

JOURNEY TO THE CROSS (5) "The Cross and SELF" -- a sermon by Gary R. Hindman, FPCUC. Scripture: John 13:1-5; 12-14; 34-35.

Text: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God..." --John 13:3

Bruce Larson relates the touching story of a father whose 17-year-old son died in an auto accident. On the day of his birth the father had written him a letter to be opened on his 18th birthday--a date he would now never celebrate.

"(My dear son), there are so many things I should like to say to you today--bits of advice and words of suggestion for the life that awaits you. Suffice it to say that you and your wonderful mother have made me the happiest man on earth!

"You and I will be entering into a father/son relationship, difficult sometimes to say the least! I, too, had a father; and I know that I was a rascal on more than one occasion--and knowing that you will be a 'chip off the old block', I predict the same for you. And on the other hand, sometimes, I'll be a bit overbearing and somewhat of a problem to you; but do please bear with me. I know how wonderful your mother is--she'll be a referee deluxe and ever do her best to make our home (the best it can be). No matter what comes in the course of the years, might this passage from the parable of the prodigal son, where the father speaks to his elder son, ever govern and guide and guard that relationship between us where he said, 'My son, you and I are always together' (Luke 15:31). Always together in life and death, let us be."

It's a great idea to write your child a letter at their birth--and in the light of his son's tragic death, this note will be a treasured moment to this grieving father. Though I never received such a letter from my father, I am much indebted to him. But recently, as I was rummaging through a Bible I used to read years ago I discovered, quite by accident, a little note written to me by my mother while I was in college. It was a simple message which said, in effect, that my parents were proud to call me their son, were pleased that I was in college and that they would stand by me in any decisions I would make in my life and always have their undying love and support. In this light of my mother's recent death, that note really means a lot to me.

Each of us needs a message, a note, an occasional reminder, and some assurance that our life matters and has meaning. Throughout our lives we find ourselves in the midst of a quest for identity. Times, events and circumstances can augment or frustrate the quest. For most people it is through parents, family and friends, that we get a grip on the mystery of our own identity, but the person of faith knows that this search is inextricably bound up with one's search for God, *for our true identity lies in God.*

In the Bible the essence of this identity-search is bound up in the fact that God knows you the way a parent knows a child. Before you were a thought in your father's head or a seed in your mother's womb, God knew you by name and wrote you a letter. You'll have to fill in many of the blanks on your particular letter, but in part God's letter to you

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says, "Dear John (Jane), there is nobody else like you; nobody with your particular set of genes; nobody with your past or potential experience; nobody who will have your parents, your friends, your influences. You are the one and only you that I have made, and I want you to know how special you are."

Your letter from God is something like the letter God wrote to Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." (Jeremiah 1:5) But sadly many people never read the letter God wrote to them before they were born. Like the youth who died at 17, they are gone before they read the beautiful, moving letter from their Heavenly Parent.

Bruce Larson writes, "It is in finding the letter God wrote to you and to no one else, that you find yourself in all of your unique and mysterious personality. The tragedy of so many people today can be summed up in the phrase, 'I am a wandering generality.' I believe," says Larson, "that it is possible for a person to find God and still not find (one's) self. But I do not believe that you can find yourself truly without finding God."

Lots of people meet God in the Bible and, in meeting God, discover their true identity. Jacob, whose name means supplanter or cheater, met God in the form of a strange mysterious angel who wrestled with him and let him put his past behind and set out into a new, bright future. In his struggle Jacob, the supplanter, became Israel, one who strives with and works along side God. In the burning bush God called Moses by name and this shy, retiring, reticent man of fumbling speech and lack of resolve became the great leader of the Hebrew nation. The voice of God called out, "Samuel, Samuel" and the boy Samuel answered the call saying, "Here I am, your servant is listening." Samuel responded and became a great prophet of the people. Saul, persecutor of the Early Church, met Christ on the Road to Damascus and in time he was to go from being the greatest enemy to the greatest advocate of the Church.

God touches people, calls them by name or a new name, and gives them a whole new identity because God is personal and when we know God and when we know that we are known of God, we are radically changed. Jesus told Nicodemus the change is something like being born anew, born from above, born from God, born again!

All of this provides background for our passage for this morning. Usually when we read these verses we concentrate on the central act that occurred, the washing of disciples' feet by Jesus. But today let us look at the person of Jesus himself. Look at verse three and think of the strength of character and sure sense of identity that Jesus had. "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given him all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose (not in a show of power, not to inflate his ego, not to lift himself at the expense of someone else...but) girded himself with a towel...and began to wash the disciples' feet.

Jesus does not have an identity crisis like so many people today. He knows who he is; he knows "whose" he is. He was a humble child of God, the humble Son of God who lived in close relationship with the Father. I believe if you and I want to win the battle of self-understanding and self-affirmation, if we want to have true inner peace and

fulfillment, the lion's share of the battle is knowing yourself in relation to God.

Look again to Jesus. He knew that his life was in God's hands; he knew that his purposes were aligned to that of the Father; he knew therefore that life has an eternal purpose and that what we do here on earth has deep consequences; he knew that he came from God and that he would go back to God and that all the challenges of the present time are just "the stuff in between"! He felt no need to worry about his status or image. He could as easily wash the feet of his disciples as he could walk on water, bring the dead back to life or make smooth, the raging sea.

In Luke's account of this incident we get added background. Luke records that on that particular night none of the disciples wanted to lower themselves to washing others' feet and that they had just been in a dispute over which among them would be regarded as the greatest when they get to heaven. Pathetically, they were starved for power and attention and that must have been a big disappointment to Jesus.

Here's the truth: you and I belong to God. Apart from God we cannot ever know who we really are. But to make matters worse, through sin and separation, the image of God within us has been, from our side of the equation, irreparably damaged. We were created to be in communion with God just as Jesus was in communion with God but in our self-centeredness we turned away. "All we like sheep have gone astray," says Isaiah, and this estrangement is at the root of our identity crisis. Human beings are like modern-day prodigals, living in a pig-pen existence when, all along, a loving Heavenly Father is waiting with open arms to take us back home.

The good news is we do not have to remain in estrangement. Through the cross we now belong to God by "redemption" as well as "creation". The vertical arm of the cross tells us God has come to be with us; the horizontal arm tells us that he is putting his arms around us and restoring us to a right relationship with him, with others, and with ourselves. God knows you personally and by name and God's love is gracious and full of compassion and understanding. Even if you have wandered far from God, it is not too late to turn back. Our "Journey to the Cross" can be a journey back to God and therefore back to our selves.

The passage this morning ends with a command. "Love one another as I have loved you." Those words serve to remind us that the relationship with God is not burdensome or heavy. The way of the cross need not be a way of sorrow—Christ took that burden for us and we are left with pure, good news and it is this: he knows your name and he loves you anyway! SO the word for today is to love your self, love others and love God in Jesus Christ whose cross makes it all possible! Amen.