

1st Sunday after Epiphany (January 8, 2012)

Will Your Center Hold?
“Remember Who You Are”

Text: [I Corinthians 1:1-9](#), [Mark 1:9-11](#)

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Here’s a question that confronts us at the beginning of this year, but a question that also confronts us nearly every day in one way or another. Will your center hold? Is there a center of faith that can provide stability in times of confusion and change; a core of conviction that can bind us together when everything around us seems to be pulling us apart? Will your center hold?

We intend to give a positive, practical and biblical answer to that question by focusing on the core values that are at the center of our life in this congregation.

The biblical precedent is in Paul’s letters to the church in Corinth, which was clearly the most confused, conflicted and cantankerous crowd in the New Testament. He announced his purpose in the first chapter, the tenth verse.

“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

John Wesley was in line with Paul when he told the early Methodists:

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may...If your heart is as my heart...give me your hand.” –John Wesley

Our prayer is that we will be united in the same heart, mind and purpose so that we can offer a positive witness to the polarized world around us.

Let’s begin with the day the first President Bush was visiting a nursing home near Washington. He asked an elderly patient, “Do you know who I am?” The patient looked up into the President’s face and said, “No. But if you ask one of the nurses, they can tell you.”

So, who tells you who you are?

There are more than enough ways in which other people try to answer that question for us. In fact, we’re all tempted to do it. We’re tempted to take one fact, one piece of information and hang it around another person’s neck like a neon sign that keeps us from seeing anything else. All too often, we try to stuff people into simplistic little boxes labeled conservative or liberal,

Republican or Democrat, Gator or Seminole, black or white, gay or straight, rich or poor, young or old.

While any of those facts may be true, none of them tells the whole story of who we are. Instead, they are the devil's way of separating us from one another so that we miss out on the life God intends for all of us.

That's what was going on in Corinth. Folks were taking up sides with different leaders. Some were saying, "I'm with Paul." Others said, "I'm for Apollo." Some insufferably self-righteous folks were saying, "We're the real Christians. We follow Christ." They were separating people as rich or poor, men or women, single or married, former Jews and former pagans.

Paul opens his letter by reminding them of who they really are as followers of Jesus Christ. First, he addresses the letter **"To the church of God that is in Corinth."**

It caught my attention that he did not address them as citizens of Corinth who were also in the church, but as the Church which happened to be in Corinth. Both things are true; the difference is a matter of priorities.

There's a word there for those of us who live in the most powerful nation on the planet. It's a reminder of how easy it is to get those two parts of our identity out of order, as if our primary identity is as Americans who also happen to be Christians, or, even worse, to create a merger of the two. When the church has fallen for that trick of the devil, the results have nearly always been tragic. It's Paul's reminder that we are the Church of God which lives and serves in Tampa, along with his warning not to get things turned around.

Paul goes on: **"to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus."**

"Sanctify" means "to make holy." It's the way God's grace washes away our past and cleanses us of the sinful stuff that separates us from God and from each other. I love the way an Episcopal priest named Eugene Sutton said that in our baptism we are "washed of all the 'waxy build-up' of labels and titles, to become who we truly are."

Sanctification is the life-long process by which the Spirit of God enables us to become people who really love God with our whole heart, mind and strength and love others as we have been loved by God; people whose lives are constantly being more deeply centered in Jesus Christ.

Which raises the question: Are you more like Jesus today than you were a year ago? Are you more deeply in love with God and do you love people more today than you did in the past? That's what it means to be "sanctified in Christ Jesus."

I suspect that the folks in Corinth were surprised to hear Paul say that they were **“called to be saints.”** Saints? In this crowd? You’ve got to be kidding! One look at the church in Corinth and you can forget the idea of “saints” being perfect Christians, who never make mistakes, never disagree and are never disagreeable.

“Called to be saints” is not so much the description of where we are, as it is to destination toward which we are going. Wherever we have been and whatever we have done, by the grace of God we are headed in a new direction, called to be saints, people who are becoming more and more like Jesus Christ.

Finally, Paul says we make this journey **“together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”**

We cannot be Christians on our own and we don’t have to. In our baptism we promise to serve Jesus as our Lord **“in union with the church, which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races.”** The only exception is in the New Testament being exceptionally committed to Jesus Christ.

Paul says that’s who you really are. And that’s what we celebrate in the sacrament of baptism.

We remember today that moment when Jesus came up from the water of baptism and heard a voice from heaven say, “You are my Son, the beloved.” Throughout the gospel, there were plenty of people who tried to label Jesus with other identities: teacher, rabbi, rebel, troublemaker, Messiah, or king. This story is at the beginning of the gospel to say that *this* is who Jesus really is – the beloved Son of God. And that’s what God says to each one of us in our baptism.

When we say, “Remember your baptism and be thankful,” we are not saying, “Remember an event in the past.” We are saying, “Remember that you are a baptized disciple of Jesus Christ. You are a child of God.” Regardless of the labels the world wants to stick on you or the tiny boxes into which people try to squeeze you, remember who you really are.

Remember that you are the Church of God that is in Tampa.

Remember that you are being sanctified in Christ Jesus, being cleansed, made whole by the love and grace of God.

Remember that you are called to be saints. You are headed in the direction of becoming more and more like Jesus.

And remember that you are not alone. You are in this together with people everywhere who follow Jesus Christ. That’s who you really are.

We've been seeing a lot of the British royal family these days. A few years ago "The Wall Street Journal" told the story of the day when Queen Elizabeth was walking her corgis around the village of Sandringham. A villager looked at her and said, "You look just like the Queen!" The Queen replied, "How very reassuring."

And today, as we gather around the waters of baptism, may we know just how reassuring it is to hear God say, "You are my son, my daughter. That's who you really are."