

Remember who you are.”

January 11, 2004

Have you ever heard those words before? When I was a teenager ... headed out on a date or going on a trip when my rather weak judgment at that point in time would be sorely tested ... sometimes my parents would say something to that effect.

Remember who you are. Remember what we have taught you about right and wrong. Remember that your family loves you. Remember.

Some young people these days may have never heard that phrase. Some do not know what it is to have a sense of right and wrong ... a sense of love and being settled. They ... like so many of us ... cannot remember who they are because they are not really sure.

Somewhere along the line, we have muddied the waters when it comes to our identity. We have forgotten who we are.

And so it comes as no surprise that we don't know how to act or feel and we allow ourselves to be defined by the situation.

WHO ARE YOU?

Who are you? It depends upon who is asking the question. Perhaps, at the office, I'm a person who will do anything or say anything to make a sale. Perhaps, at home, I'm the one who is expected to provide the meals and clean the house. For the folks on Madison Avenue, I'm a consumer ... a commodity to be prompted. Who I am is defined by what beer I drink or what car I drive.

But, however we define ourselves, we want to be successful. We are intent on being the best. That's why every year when the best colleges fight for football supremacy. That's why young people in war paint and costume are regularly seen running up and down the sidelines at sporting events, index fingers thrust in the air, shouting, "We're number one! We're number one!"

We even have sophisticated computer programs that will supposedly will tell us who's number one. But, as we found out this year, that is not always easy to determine. Determining who we are and where we stand has never been easy. We have to realize that there is more to our identity than rankings and statistics.

THE NUMBER ONE CHURCH

Too often the church has also succumbed to the subtle trap of letting someone else define who we are. There are religious figures and institutions so caught up in the competitive enterprise that being number one is their goal.

Consider the congregation which advertises itself as "the most exciting church in town." And aren't we all envious of those who report the most people out on Sunday morning, or the biggest budget, or the largest youth group?

But, are we really called to be number one? Is this really the mission of the church? I think not.

Whatever we are as a church and as people, it must point beyond ourselves to the One who has named us. Christians confess not "we are number one." Christians confess,

"God in Christ is number one." It is this confession which defines who we are and what we believe.

THE MULTITUDES AND JOHN THE BAPTIST

John the Baptist was an impressive figure -- not necessarily attractive with his strange dress and diet, but impressive nevertheless. When he appeared at the Jordan River Mark says:

"And there went out to him all the country of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem." That's a high level of visibility -- a lot of folks! "He baptized multitudes," reports Luke. That must have looked good on his yearly statistical report.

We have to fill ours out this week. Instead of putting down a certain number of members this year, wouldn't it be great fun to just write in "multitudes?"

But fascinating the multitudes is no sign of authenticity. Unfortunately recent history is replete with examples of those who attracted many followers and yet, in the end proved to be false prophets.

But, John was a true prophet. John did not let the seeming success of his ministry divert him from his true mission.

John lived in an age when expectations were high. It was an age when God's people were desperate for some sign of hope. Many believed that the God of Israel was going to free them from Roman rule through the leadership of a Messiah.

They dreamed of a free Jerusalem and a return to the glory days of David and Solomon. The appearance of multitudes in the desert aroused these hopes to a fevered pitch. They wondered if this strange man preaching in the desert could be the one for whom they longed. They began to say what they thought.

"Even though he is hard on us, perhaps John is the Messiah," they began to say. And all the more they paid attention to him, followed him, hung on his every word.

Had John been an opportunist, a lesser man, he might have had his head turned by this adulation. He could have said to himself, "Well, if everybody says I'm marvelous, who am I not to believe it? Maybe I'm God's chosen one after all."

What a temptation! But, John did not succumb to that temptation. He knew who he was, and he was not the Messiah.

JOHN NOT NUMBER ONE

Jesus would later say to his disciples, "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets."

John understood that as well. John knew that doing God's will often involved sacrifice and the true meaning of life did not appear on that year's statistical report. John knew that the glory was not his -- he was the announcer -- the Messiah was coming on the stage later.

"I am not even worthy to untie his shoes," John said. "Don't think too highly of me. I don't want you to remember me. I want you to see the Messiah, the Christ, the one God is sending to rescue you."

"I baptize you with water," he continued, "but mine is just a physical symbolic act. All the water in the Jordan River can't save you. But one is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The real baptism, conversion, salvation, hope is not in me; it is in Jesus."

RESISTING THE CULTURE

Too often the church is just another expression of what we believe as a society and not the true messenger of the gospel that she is called to be. From the very beginning the church has had to fight against those who would give us a name that is not our own.

Church history is replete with sad examples of what happens when the church adopts the world's agenda as her own. We led Crusades against people of another faith, we supported the Inquisition and blessed countless institutions that were the very antithesis of what it meant to be a follower of Christ. History should warn us that we should be suspicious of our motives even when we use the name of Christ.

But, down through the ages we also see that there has always been a remnant who were unwilling to bow before the powers of the world. There was always a faithful few who were willing to reform the church and society according to the Word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

We need to count ourselves among that faithful few. We need to resist the temptation to find salvation in the common wisdom of our time and instead look to our true and ancient heritage. We need to remember who we are and whose we are.

We are able to resist because God has named us. God begins a relationship with people by telling them who they are. It's the process which we call baptism.

Who are you? You are one who has been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. You are baptized. In other words, you are a child of God.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BAPTIZED?

Trouble is ... we sometimes forget what that means. But, it's very, very important to remember. What, exactly, does it mean to be baptized?

It means that we do not have to answer the "who am I" question in the way that the world answers it. Yes, we are people who function in a certain job. Yes, we may be parents or grandparents. Yes, we may live in a certain neighborhood or drive a certain car. But, none of these things really say who we are.

In the final analysis, success does not depend upon being number one. Success depends upon looking to the right One. Success depends upon following the call of Jesus rather than our own call.

John still bids us to look beyond all others to the salvation that is in Jesus alone. Baptism teaches us that who we are is determined by one who is above us and beyond us and yet at the same time it is also determined by one who is with us in every way ... every day.

WHY WAS JESUS BAPTIZED?

Scholars have been puzzled for a long time as to why Jesus was baptized. You see, the baptism of Jesus presents a problem. If Jesus was without sin (as the Scriptures clearly teach), then why did he submit himself to John for baptism.

Actually, Luke seems to soft peddle the baptism of Jesus ... preferring to emphasize the miraculous things that happened after the baptism instead of what happened before. Yet, the question still remains why did he do it?

There are a number of different possibilities, but I would like to lift up just one this morning. In the baptism of Jesus, we see how God in Christ identifies with humanity and understands the hurt of sin.

Jesus was tempted in every way that we are. The sinless one who left the glory of heaven to be with us... who was sacrificed for us ... that we might be saved is also one of us. In my opinion, the baptism of Jesus is yet another way of talking about the message of Christmas about how Jesus is ... Emanuel God with us.

HIS BAPTISM AND OURS

I believe that there's a connection between his baptism and ours. I believe that in our baptism Jesus tells us who we are ... just as long ago he was told by the Heavenly Voice after his baptism.

Do you remember what our Scripture said about what happened to Jesus after he was baptized? I can spot at least three significant things.

The heavens were opened. The Holy Spirit descended upon him in "bodily form like a dove." And finally, there was a voice from heaven which said, "You are my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

We know that for a long time that Jesus had a sense that he was special. Even at the tender young age of twelve, he told his parents that he needed to be about his heavenly Father's business.

But, now he had been baptized in more ways than one. He was baptized with water, but he was also baptized with a heavenly promise.

Jesus did not have a delusion of grandeur. Jesus was ... according to the heavenly voice God's Son the Beloved.

And, although the baptism of Jesus was certainly unique, there is a sense in which our baptism is related to his.

The Bible teaches us that through the redemptive ministry of Jesus, we too are God's adopted sons and daughters.

This is who we are.
We are God's children.

CHRISTENING

Sometimes people will ask me if "christening" and baptism are the same thing. Actually, "christening" is a part of the ceremony of baptism. The connection was easier to see in the early church. In those days, the parents did not name the child. The child was named by the church often in memory of some favorite saint.

People wouldn't put up with that today ... would they? We want to name our children after favorite family members ... or even after ourselves. That's okay.

But, the ancient practice of having the church name a child still teaches us an important theological lesson. In the final analysis, it is God who names us when we are baptized.

It is God who gives us the name above all names, "Christian."

Who am I?

I am a Christian.

I am a follower of Jesus Christ.

I am a child of God.

WE'RE ALL CHRISTIANS

Several years ago I went out to play golf while I was on vacation in north Florida. Since I was playing alone, I asked a couple of guys on the first tee if I could join them for a round. They were a bit hesitant at first but graciously agreed to let me tag along.

I told them that I was a minister, and their faces lit up immediately. Both of my playing companions were Pentecostal ministers in the area.

One said, "Good. We're all Christians." Now I've enjoyed many rounds of golf with people who are not Christians. That's not a requirement.

But, on the other hand, in this case, there was a bonding which took place on the basis of our common faith. We were all Christians. We all had the same "last name" so to speak. It was like discovering some long lost kin folks.

It occurred to me that this is what baptism is all about. It is discovering and rediscovering who we are.

We who have trusted Christ are related.

We are all Christians.

That is not something to be stated in a ho-hum, matter of fact way. Our common name is a cause for great rejoicing and blessed fellowship. Because God was in Christ, we know that God is not only took pleasure in Jesus God also takes pleasure in us as well.

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Some folks have suggested lately that the search for identity must be a lifelong process ... that we must (as one commentator put it) "root around in the dark recesses of our own egos" to discover who we really are.

But, that is not necessary. We don't have to prove ourselves. Who we are is not dependent upon what we do. Our worth is not dependent upon being number one.

Who we really are is given to us at our baptism. For some of us, that occurred not long after our birth. For some of us, it occurred later in life after a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

But, in both cases, baptism was something that was done to us.

We were passive recipients of the water. We were baptized as children ... sons and daughters of the covenant ... in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Our identity is a gracious gift.

WE BELONG TO GOD

I love the opening words of our newest confessional statement, "In life and in death we belong to God."

We belong to God ... not to ourselves ... not to somebody's idea of the good life not to our job ... or even to our family. We belong to God.

Those words are for me like two gracious arms giving me a big squeeze.

All of us want to be a part of something important ... something good. How about being a part of the Creator of the Universe ... Lord of heaven and earth?

Now that really is being number one!

Do you believe that? Do you believe that you belong to God ... no matter where you are ... no matter what has happened to you?

It's true. You have been baptized. You have been given a new, gracious name.

ROYALTY

Not only that, you are also royalty. Isn't that a lovely thought? Wouldn't it be interesting to find out that you are an heir to the throne?

Many years ago I watched a silly movie called "King Ralph" in which a rather loud, boisterous American was found to be the next in line for the throne of England.

He made a mess of things, of course, because he had no idea how a king should act. But, as he continued in his role of Monarch, he began to see how important it was to "act the part." He actually began to live up to his new name.

The same can be true for us as well. Oh, we won't always live up to the name of Christian. We will sin. We will live less righteously than we should.

But, our unrighteousness will trouble us precisely because we know that we were made for something better. The name of Christian will always influence our actions. Everything we do will be judged by the question, "Is that the Christian thing to do?"

FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING

Remember when you were out on your own after your parents gave you all those warnings about remembering who you were and you began to forget? You began to do things that were on the "border" or perhaps even did some things that were wrong.

Do you remember what you thought? I don't know about you, but I can remember the admonition ringing through my head ... seared into my brain by a guilty conscience, "Remember who you are!!" Our sin, our unrighteousness troubles us because we remember who we are. We know that we were made for something better.

As one preacher put it,
"The Christian message is not that we should try hard to 'act like somebody.' The Christian message is simply, 'We are somebody.'" When we realize that, we want to act like it.

KUNTA KINTE AND THE MUSIC

In Alex Haley's book, *Roots*, there is a memorable scene the night the slave, Kunta Kinte, drove his master to a ball at a big plantation house. Kunta Kinte heard the music from inside the house, music from the white folk's dance. He parked the buggy and settled down to wait out the long night of his master's revelry.

But, while he sat in the buggy, he heard music coming from the slaves' quarters, the little cabin behind the big house. It was different music, music with a different rhythm. He felt his legs carrying him down the path toward those cabins.

There he found a man playing African music, the music he remembered hearing as a child ... the music he had almost forgotten. Kunta Kinte found that the man was from his section of Africa. They talked excitedly, in his native language, of home and all the things of home.

That night, after returning from the dance, Kunta Kinte went home changed. He lay upon the dirt floor of his little cabin and wept, weeping in sadness that he had almost forgotten, weeping in joy that he had remembered.

The terrifying, degrading experience of slavery had almost obliterated his memory of who he was. But, the music had helped him remember.

That's a good parable of why all of us need to remember our baptism. It is so easy for us in the midst of the struggles of life to forget who we are and whose we are.

But, the words of baptism remind us "Child of the covenant. I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Father and of the Holy Spirit." We are God's. God is our guardian who will guide and keep us every step of the way.

Remember your baptism and be thankful for who you are.

Amen.