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February 7, 2010

Owning It

1 Corinthians 15: 1-11

Part of the job as pastor is to meet with couples as they prepare to marry. Now, every pastor works through this pre-marital process differently. For myself, we meet three times. The first time I want them to tell me about their pasts: both their separate pasts and their past together. We talk about what kind of family life they've come from and how that will affect a future marriage. We try to discuss whatever baggage each of them might bring so that they can "own" it. Then, after that session, I give them homework. It is my favorite part. The homework merely consists of 6 or 7 words on a piece of paper. It is a list of the top 6 or 7 things we know couples most often fight about: money, children, work, sex, in-laws, religion. Their homework is to discuss each of these topics with one another and gauge how they are doing in each area. When they come back for the second visit, we will discuss the issues they need "to own."

As we well know, this kind of thinking doesn't just happen when two people are marrying. We talk all the time in our culture about "owning" our shortcomings. We tell ourselves we've got to own that temper of ours or that that person close to us really needs to own their disorganization. We've even gotten pretty open about owning even larger and deeper issues. Perhaps we have learned it from the many 12 Step Programs but we're even pretty open about "owning" our addictions or "owning" our divorce or "owning" our depression or "owning" the abuse of our past.

As much as it seems we've gotten so good at this, it is not a new phenomenon. The Apostle Paul was a master at it as well. Here is a man who is often known for being confident to the point of conceit and yet he is all about "owning" his weaknesses. In his letters, including ours for this morning, he fully admits that he is unworthy because he persecuted the early Church. What that means, in a less tidy way, is that he helped to murder and imprison Christians simply for being Christian. He owns his murderous past. He is famous for his illusive "thorn in his side" that causes him much suffering. He knows he was born too late to miss the main act of Christ's life on earth. The phrase here about being untimely born has a double meaning. It was a terrible put down that people often used about people they found grotesque or deformed. Whether this refers to some physical impairment for Paul or was simply what people who still could neither trust nor stomach his presence chose to label him, he owns the title, as cutting as it is. And, to top it all off, we know from the type of haircut he gets in the book of Acts that he was balding too! Yes, Paul had a lot to "own" in his life. He had misdeeds and darkness that he could not erase and he could not heal.

Here is the difference we find in Paul. We do not find him wallowing in his weaknesses. He has owned them as a part of his life and who he is. He has owned his failings but he does not let them own him. Paul is famous for beginning his writings by announcing that he is a "servant" or a "slave" for Christ. These words are not simply a form of greeting. He means that, in this life, we are all slaves to something. He knows this and he is choosing to be Christ's slave and no one, or nothing, else's. Often we talk about not being a slave to our money or to status or to our ego. And this is important and difficult to do. But, perhaps even more difficult, we cannot be a slave to both Christ and our failings. We can and must own what has gone wrong in our lives and what role we have played. We can and

must own where our weaknesses lie and how we might take detours to divert around them. We can and must do these things but we cannot have them own our lives.

Over and over again in the accounts of our faith we meet men and women who are full of self-doubt and sin and who are still called by God for great work. Isaiah says his lips are too unclean; Jeremiah says he is too young; Gideon is so weak he hides in a hole rather than receive God's calling; Sarah is too old; Mary is too young and single; Peter is too sinful. The list goes on and on of people who had weaknesses they needed to own but who were then called to a greater service; a service where those weaknesses had to take a backseat. In each and every case, when it comes to being a slave to our failures or a slave for Christ, Christ wins every time.

This opening paragraph of our passage today shows Paul passing along a message that he was not blessed enough to receive from Jesus when he was on the earth. It is obviously a set of beliefs, the core of the Christian faith, that dates to probably within a couple of years of Christ's earthly life. It is one of the first examples of a creed we can find: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day...and that he appeared to Peter, then to the twelve...Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

He is sharing with them the faith he bases his life upon; the faith he bets his life upon. It is not a faith that was thrust on him while he was fishing, as it was for Peter and his friends. It is a faith he came too late in time and, though he never knew Christ, he has still met him. It is this way for us as well. We have been given a faith that is not forced upon us while we are fishing. We will not know Christ in that way but it does not mean that we will never meet him. When we meet him he will not force this life of faith upon us but he will demand that we be his and his alone.

What a tremendous gift! No matter our failings we can say, with Paul, I am what I am but, by God's grace, Christ's call to me will not be in vain. I own my past but Christ owns me. Christ meets people still and asks them to go out in his name, no matter what their weakness. The faith and the call are there, even now. The only question we have to face is whether or not we will own it.