knew that they were up against it. Corinth was a

decadent seaport city in Greece, and some of its ways would be shocking to us today. It was a sort of Las Vegas of the ancient world. And yet, against all of that, the people of Christ made their way. Not always perfectly to be sure, but they lived out their faith. Because they remembered who they were.

As we look at this introduction to I Corinthians, it might seem to be an everyday sort of beginning to a letter. But Paul uses words and concepts that get to the very heart of remembering who we are.

He begins, Paul, called to be an apostle. And at the end of the introduction to the letter, he tells the folks, "God is faithful, by him you were called into the fellowship of his son, Jesus Christ." I have to tell you that I'm a little uncomfortable when someone asks me about my calling to be a pastor, especially if one says, "It's a special

calling.” For you see, it is not so much a special calling as it is a particular calling.

For you see, everybody who is a Christian is called by God. It’s just that some callings are more defined than others. Paul’s calling was defined: he was to be an apostle, one who is sent to tell. And my calling is to be pastor. But Paul’s calling and my calling is no more important than your calling, no more special. It’s just more precisely defined.

And in some ways, I have it easier than you, because I get to live out my calling within the church, within the body of Christ itself. You have to live out your calling in the workplace, where to be Christian isn’t always so honored.

At the same time, you and I both must be careful to live always, as the people of Christ. Sure we forget sometimes, but we never stop trying. If we truly remember that we are called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ, as Paul says, then we act and decide in certain ways. Christians are trusting of one another, think the best of one another, and when hearing something with which they disagree, are humble enough to think, "well maybe God is offering a new insight here," rather than simply dismiss the argument. People who are truly in fellowship with Christ conform their attitudes to the mind of Christ, rather than demand Christ's blessings upon their own.

It's an awesome calling God has given to you and to me. We are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints. These are Paul's words. Sanctified, saints, holy. It's all the same word. We are set apart, now for special privilege, but for special purpose: to be

witnesses to Jesus Christ, to his mercy, his grace, his boundless love.

And Paul says we are bound together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And this is important to hear. Despite our differences between denominations, what unites us is greater than what divides us. This is what the ecumenical movement is all about. Seeking common ground. Now, you folks who are married might be shocked to find out that there are some married couples who actually have disagreements about some things.

And if two folks disagree, then it is natural that Methodist and Baptists and Catholics will also disagree on stuff, and it is natural that two church members will have different views on certain things. For instance, how to use money raised for mission or what color to

paint a Sunday School room, or what new ministries to begin.

And this is natural. We all hear God's whisper in slightly different ways. And it is in the sharing of our different views, that the church finally begins to discern what the will of God is for that denomination or local fellowship.

But we must do this as holy people. People set apart. People called into fellowship with Christ Jesus.

And something else about what Paul has written, that we are bound together with people who in every place call in the name of the Lord Jesus. We must never forget that it was Jesus himself who commanded his church to go into all the world, making disciples. Yes, we have a calling to fulfill in Beaufort, to reach, to teach, to

touch our community. But at the same time, our vision must extend to the ends of the earth, because that's where Jesus' vision leads us. That's why as a denomination we support this Human Relations Day offering, in Puerto Rico and elsewhere in our nation, because those folks are as much our concern as our neighbors next door. No church or denomination can help every body every where, but we can all help some people in some places.

This is who we are. Called by God. Into fellowship. Into mission. And, Paul writes, it is all through the grace of Jesus Christ. "Grace" means an undeserved gift. It is grace that has saved your soul. It is grace that has called you to be a part of this body of Christ. It was grace that called Paul from a life of persecuting Christians to a life of building up the body of Christ.

It was grace that during these difficult few weeks with my mother in law's illness and death and Susan's surgery, led you simply to tell me you were thinking of us, praying for us

Let us remember who we are. Called by God, into fellowship, into mission. Saved by Jesus Christ. Given the gifts we need to fulfill our calling, Paul writes. And finally, it is the spirit of Christ himself, who gives us the strength to the very end. Whatever you might face in your life, it is Christ himself who is with you. God does not magically take away every problem, but God is right in there with us, helping us to face every problem.

So this is how Paul begins his correspondence with the church at Corinth. And then, on towards the end of II Corinthians, here's how he concludes: "Put things in order, listen to my appeal. Agree with

one another (that is, in the midst of disagreements, remember the agreement, the unity you have in Jesus Christ), live in peace. And then this promise: The God of love and peace will be with you.”

This is our calling. This is our promise. We are the ones called to be saints, called into holy fellowship with one another, called to share Christ’s love to the very ends of the earth. May we never forget who we are. Even when the umpire’s call is wrong.