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To Whom You Belong

Luke 15: 14 – 19; Genesis 1: 27

Ah, the places we have been!

Down rivers, up mountains, across ski slopes, some of you even sailing through the orange netting that defines the boundaries of where you are supposed to ski – not exactly infinity, but definitely beyond!

We've been tossed by roller coasters, careened by bumper cars and conveyed down chutes of water.

We've swum across lakes to islands that needed exploration.

We've bested blizzards, weathered monsoons, caught fish, played with rattlesnakes, and built salamander pools.

Oddly enough, you are a group that few people have wanted to chaperone,

so in my roles as parent and pastor, and, accompanied by Mrs. Kremer,

as camping camp hosts, I have come to know you at your best and at your worst

– have come to know you in your strengths -- and in your weaknesses.

I have watched you over the course of your lifetimes grow from toddlers to the cusp of adulthood --

and it has been my rich privilege to do so.

Since you can be a slippery group to corral and keep tabs on, we've over the years

assigned you swim partners, ski buddies, tent mates and hiking groups.

We've stood and watched as amusement centers, water parks and ball fields stamped you with inky tattoos, so that you as well as the park personnel would be reminded, "These kids belong to us."

Occasionally, you have given evidence that you knew you were growing up as part of a community of faith.

I think, for example, of huddling together with some of you on a basketball court late in a game

on the morning after one of our church members, the mother of one of your teammates,

had been involved in a life-threatening accident and who at that moment lay in an intensive care unit.

As you broke huddle, vying for a chance to play for the city championship,

almost as a prayer, one of you said in earnest innocence,

"Let's do this for Mrs. Godsey!" And then you did.

Now, thanks be to God, it is time to send you away to become somebody else's problem.

I'm sure ya'll are as in a big a hurry to get away from us as we are for you to be going away.

That is the way it is supposed to be.

The only way for you to become the adults you are supposed to be is to step away from this community

of faith and from the shadow of your family and carve your own way in the world as you deem best.

Most of you are pretty sure that you are adults already. Well and good: it is time now to test that theory by throwing yourselves into the air and beating your wings against the cold winds of reality.

That's the way you grow.

No doubt you think you are ready to set out on your own.

Even so, I remind you that Jesus told of a young man who was so sure of himself that he went to his father

in the disrespectful insouciance of youth went to his father and said, "Give me what's coming to me!

Give me my inheritance! I'm ready for it."

The father, somewhat stupidly in the eyes of some, granted the young man's request,

knowing as he did that some people reach a stage in life where words seem to teach them nothing,

and they can only learn some lessons the hard way.

Some of you will only learn certain valuable lessons the hard way, too. My only prayer is

that you will survive those lessons to have opportunity to apply them in new crossroads and crises.

But as you leave this place, my young friends, I want you to know something in the marrow of your bones. I want to remind you to whom you belong. You belong to the living God.

You bear the image of your Creator. You are made in God's likeness.

Male and female, you are the latest generation of young adults to be fashioned in God's image.

You will never far stray in life from your true destiny if you can retain this truth uppermost in your mind.

I know that you are a very talented crew. You leave here with ambitions of blossoming into great athletes, great teachers, great coaches and great lawyers, great physicians, great bankers and great businesspeople.

Yet those wonderful professional aspirations are not enough.

Equally important, you want to be liked. You want to be accepted by your peers.

You want to be loved. No, you want to be "loved," embraced by a special someone.

Such ambitions are rooted in the fabric of what it means to be human.

Naturally, you will look for mentors and friends who embody for you what it means to be a professional and social success.

You will find yourself, consciously or no, patterning yourself after such people.

Again, that is the way we are made. Such is the way we learn.

But, I remind you, in choosing human paradigms upon which to pattern your life, find those people whose lives keep before your eyes the image of God in which you made.

Even the apostle Paul wrote the same advice to his friends in Corinth.

"Some of you," he observed, "have fashioned yourself after me, while some of you have fashioned yourself after Peter, and some of you have fashioned yourself after Apollos. But you don't belong to any of us.

You belong to Christ." You belong to Christ!

You do well to ponder that odd statement that Jesus made to his friends and his enemies when he said, "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and render unto God that which is God's."

People thought he was talking politics, when really he was making a profound point about theology.

Jesus was saying, render unto the Roman government (or any government)

the coins that bear the stamp of that government. But your lives, your soul, your very beings, are coined in the image of the living God. So render unto God that which is God's.

You will grow up to be called by many names, "Doctor, Coach, Teacher, Boss, the Honorable whatever" – but the most important response you are called to give is to answer when Christ summons you to service.

You are his sheep and the sheep of his pasture. When Christ calls you, never fear to respond,

"Here am I. Send me." Never be afraid to be identified as the sheep of the Good Shepherd.

For truly you belong to his flock.

That young man in Jesus' story was so sure that he was able to handle his freedom that he took off for the far country. Are you sure that you are ready to handle your freedom?

Jesus said that in the far country the young man lost everything he had in riotous living.

I'll leave you to define riotous living in your own mind, but to me, a riot is a welter of confusion.

This young man lost everything that had been given to him, everything he treasured, because he lived a life of confusion, losing sight of what he valued.

I have seen many people disfigure themselves and stray from what they were meant to be

because they lost hold of themselves living a confused life. They lost their way living confused values.

They forgot to whom they belonged.

As some of you know, last week I received a phone call that no parent wants to hear.

One of my sons called to say, "Dad, I've been in a wreck."

He was okay, just a bit banged up, but he admitted that almost his first thought was,

“My mom will never trust me again.” Well, that’s a natural fear. Think about that young man who had lost everything he valued in riotous living. He had made stupid choices. He was guilty of dumb decisions. He had lost everything! But then Jesus said, “He came to himself.” Finally he remembered in whose image he was made. Even so, he thought, “My father, will never trust me again.” He had made so many stupid decisions, had done so many foolish things, that though he resolved to return to his father’s house, he only wanted to be hired back as a slave. But the father ran to him, hugged him, kissed him, killed the fatted calf for him, threw him the mother of all parties and gave him his own signature ring. Why? Because the father wanted the boy to know that no matter what he has done, he could not erase the father’s mark of love upon him. No matter what the boy had done, he still belonged to the father’s household, he would always be his son.

Hold to this truth, my young friends, for it will tide you through many a dark hour. All of you will fail at some point. Occasionally, you will make some really stupid choices. Certainly, all of you will fall short of the glory of God and blur in your own mind the image of your life as belonging to Christ. You will occasionally forget that you belong within Christ’s flock. Hold to this: you do not do good or evil in a vacuum. You live in a community of faith. There is not a failure, not a mistake, you can make with your life that someone in this room hasn’t already made before you. There is no far country into which you can stray from God that some of us haven’t already visited. I can only hope that you learn what we have learned in our own prodigal journeys: you can always find your way home. *You can always find your way home!* There is nothing you can do to erase the mark of the God who loves you. There is nothing you can do to make your heavenly Father stop loving you. You can blur your vision of God’s mark upon you from time to time, but beyond your actions, the love and grace of God always takes priority.

Of course, I wish I could tell you that all of the adversity and conflict you will face in life will be as a consequence of your own bad choices. That would not be true. *In fact, much of the adversity that you will face will arise in response to your good choices.* You will find yourself in conflict with evil precisely because of your resolve to embrace high values. Malignant, malicious and scheming people will frustrate you. Circumstances will daunt you. Disappointments will dishearten you. Failures will drain your strength. Dashed hopes will tempt you to give up the belief that you are part of a great story, that you belong to a great God. All I can urge you to do, all I can beg you to do, in those times of darkness, is hold fast to the truth that truly you bear the mark of great God upon you and even amidst dark times you are called to be children of light. I know that even if you have not read the book, most of you have seen the movies that depict J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Think of the climactic scene late in *The Two Towers* when the weight of carrying the Ring of dark power so infects and overwhelms the mind of Frodo who bears it, that Frodo actually raises his sword to slay his best friend Sam. Sam tries to remind him to whom he belongs, to what great cause he serves. He says, “It’s me. It’s your Sam. Don’t you know your Sam?” The darkness lifts from Frodo’s eyes, and he realizes what he has almost done, and he collapses in weariness and says, “I can’t do this Sam.” Sam then offers him this encouragement:

“I know. It’s all wrong. By all rights, we shouldn’t be here. But we are. It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo, the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes, you didn’t want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was before so much bad happened? But in the end it’s only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you, that meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folks in those stories had lots of chances to turn back, only they didn’t. They kept going because they were holding on to something.”

You, my young friends, are old enough to know that you are in a great story that means something, the great, unfolding, eternal story of God, and I hope that you are able to hold fast to this story even as you learn in so doing that God holds fast to you.

You have a role to play in God’s story!

Ponder for a moment those inky tattoos that the amusement parks put upon you.

As you sweated and swam throughout the day, that image may have seen smudged, indistinct, obscure.

But when you walked through the gate, and put your arm under the light, suddenly the image became distinct and clear.

Put your lives under the light of the Christ and allow the mark of God upon you to become clear and distinct. Nourish your relationship with the divine, and the divine will nourish you all of your days.

To tell you the truth, I was driving down a road one day several weeks ago when on an impulse I pulled out my recorder and started dictating this sermon.

I could see each one of your faces so clearly in my mind’s eye that to my surprise and embarrassment, great tears started rolling down my face.

Anybody who passed me on the interstate would have seen this old man weeping as he talked to air.

Yet my tears were tears of joy and pride.

I can see the great mark of God so clearly upon each one of your lives.

As you approach this watershed moment in your lives, my hope and prayer is that you will develop this mark so clearly and distinctly that it becomes the dearest image of your existence.

May you always know, to whom you belong.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

St. John’s Baptist Church

June 8, 2008, Senior Recognition Sunday