

August 11, 2024
Genesis 32:24-30
Acts 9:1-9;
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
“Remember Who You Are”
Michael Stanfield

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God



Before you is the beautiful 1868 painting by Gustave Doré entitled “The Triumph of Christianity over Paganism.” Of course, we take this for granted now, but in the time of Jesus and the Apostle Paul, Paganism was king.

Paul’s message therefore to the fledgling church at Ephesus is: “You live in a Pagan culture: Remember Who You Are as Christians.”

“Forming a new community in Christ is hard (says Paul). So here is what I recommend: ‘be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you... be imitators of God..., and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...’



Transitions are hard. And the transition from Jew to Christian, and especially Greek Pagan to Christian during the time of Paul was perhaps one of the hardest.

Yes, transitions *are* hard – especially those in which you are supposed to be happy because it marks some great accomplishment or some new and wonderful course in your life – like Finishing high school and going off to college; getting your first real adult job; getting married; having a baby; having adult children move out on their own; retiring; or leaving your current job by choice to venture out on a different course;

As one might expect, such milestone events bring excitement and joy. However, these events can, and often do, also bring with them the nagging question: “Why am I so sad when I should be happy?”

Well, with regard to the human psyche, it is an absolute that order to grab hold of something new – no matter how valuable it might be to you – you have to loosen your grip on something of nearly equal value that your heart still holds onto tightly.



-Attending college means letting go of familiar places and routines that provided more comfort than one ever imagined.



-Starting a first job as an adult means that you now dance to the beat of someone else's drummer. Suddenly, time that you took for granted is now no longer your own. You have to let go of the idea that the better portion of your waking hours belong to you.



-Committing long term in a loving relationship with another through marriage means letting go of some deeply held loyalties to parents and family of origin as one realigns those loyalties around the needs of one's new life partner.



-Having a baby means saying goodbye to the luxury of thinking about yourself first – at least for the foreseeable future– not to mention a good night's sleep – in favor of the incredibly powerful *new* love that is suddenly at the center your life – a love who demands your attention 24-7.



-Retiring means letting go of authority and power, or colleagues who though once were like family, you now barely see, in favor of redefining your priorities and activities around a completely different axis which requires a realigning of friendships and connections.



-Getting a new job – particularly if it is the switch of professions as I am doing, means letting go of the comfort of the old one, including colleagues and great friends that you will sorely miss –

in order to develop new skills and alliances as you take on something that is either more in line with your vocational needs, wants and desires, or, is just better for your family.

These transitions can be wrought with unexpected emotional upheaval – and in a culture that generally offers one little aid. In places where one is expected to be back at work and clear-headed within a week or two of the death of a parent or a spouse, good luck getting much sympathy for the kinds of grief that occur at what are supposed to be a *positive* milestone event...



But, regardless of the transition, it creates the necessity for returning again and again and again to the questions – who am I, and who is God calling me to be?

This question of identity is prevalent in both the passages that Bill read this morning.



On the one hand you have Jacob who faces the transition of moving *away* from the land of his Uncle Laban – *toward* the land of his brother Esau.



On the other hand, you have the Apostle Paul, who faces the transition from being a Jewish Pharisee to God-appointed founding father of a new religion.



Note how hard it is for both. Though he has been looking forward, for nearly 20 years, to the day when he would finally be out from under the thumb of his Uncle Laban, Jacob is filled with fear and dread. The reason is that leaving Laban means facing his jilted brother Esau. Thus, Jacob literally wrestles with his identity all night long until, at daybreak, he finds it anew as he is renamed Israel.

And then there's Paul. He has this wonderful, unequivocal encounter with the risen Christ himself; yet he is struck blind for three days – the same amount of time Christ was dead in the tomb. He is completely dependent on his new-found community of fellow Christians – the very people who, only moments ago, he was trying to kill.

There is great pain involved in moving from Jacob the supplanter to Israel, God's chosen. And it's as humbling as can be moving from Saul, the Jewish Pharisee to Paul, Christ's lead Apostle and ambassador to the gentiles.



Transitions: They involve a time of liminality – a sense of limbo – a sense of standing in the threshold of who you were yesterday and who you are getting ready to be tomorrow. And being called to new adventures, even when they are for the absolute best, usually are accompanied by a set of unforeseen but painful difficulties. We would therefore do well at such junctures to spend some time in prayer, reflection and soul-searching.

But be warned. There are parts of our culture that judge the expression of such ambivalence as some kind of failing – a willful lack of gratitude. In fact, if it were up to the collective wisdom of popular culture, we would deny any and all sense of loss and just focus on the gift of the new life ahead.

You know, there are many churches who do that. They focus only on the new life in Christ giving short shrift to the fact that that new life only comes about by way of suffering and death.

Yes, the reality is that fully embracing the gifts ahead is not possible until the pain of losses associated with the past is fully acknowledged, felt, and sufficiently honored.



Ironically, the real truth is that, in times of transition, especially *positive* transition, pain and sadness are powerful signs of gratitude – gratitude we now have for a precious part of our lives that the journey now dictates we leave forever behind.



In order to embrace the new life ahead, it is no less necessary for us to experience the grief and death of the passing of a significant portion of life than it was for the disciples after Christ's death.

In order to experience the power of the resurrection, they had to live through the experience of the suffering and death of Christ on the cross. The resurrection means nothing without the cross.

In the same way, the joy of committing to a life course as an adult is impossible if one does not experience the pain and loss of one's childhood cocoon.

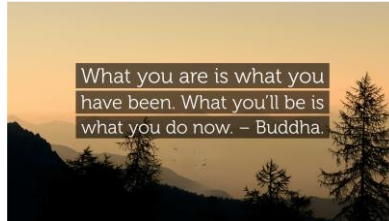
If one does not learn to face the darkness of loss that is woven into what it means to be human and alive, making room for the pain of grief in life, one's true identity remains unknown, and one's growth becomes stunted in a kind of eternal adolescence.



The biblical antidote is the full acknowledgement of loss coupled with the grappling with identity.

But we are a pain averse culture and grief is painful. Grief sets us on our heels. Being angry is a lot easier, which is why we see so much of it today. Yet grief denied is loss that ultimately has no meaning.

Who have I been because I loved and was loved by this person, or in my case my congregation – that is you – and more importantly, who will I be when I am no longer yours and you are no longer mine and I am now doing this wholly other thing?



As the Buddha put it, “What you are is what you have been. What you’ll be is what you do now.”

What does all this have to say about how God is present and who God is calling me to be? Who is God calling you to be? How do those two things fit together?

When we are unable to face this head-on, we can find ourselves in rebellion against life itself.

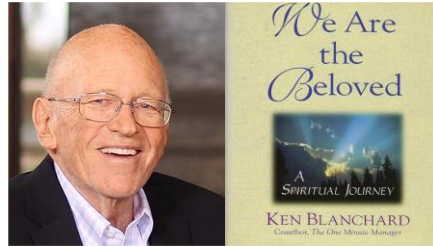


My great friend, Judd Shaw, who you see here was a fellow pastor in Knoxville, TN. I say was because he died in a car crash a couple years back at this time of year. It was a terrible tragedy as he had just retired only two months earlier from a life dedicated completely to the church. I was overcome with shock and grief. Carl and Grace and Janet were all quick to buy plane tickets to come here to be with me.

My first thought after completely losing it when they told me they were doing this, was that they all have commitments elsewhere. They don’t need to be spending extra money and time with their blubbing husband and Dad.

But Janet told me that they were doing this to honor Judd and the love he and I shared. And I knew she was right. They were coming to sit shiva, as it were – that is to sit with me in my pain and grief – to honor it together with me.

Our initial reaction to loss is so often like mine was – rebellion against the grief – rebellion against the loss – with either denial or anger.



In his book, “We are Beloved: The Spiritual Journey”, Ken Blanchard tells a story that beautifully illustrates this experience of rebellion/acceptance that is part of becoming who we were meant to be:

“A prince was kidnapped at birth from his father’s palace. Raised in poverty in a wretched village, he rebelled against the poverty of his life. Unaware of his own pedigree, he yet constructed careful plans for becoming king of the land. Through a series of schemes and battles, he won the throne and imprisoned the king – not knowing that the king was actually his father.

But from then on, he was anxious, hostile. Having taken the kingdom by force, he lived in dreaded fear of other ambitious men. It was day-to-day misery. Meanwhile, the prince’s mother had long ago left the palace walls in an unending search for her son. Finally, one day she returns to the palace. She recognizes her son instantly.

Thus, the prince learns his true identity. He is a king by birthright. He sees the folly of trying to regain by force what is already his inheritance. He releases his father and returns the scepter to his hand. But the father, now overjoyed, gives it right back. And now with his kingly consciousness, having remembered who he really was, there is no fear, no threat, only quiet dominion. Ken Blanchard, *We Are the Beloved: A Spiritual Journey* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 53. With thanks to Landrum Leavell, Phoenix, Ariz.



Re-remembering is like that. Our rebellion against the loss is recognized for what it is, and acceptance of the loss and its accompanying grief is made possible. That transition can be shorter like Paul’s but for most of us it is more like Jacob – measured in months or years.



I remember my first day of college. My parents spent all day helping me to procure a refrigerator, matching bedspreads, posters for the walls, a carpet for the floor, a fan for the window, a hotplate, and a cupboard full of food. Then the time came. There was simply nothing left to do. In tears my mother hugged me and walked quickly out; and then my father grabbed me by the shoulders, looked me in the eye said,

Remember
who *you* are

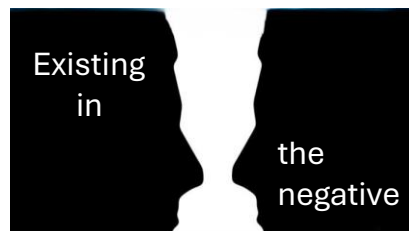
“Remember Who You Are” and then he too was gone.

I knew exactly what he meant. He and my mother loved me, and they were letting me go; now their expectation was that I remember the lessons in Christian character they had taught me. If I did that, all would be well.

Remember Who You Are.



The great Trappist monk, Thomas Merton said much the same with greater eloquence. He wrote, “Re-membering who we are in Christ, allows us to grieve appropriately, let go of what no longer *is* and grasp the new life ahead. If we cannot make this move we become incapable of existing except as a ‘no,’ which we fling in the face of everything. This ‘no’ to everything serves as our pitiful ‘yes’ to ourselves – a makeshift identity which is nothing. Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (New York: Image Books, 1968), 224.



Think about that for a moment. The inability to grieve, remember who I am, and to accept the gift of who I am be-coming in Christ, means that the only way I really know how to exist is in the negative. And knowing what you are not, *is* not the same *at all* as knowing who you are.

To live as a ‘no’ means to harbor a constant inner need to have something to be against, something to compare to. In fact, one feels one *must* be against, one *must* be making comparisons in order to feel alive. Again, one only has to look no further than our culture to see this tendency everywhere.



Grieving, Re-mem-bering, and accepting who we are called to be are all crucial to living a life based on God’s “yes” in Christ rather than our “no”.

Remember
who *you* are

People of Trinity – remember who *you* are and all will be well. And who are you? You are a people who, no matter what, always, and I mean, always make love your aim. This doesn’t mean that you don’t get sideways with each other and with your pastor now and again. But at your core, your commitment is and always has been to be loving first. Being right has always come second. I hope you know how rare that is these days.

And the beautiful thing is that when you know that, when you know you are part of a community like that, it gives you the freedom to express opinions that you feel very strong about without fear. Because, at the end of the day, whether things go exactly like you want on every issue, you always know that at your core *you* love these people, and *they* love you.

Over the years, there have been people who have come, stayed a little while, gotten mad over a pet issue and have left. From my perspective, they did so because they lifted their interpretation of the scriptures and the truth about God over the central guiding principal of Jesus: Love. “Love the lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” Well, that guiding principle is in your DNA.

So, when things get tough over the next couple of years, you just remember *that* and I guarantee you, all will be well.

Let us pray.

Gracious and most merciful God, we give you thanks that at every transition point in our lives, you are there to name us and to claim us – indeed to re-mem-ber us to you. Make us open to that glorious fact in the name of Christ.

