

The Heart of our Identity

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I had a sermon planned on this text – an interesting text, don't you think, for a church struggling to pledge its budget. The text has to do with whether or not Paul should be paid for being an apostle. Whether it was his right to ask for such support. Fascinating text for us to ponder given our struggle to pledge our budget – and what gets cut when we can't pledge it is salary cost of living increases, program resources, and money for justice and mission work. I did a lot of thinking about Paul's words – while I was emailing, calling, visiting with a number of you to ask you to make a pledge – or to increase your pledge.

I want to bring you some good news. As of about 3pm on Friday, we met our pledge goal – the 85% pledge to budget ratio – that was required to go into 2006 with the budget we approved in November. I am proud that we have done this. I am grateful to you for going the extra mile, for making the effort to get there. Four weeks ago – in my sermon on January 8, I told you we were \$50,000 short of that goal. And that about 50 people had not pledged, according to my records. I also told you that I believed our budget was a mission plan for our work as a church – that there was no fluff in it, there was no extra put in with no purpose behind it. No, this was our vision in these line items of ministry and dollars. And I believed we could do – that it was within our reach to do – and not just the 85% - but that we could pledge the full budget and move forward with confidence.

I have thought a lot this past month about where we are. I have been here going on 10 years. I have watched us go through a lot. We have taken on a spirit that has carried us a long way. We wanted to be a light on the hillside of Piney Mountain in order to be a beacon of hope to people who needed to know there was a faith community that would do justice work as an expression of our faith. We wanted to have room for education classes that could have the space to be creative, to spread out and learn the Biblical story with art and music and dance and storytelling. Where there was room for others to join us. We wanted to have room for people to join us in worship. We wanted to have space we could offer to groups in the community who needed a place to meet – people who were, like us, trying to do the work of justice on small budgets and little resources. We wanted to offer Room in the Inn as we have since its inception here in Asheville in the year 2000. We wanted all of this.

But why did we want it? What good does any of it do? What difference does any of it make? Does it really matter that we have a Sunday School for our children to learn the stories of our ancestors? Does it make any difference that we come together each week to worship – to sing hymns, to pray, to share celebrations and concerns, to hear a text read

and preached on. Does it matter? What would it matter if we didn't exist – would our lives be any different?

That's what I thought about this past couple of weeks. And that's what I talked with some of you about. Because I realized it really does matter to me. We did not work this hard to get a new building to have to put on the brakes now and limp into a new year. I hated the very thought of that. It felt like a compromise to our long hoped for vision. It felt like we had quit before we ever had the chance to really get going.

So today, we celebrate this good news. Yeah for us! We have given ourselves the possibility to see what God still wants to do through us. Just like that core group of people who refused to shut our doors and sell the church about 12 years ago, we too have now expressed our desire with some real effort – we believe God has more to do with us.

I will talk about all of this more this afternoon – because I am really excited about what we can do now – what we have given ourselves the possibility of doing.

But for this morning, I want to say just a brief word about Paul's letter, the point Paul is making, to the church at Corinth. There are two examples he gives – I have already mentioned the point about his getting paid for being an apostle. The second has to do with what food to eat – and in particular, could Paul and other Christians eat food that had been consecrated to idols. It was a question about differences – and mainly, differences between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Neither of those issues is of huge importance to us today. But what is important is to see how Paul dealt with the issues. It is particularly of interest since he was accused of being wishy – washy – eating one thing with one group of people, and something else with another group. They accused him of playing it both ways – of not having any guiding principle. Sounds like the accusations some have at the United Church of Christ – you believe a lot of things, which means you really don't believe anything. You've heard this before.

With the budget a go for us now, I am pleased to start looking forward to some sabbatical time this summer to read and explore with other ministers what it means to be a community held together by faith, but for there to be no specifics that are essential beyond the belief that our faith is in God as lived through the life and actions of Jesus, and we are held together in community by our commitment to live in his ways.

Our purpose is to live the gospel. The gospel is the main reality of our lives. Our faith is the heart of our identity. The church is not another non profit that we support in some way. It is the core place where we are fed, where we work together, where we pray together, where we take on the gospel story and try to make the love of God real in our world today. We are formed by the Christian story – as it has been given to us in the Biblical text, and as we know it from the experiences of our own lives. Yesterday I say the Chronicles of Narnia – I hope you will take the time to see it. It is a delightful film. The story has to do with four children going through a wardrobe into a mystical land. I

won't give it away, except that there are so many parallels to the Christian story that you will find yourself thinking about all sorts of things. But at the end of the film, the four children come back to reality, through the wardrobe – and the youngest child has an encounter with the wise professor who owns the home they are in. She has returned to the wardrobe, in the hopes of traveling to Narnia again, and he says something like – you can't get there that same way again. You just have to keep your eyes open for the next opportunity – and be ready when it comes.

I love that. We can't relive the story of old just the way it was. Everything has changed. But we are called to live our own story, using the light of life that we see in the old story, knowing that the power of God in our ancestors is the power of God still in us today.

We have been looking for our opportunity, and it is here now. But we almost missed it these past few weeks because we were not ready to make it count. We were too cautious. We were holding back. We were not sure what was most important to us. And some of us are still not sure. I have to admit, I waver sometimes. Sometimes I wonder – is God just a figment of my imagination. Is this thing called church just a fantasy trip we are on? But then I remember. I remember the times when the church gave me hope and life by telling me the story. And by inviting me to live the story. I look around at you, and I know I need you. I know the power we have to make a difference in our world.

Fred Craddock tells the story of a young mother once coming to him and asking him to baptize her young child. He was pleased to say yes, and began to look for a time when they could do it in worship. But he quickly discovered that this woman could not commit to any Sunday because there was always a conflict – a soccer game, a trip, a family gathering. Finally the woman asked – can't you just do the baptism sometime during the week. We can do that. But Fred said no. Because she was missing the significance of the sacrament. She did not understand what it means to become Christian – a people living in the ways of Jesus. Baptism did not have anything to do with identity for her, only a ritual that she wanted her child to have.

The question we have been struggling with as a congregation is – who are we? What is most important to us? What role does the gospel have in our lives? How are we shaped and formed by our naming ourselves children of God, followers of Christ, Christian? How are we looking for God to break into our lives again and take us to some place we never intended to go?

A lot of people don't like Paul – for a lot of reasons. He is largely misunderstood I think. I too have not liked to read him, because of what I felt was sexist attitudes and an old understanding of being Christian. But I think we have to look at his words more closely. He annoys and disturbs the early church – and you and me – with his intense effort to live the gospel life. In the words of one writer, “He repeatedly nudges the comfortable accommodations we have made with the surrounding culture.” (p. 139, Texts for Preaching, Year B). He does not let us rest easy with the gospel – as if our living this way

is just an option to consider. For Paul the gospel life is the heart of our identity. It comes first, and it shapes everything we do. Again, in the words of Charles Cousar, “the gospel is not intended to be heard and enjoyed; it is to be lived and preached. (p. 139)

Paul refuses to let the church at Corinth get off easy with their sloppy practices or lazy attitudes. He refuses to accept from them a “this is how we have always done it” attitude. He calls them to think in all situations. To pray earnestly. To follow where God leads – even if it is to a table with Gentiles who eat different foods. What matters is the gospel.

I have let you off easy in the past by not inviting and challenging you more to give your time and money to support what you say you want to live fully in your life. I have felt the need in these past few weeks to not let you off the hook. If this is the faith you live out of, if this is the story that gives you meaning, then by God – and with God’s help – give of your lives to help that story be real in our world. We are called to help bring about God’s beloved community here on earth – let us not back away from that one step. Let us decide if indeed it is the heart of our identity – and if it is, let’s live that way.

My words are a challenge to me as much as they are to you. We are in this together. We need each other.

We have stepped up to the plate. We have pledged our goal. But we have not yet pledged our budget, and we have only begun to step into our new lives as a community together. I ask each of us again – whatever the amount may be, give a faithful pledge to the church. And then add some more. And give not only your money, but your time, your love, your energy, your hopes and dreams. We have only begun. There are 148 visitors on our visitors list – not counting children – who have been visiting in the last 3 months. People are coming. I assume it is because they too are looking for something in life – for a deeper meaning, for a community to share the journey with. We have more visitors now than we had members when I first came 10 years ago. I think there is still more life for us to live. Thank God for the opportunity to make our church count.

It all comes down to where our hearts are. What is at the heart of our identity? And how much does it really matter?

Amen.