

## **Life Verses: Identity**

I Corinthians 15:1-11

### **Do Your Best**

I was pretty blessed for a lot of reasons growing up. I have always been thankful for that. I did not have to face what so many had to face. I pray for kids all the time who are trying to make do in less than desirable circumstances.

One of the real blessings of growing up in the Grieb household was there wasn't a lot of pressure to overachieve. "Just do your best and be satisfied with that," mom and dad would say.

If a grade was ever sub-par the question would come, "Did you do your best" and if you did, that seemed to suffice.

So I lived with the notion of consistently trying to do my best as a good way to go about life. I figured I could do a whole lot worse.

Doing my best became just sort of ingrained.

Of course, doing your best can be a bit elusive. It's sometimes hard to know just what your horizons are. "Could I have done more?" can leave us wondering.

I have known way too many young people who even after they had given it their best were absolutely devastated when things didn't work out. Of course, you and I have also known those who didn't even try to give their best.

Casey Kasem used to say at the end of his American Top-40 radio program, "Keep your feet on the ground and keep reaching for the stars." That's not a bad way to live.

More sublimely, Robert Browning shares, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for."

The interesting thing about doing your best is that it can leave you dependent upon your own energy, instead of the wonderworking power of God to transform.

As my life in Christ began to take shape, I began to re-think things. "Instead of just doing my best," I began to think in terms of "doing my best with what God had given me."

As the Psalmist affirms, I firmly believe that I am "wonderfully and beautifully made." (Psalm 139:14) I believe that about everybody.

Thinking in terms of "doing my best with what God had given me," took some of the pressure off. I didn't have to be anything other than God had created me to be.

The pressure of unrealized horizons didn't seem so daunting.

I always enjoyed playing basketball and really wasn't that bad at it. It dawned on me though pretty early that I wasn't going to be a starting point guard in the NBA. That was okay. I could still do my best with what God had given me.

### **Only by God's Grace**

And then I ran into verse that revolutionized my life. This is a sermon series based on life verses, after all.

As I said last week during this sermon series I want you to get to know me and how God has formed me spiritually. I also want you to be thinking about your own life verses.

Nestled in a great passage that champions the resurrection of our Lord, Paul writes in I Corinthians 15 about being "untimely born." He figures he didn't deserve Christ appearing to him like he did.

He certainly didn't feel like he deserved his position within the church, particularly since he had been a chief persecutor of the church.

On face value Paul considered himself "unfit" for the role of Apostle. God's grace changed all that.

*"By the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain." (I Corinthians 15:10)*

God's grace made all the difference for Paul. It was the very thing that released him from all his striving, as misguided as that had become, so he could become the very person God had in mind all along.

As with Paul, some of the same things have taken place in my life. Instead of striving to do my best all the time I have attempted to rest in the grace of God and let him do his thing.

God's grace has made all the difference in my life. It's only by the grace of God that I am what I am. In a word, my identity is defined by what God has done, is doing, and continues to do in my life.

I don't know who I'd be or what I'd be doing if it were not for the grace of God in my life.

I do know this. I'd be a mess with Jesus.

You remember Popeye the sailor man. He used to sing, "I'm Popeye the Sailor Man. I am what I am and that's all that I am."

For me, that song takes a different bent, "I am what I am in Christ, and that's all that I am."

## Identity

Identity is so important.

Moses in asking God “who shall I say sent me?” replies, “Tell them **I am** sent you.” The very name of God was wrapped up in his identity.

Jesus was clear about his own identity. He was the one who said, “I am

- the bread of life
- the light of the world
- the sheep gate
- the Good Shepherd
- the way, the truth and the life
- the resurrection and the life.”

“Who am I?” is an age old question and is not easily answered. Some spend their whole lives trying to figure out who they are. Some never get there.

We can be identified by family, title, position, political party, even sports team.

Believe me, Cheryl and I lived for nine years at the epicenter of Big Blue Nation, don't tell me that people's identities aren't wrapped up in the teams they pull for.

For years, Cheryl and I weren't Cheryl and Tom we were Brian and John's mom and dad. That's the way many knew us, particularly their friends.

For those who have given themselves to Christ, identity becomes very much a matter of who we are in him.

When we remember who we are and, even more importantly, whose we are, life is just different.

This is wonderfully illustrated in the movie, *The Lion King*.

You remember that Simba the lion cub is separated from all that reminds him of his identity. He is away from home, away from his family, and away from his responsibilities in the world. In fact, Simba forsakes his true identity as a lion, much less the king of the lions.

In his absence, the kingdom is overrun by forces of evil. It becomes a dark and wounded place.

The baboon, Rafiki finds Simba in the jungle and calls him back to his identity. He leads Simba to a lake and as Simba stares into the water he sees the face of his father. In that moment he recognizes his father within himself, hears his father speak, and is immediately transformed.

He understands his true identity as the Lion King and sees the responsibility that comes along with that. Simba is able to overcome the forces of evil that had taken hold and brings light and healing back to his kingdom.

God is able to bring that sort of transformation in our lives if our identities are vested in him. After all, we are “children of God.” This is who we are and we need to live as such.

### **Making All Things New**

While I wholeheartedly affirm that “by the grace of God I am what I am,” I realize that God is not yet finished.

*The Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada* in our *United Methodist Hymnal* has it this way, “We believe in God: who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the Spirit.”

God is always doing a new thing. He’s not finished with us yet.

We are like clay in the potter’s hands. We would do well to let him do his thing.

Since leaving here some twenty three years ago, I sense that I am a much different person. I hope you notice that. God has continued to work in my life to good effect. There’s no boast in that. It’s all God.

In this regard, I hope all of us are different today than we were yesterday, that we are different this July than we were last July.

God’s every desire is for us to become more and more like Jesus. It rests with you and me to cooperate with him in that.

### **Has He Appeared to You?**

As we noted a few minutes ago, the context of our passage for today has to do with Christ’s resurrection.

Contained there is a long list of those who witnessed with their own two eyes the resurrected Lord.

Paul lifts up Peter and the disciples, not to mention James the brother of Jesus and the rest of the apostles. He even mentions the fact that Jesus appeared to more than 500 believers at one time.

Peter was the one who had denied Jesus three times and yet the Lord appeared to him as if to release him for the error of his ways.

God’s was not finished with Peter. He would go on to be “the rock” upon which the church would be built.

Peter emerged from his encounter with the resurrected Lord with a brand new identity. Instead of one who denied the Lord, he was the one who would lift up name of Jesus to all who would listen.

Has the risen Lord appeared to you? And if so, how has your identity changed?

You might feel, like Paul, as “one untimely born.” God’s grace is there for you.

There’s no time like the present to accept that grace. I’d love to talk with you more about that. Nothing would thrill me more.

### **We Are What We Eat**

They say, “You are what you eat.” If that’s the case then I’m “a deep fried chicken sandwich” from Chick fil a.

We are what we eat when comes to this meal.

Our very identity as Christians is wrapped up in these common elements of bread and cup.

We remember all God has done in Jesus Christ and realize that what is offered here helps us become the sort of people God wants us to be.

And think of it, ever bit of this is a free gift. Come to the table. Encounter the Lord. Leave knowing full well who you are and, more importantly, whose you are.

May God bless us all.