

I

Remember who you are.

As many of you know, my wife Amy and I are the proud parents of three sons, and as our children are growing older, keep catching myself uttering phrases and admonitions to them that are nearly identical to the ones my parents said to me when I was their age.

And one of those admonitions I find myself saying to them is this: “Remember who you are.”

II

When you stop and think about it, at face value, that’s a silly thing to say to anyone, including the three smart, kind, and capable young men who live in our house. Who forgets who they are? That’s the stuff of science fiction or spy thrillers, but short of amnesia, who can forget who they are?

But of course we say these kinds of things to children because we know from our own lived experiences that one of the fundamental questions of human life is both simple and profound – Who am I? And we know from our own lived experiences that the adolescent and young adult years are when that question is often raised over and over and over again. So much of coming of age is figuring out who you are, and what you’re about, and what you’re supposed to be doing here.

But of course, we discover as we age that that question never really goes

away. That question – Who am I – rests deep inside every human heart, whether you’re 9 or 12 or 45 or 105.

That question of identity, of belonging, of purpose, is inside every human being. And that question is also at the heart of our passage today from the Book of Romans.

III

As we mentioned last week, Romans isn’t a book at all, but rather a long letter.

The author of this particular letter was a man named Paul, who, although he wasn’t one of Jesus’ first twelve disciples, nevertheless became the most important preacher, missionary, and church planter of the first century. Of the 27 books that make up the New Testament, about half of them are letters that were either written by or attributed to Paul.

Paul wrote this letter to a small group of Christians living in the city of Rome probably sometime between the years 50 and 70. Paul had never met these women and men, but in the letter he speaks of his plans to travel to Rome and meet them in person at a later date.

Romans was one of the last letters that Paul wrote in his life, and it reflects two decades of his work as a preacher, missionary, and church-planter. Although we live two millennia later and half-a-world away from Paul’s intended audience, his words have been preserved and handed down to us as Scripture, and as such, Paul’s letter to

the Romans is also a letter to you and me. In our passage for today, Paul implores his readers to remember who and whose they are. So listen now for a Word from God from Romans 6:1-11.

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

When I was training for pastoral ministry, we practiced baptism using my

friend Morgan's teddy bear. In our Presbyterian way of being the church, we join with the majority of Christians around the world and throughout history who practice the baptism of infants and children, as well as adults. In most Presbyterian worship spaces, you won't find a separate baptistry or a deep pool, because in most Presbyterian churches, the sacrament of baptism is usually administered by sprinkling water taken from a basin or bowl called a baptismal font.

When we were practicing with Morgan's teddy bear, the notion that in baptism we were somehow symbolically putting something to death never crossed my mind.

But that is expressly the argument that Paul is making to the Romans – that when we were baptized into Christ Jesus, something died. The old self was crucified with Christ, along with our captivity to sin.

For Paul, sin isn't just a set of thou shalts and thou shalt nots. For Paul, sin is more than a set of binary choices. For Paul, sin has an almost cosmic power, a power that holds dominion over every human life and every human institution, from the days of the first humans until now.

And so because sin is so pervasive and so cosmic and so deeply embedded within the human condition, there is only one way to break its power over us. It has to be put to death. In his own words, Paul writes, So you must

consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

IV

My friend, remember who you are. You are God's beloved, and there's nowhere God wouldn't go to find you. You are God's beloved, and there's nothing God wouldn't do to be with you. You are God's beloved, and there's nothing God wouldn't give for you, including God's very self in Jesus Christ.

And remember who you are not. You are not the sum of your achievements or assets. Nor are you the sum of your mistakes and failures.

The late Frederick Buechner tells a story about a boy who grew up as the child of a single mother in the Appalachian Mountains during the throes of the Great Depression. He never knew his father – all through his early years, it was just he and his mother. As he grew older, he began to notice the stares and hear the whispers as he walked through town. Once a group of older kids decided to pick on him and tease him about not having a father, and they called him a word that he did not know. When got home and asked his mother about the meaning of the word, she broke down in tears, and he never asked her about it again.

One Sunday evening, he happened to be passing by a small church. It was warm, the doors and

windows were open, and something about the sound of the singing drew him in. He slipped into the back pew, hoping nobody would notice him. And he sat and closed his eyes and just listened to the singing, feeling a deep ache down in his chest.

The song came to a close, and the preacher stepped into the pulpit. And then the preacher's eyes fell upon the boy, and the preacher said, "Young man, whose boy are you?"

And the boy felt the tears well in his eyes, and the lump rose in his throat. And he hung his head in shame.

But again, the preacher asked, "I said whose boy are you?"

And the boy stammered, "I don't know."

And the preacher said, "I know who you are. You, boy, are the child of the Most High God, made in God's very own image, and you bear a striking resemblance to your Father. Welcome home, son."

My friend, you belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to any human institution, not to any family or tribe, not even to yourself, but you belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to your faithful Savior Jesus Christ. In baptism, all the markers of identity the world might have once tried to place on you are washed away, or, as Paul would say, the old self is crucified, so that you might be raised to a new life in Christ Jesus.

And so, my friend, if you've been baptized, remember your baptism! Remember who and whose you are!

But maybe, my friend, you've never been baptized, or you're not sure whether you have. If that's you, let's have some conversation. As you may have noticed, different branches of the family tree of the worldwide church have arrived at different understandings about what this sacrament means. For us, baptism is not the culmination of a journey to faith in Jesus Christ, but rather a marker of its beginning. So come on in, the water is fine.

V

Remember who you are, friends. Remember who you are, church. You are not just another non-profit organization trying to do some good service in the community. You are not a social club. You are not a museum.

You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it. You are the hands and feet of Christ in and for the world. You are ambassadors in this broken and hurting world for the kingdom of God, proclaiming a word of peace to a world desperately in need of it.

So for heavens' sake, remember who you are.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the

glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.