

## ***Being Who We Are – By God's Grace***

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, February 7, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 6:1-8; I Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Two images come to my mind when I read today's second lesson, which is a portion of Paul's first letter to the people of the church at Corinth. And both images that come to mind happen to be cartoon characters from my childhood years.

The first character is Underdog. Underdog was a canine superhero who was loved by Sweet Polly Purebred, and who defended the weak against injustice and evil. The opening scene always showed him flying in the air, people pointing upward and saying to each other: "Look in the sky! It's a plane! It's a bird! It's a frog! A frog?" Then you'd hear our hero say, "Not plane, not bird, not even frog. It's just little ol' me..."—at which point he would crash into something and then add—"Underdog." He was terribly clumsy, and in his haste to right wrongs, he didn't much care what collateral damage he did.

So actually it was with a kind of false modesty that he said those words: "Just little ol' me... Underdog." He really wasn't very modest at all. He was quite confident in his superpower abilities.

Now, when I say this image of Underdog comes to mind as I read Paul's words, it isn't because Paul is like Underdog. Quite the contrary. I think Paul has no false modesty at all. I think Paul is incredibly modest, incredibly **honest** about himself—his weaknesses, his failures, his sinfulness. He doesn't feign humility. He is truly humble in the truth-telling about himself. He admits to the Corinthians that he worked hard to persecute Christians, arrested them, imprisoned them, brought them to trial. Paul remembered the wrongs he did against the children of God, the collateral damage done because he thought that persecuting Christians was the right thing to do. And Paul doesn't add, "It's just little ol' me..." No, Paul says gut-wrenching words: *I am the least of all apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*

Just prior to these words, Paul is busy speaking the Good News to the Corinthians, reminding them of the story passed down to them not only by Paul, but by others besides him—the story that Jesus Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, and that on the third day, as scripture says, Jesus was raised from the dead. Paul has just spoken these important words testifying to Christ, and then he goes and basically says, "I'm unfit to be telling you any of this! I'm the last person in the world who should be speaking this story!"

But Paul's honest story about himself, about being unfit to tell others about Jesus, makes the big story of Jesus living and dying and rising for us all the more

compelling. Because maybe it takes a story like Paul's story to help us understand just how great and compassionate and merciful our God really is.

For in this lesson today we are not left simply with Paul's gushing about his evil past, his wrongs, his faithlessness. He also gushes about God's grace in his life. And how he does so makes me think about another cartoon character—Popeye the sailor man. One thing I always remember Popeye saying, as he avenged any wrongs done to his friends, Mr. Wimpy or Olive Oyl, or as he battled bad guy Brutus, was this phrase: "I yam what I yam, and that's all that I yam..." He was not telling us he was a sweet potato. He was saying he was who he was, couldn't be anything **but** who he was, and he was in many ways a rugged individualist, relying solely on himself (and his can of spinach.)

Again, I didn't look at Paul's words today and think he was like Popeye. Quite the contrary. While Paul does say words similar to Popeye's in this letter—*I am what I am*—please note the words prior to and following this phrase. Paul writes: *By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.*

See, Paul is no rugged individualist, relying solely on himself. Rather, he knows that anything that he is, any good news he can speak, any loving deed he can do, is all and only because of the presence of God in his life, which came about through Paul's encounter with Jesus Christ. Paul is who he is now, all and only because God graciously entered Paul's life to help Paul **become** Paul—that singularly wonderful child of God that God intended him to be. And God's grace toward Paul was not in vain, for look what Paul became for us! He became a profound witness for Jesus, our Lord and Savior. He became a writer whose beautiful words still speak to people nearly 2000 years later—words with the power of the Holy Spirit backing them up, moving people both to believe in and then choose to follow Jesus.

Okay, so what do we have here? No false modesty—Paul knows his wrongdoings. And no trying to go it alone—Paul knows he can only truly live when Christ dwells in him and goes on before him. Paul is neither Underdog nor Popeye. Paul is no two-dimensional cartoon character pressed flat on a television screen. Instead, there is a depth to Paul's life, and it is his experience of God's love for him, his experience of God's forgiveness of him, and his experience of God's calling him that makes Paul three-dimensional indeed.

Now, there's a connection between Paul's words and both our Old Testament and Gospel today. In our 1st lesson, Isaiah experiences God's very presence to him in the temple. Like Paul, he senses his own unworthiness to be in that presence. Even so, the Lord God seeks someone to go and speak for him, and I think Isaiah's pretty much the only one in the Temple at the time, so Isaiah, having just been forgiven, says yes, I'll go: *Here I am, send me!* And Isaiah does go, to speak God's word in a turbulent time in Israel's history.

Then Peter in our Gospel story reluctantly obeys Jesus' command to put out the fishing nets one more time—it had been, frankly, an awful night for fishing—but when Peter obeys, he is blessed with nets positively bursting with fish. So now

Peter knows he is in the presence of the Holy, and he knows he doesn't even deserve a moment in that presence. "We're not worthy..." Yet Jesus calls Peter to go be the Peter God intended him to be—go be someone who will follow Jesus, catch other people for Jesus, speak the Good News about Jesus again and again. Peter will do so. Sometimes he will fail miserably. Other times he will be spot-on.

All of which begs the question—if Paul really understood himself to be the "least of all apostles, unfit to be an apostle..." and yet was made an apostle (for God chose Paul to spread his name), and if Isaiah and Peter also felt completely unworthy when they first came into the presence of God, and yet God chose them, forgave them, blessed them, called **them** forth to a new way of being who they were as God's people—what then does this say about us? I mean, shouldn't we understand **ourselves** as "the least" too? Less-than-perfect, "prone to wander" (as an old hymn tells us), creating collateral damage in too many places, and constantly struggling—*struggling*—to be faithful to God while navigating through a complicated world? Is that who you and I are? Is this a moment for truth-telling in our hearts, huh? Not simply, "It's just little ol' me..." but honesty about our own human predicament of sin?

And yet, **also** like Paul, and Isaiah, and Peter, shouldn't we understand ourselves—in spite of our human predicament—as having been graced with the loving presence of God in **our** lives? The Holy come to dwell among us? From his gifts to us in our Baptism to Jesus' promise to be with us whenever two or three are gathered in his name; from a simple meal in which we taste forgiveness to this community where friendship and encouragement and kindness reign—oh, we are surrounded in this place with God. See, you and I are not simply two-dimensional characters, flat and cartoonish and buffoonish. (Though some days we might feel that way.) Nor do you and I have to rely solely on ourselves in this world. (Though some days we might be tempted to do so.) Instead, there can be a rich depth to our daily lives because Jesus Christ has come to be with us. That presence certainly is made known here in worship, but we might just discover it in as surprising a way as Peter did—he discovered God on his fishing boat—yes, we might just discover God where we work or play. We might just discover God right around the bend we're turning or in the next person we meet. And we'll suddenly realize that all along God's been calling us to be who we are—people created for serving him and caring for our world. By God's grace we will be who we will be, and God's grace toward us will not be in vain. **AMEN.**