

### **The Core Identity of a Church**

If you were introducing two people, you would say something about each person to the other, something that connects them with you and each other. But what would you say to capture the essence of a life? What phrases or ideas or images or life experiences come to mind if you try to capture your own core identity?

"I'm a machine that makes money," I heard a commuter lament. Or you could focus on the roles you play in life—wife, mother, banker—or on the tasks of those roles—bond trader, emotional health and spiritual welfare coordinator, chauffeur to school events.

What if you had to answer for a church—any church—or St. Paul's as a particular church? What is St. Paul's all about? Why does any church exist?

We are having one of our periodic Vision Events between the 9:15 and 11:15 services this Sunday. People will be asked to reflect on and share with others what it was that drew them to St. Paul's, and what has kept them here. They will be invited to imagine a future for St. Paul's. Responses will be tallied and forwarded to the Vestry for action.

But behind these invitations stands a more basic question. What is so vital to St. Paul's that it reveals the point of all we do—our worship, our children's and adult choirs, our youth groups, our outreach efforts, our adult education and Church School programs, our visits to and meals for the homebound and bereaved, our committees for all the tasks that keep the buildings functioning, the grounds beautiful, the records maintained?

What is our core identity—our reason for being—as a parish?

I want to suggest an answer, and invite you to ponder it and let it hover in the background of your reflection as you think and pray about Sunday's Vision Event.

I think the point of any church, and of any Christian's life, is to make Jesus visible. Jesus told Philip that anyone who had seen him had seen God. Of course there was a perfect correlation between them—God the Father and God the Son, Jesus. We limited human beings can never manifest that perfect correspondence. Nor can a church, composed of fallible human beings, make Jesus visible perfectly either.

But I want to suggest that we ought always to be trying to do that, in everything we do. Making Jesus visible—as we construct a Habitat house, as we rehearse an anthem for Sunday worship. As we mentor a Confirmation student or attend Youth Group. As we prepare a meal or teach a Church School rotation. As we receive Communion and pray on Sunday morning. As we polish the altar brass, welcome newcomers, or re-point masonry.

Somehow—you may well ponder how—Jesus should be visible, and, somehow, the intention of making Jesus visible should drive our efforts.

—Rev. Ben Brockman

### **Plots and Narratives**

A couple of weeks ago I was on retreat at the Episcopal monastery of St. John the Evangelist, in Cambridge, Mass., with a small group of clergy. Most of our time was spent, as the monks spend most of every day, in silence. One of our retreat leaders, a monk who had a number of years' experience as a parish priest, invited us to use the silence to recall the time of our ordination—which ranged from three to thirty years ago—and to reflect on our feelings from that time in comparison to our lived experience as parish priests in the time since then.

That was useful, and I commend it to you too as a spiritual exercise for a quiet day. Look back to a significant decision-point in your life—when you entered or left a committed relationship; when you accepted your first adult job; when you decided to go to one college and not another; when you left one church to join another one; when you discovered you were going to have a child; when you learned that you or a loved one had a life-threatening disease; when you committed to one career path and not another. Recall your hopes, fears, feelings, expectations back then, and compare them to what your experience in that situation has worked out to be.

To undertake this exercise—do let me know if you do—is to see yourself as a character in a story. The story line, what has happened in your life, is your narrative. The twists and turns along the way, some predictable, many or even most unpredictable, and the people who have figured in your life, are the plot.

Your story and mine are like any other story, whether it's the story of Abraham Lincoln or Macbeth or The DaVinci Code or Rosa Parks. Well, o.k., maybe your story and mine are a little less exciting than those. Or world-shaking.

But what makes all stories interesting is our capacity and our drive—uniquely and definitively human attributes, I believe—to invest plots and narratives with meaning. Life stories add up to something.

An artist invents plot and shapes narrative, and even the biographer inescapably selects details that give voice to one narrative while silencing another. By the time we come to reflect on them, however, our lives, our plots, are givens. Our story cannot be changed.

But what is open is the meaning we invest our story with. We can see in it flashes of the courage of a Lincoln, the despair of a Macbeth, or the prophetic power of a Rosa Parks. Or the salt of the earth ordinary person who loves God and neighbor, lives a decent life, and savors the gifts of home and hearth and friends and kin and the good earth.

But as our stories reveal the tracings of grace that hint of God and thus invite and strengthen faith, we become believers. For it is the very essence of God to turn narratives into plots, and invest them with meaning.

—Rev. Ben Brockman

## Praying

I wonder how many of our prayers—the ones that come from deep within us—can be reduced to one or two words? Like “Help!” Or “Fix this!”

No magnificently balanced Prayer Book phrases. Even the Lord's Prayer or the Hail Mary, part of the deepest mental landscape of most of us, fall short (actually, long) of our telegraphic need.

When his disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he taught the “Our Father.” Paul taught the church at Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing” (I Thessalonians 5:17).

These two teachings validate our shortest, most earnest prayers. “Help!” and “Fix this!” hallow the divine reality by imploring aid and recognizing the divine will as superior to our own and capable of supplying our needs.

Uttered over and over in times of stress, they can become constant prayers, part of our mental landscape.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Christians cultivate the practice of repeating a slightly longer prayer constantly, until it becomes virtually as automatic as breathing: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”

Prayer is powerful not because it works magic in our environment—that would empower our will to replace God, which would probably render neither justice nor compassion to the driver who just cut you off on I-95—but because it opens us to the operation of grace. Constant prayer makes us constantly available to the transforming influx of grace.

Prayer becomes powerful when—and I believe to the extent that—it grows out of our willingness to be changed by the operation of divine grace more completely into the image of Christ, the image we were created to become. Such prayer allows God to meet our needs, rather than gratify our desires.

In his letter to the church at Colossae, Paul describes what it is like to abide in this prayerful openness to grace:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . . And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17)

What is your prayer right now?

—Rev. Ben Brockman

### **Communion and the Gated Community**

My wife and I vacation occasionally in a beach community secured from the rest of the world by a guardhouse and gate at its entrance. Once you're waved through the change is instantly apparent. Outside, everything is a familiar messy jumble of all sorts and conditions of people and things.

Inside, everything instantly is homogenized and orderly. Nice cars respect the posted speed limit and well groomed people behaving quite correctly emerge from impeccably maintained homes and greet each other with a finely calibrated mixture of warmth and reserve as they make their way to the immaculate beach and golf course.

When I was younger I admired that community's beauty and tranquility. Nowadays I feel beset by its sterility and enjoy escaping from it back into the real world outside.

Yesterday I heard a report of a meeting in a neighboring deanery. Our bishops and clergy and lay deputies to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church gathered to hear clergy and laity express their opinions on matters that will arise at the Convention. According to the priest who presided at the event, nine out of ten opinions had to do with the matter of the Church and sexuality, with opinions predictably divided along progressive and conservative lines.

The meeting ended with Holy Communion, celebrated by the rector of the host parish. He reported that several people from a parish that disagree with our bishop over his approval of a gay bishop remained seated during the celebration of Communion and declined to receive Communion.

I thought about the gated community. Is Communion rightly reserved for People Just Like Us? Is the gate providing access to Communion raised or lowered according to our agreement on points of doctrine, whether large or small?

I can't help feeling a kind of smugness, even self-righteousness, corrupting the act that says, "You must be pure as I define pure before I will share God's table with you," whether an individual or an entire branch of Christendom makes the pronouncement.

Or maybe Communion by its essence not only connects us with God, as best our meager faith and intellect can embrace that Holy One, but also with all the sorts and conditions of humankind who by their very longing for God acknowledge their human frailties, their human kinship, and their Christian unity as they receive the Body and Blood of the One who by his living and dying and rising again began a work of reconciling the whole world to God (II Corinthians 5:19) that the very act of Communion celebrates.

Is it not rather that at God's Communion table we all become one, all the jumble and sorts and conditions of us, because, in St. Paul's words, we eat of the same bread, which is Christ (I Corinthians 10:17)? I am grateful for that lively jumble, and I call it holy.

—Rev. Ben Brockman

### The Attitude of Gratitude

After you get over the expectation that God is a bank into which you put good behavior and draw out good luck. After you get over believing that the spiritual truths God has disclosed to you are exactly the right ones for everyone else. After you come to realize that God is most present when God feels least present. After you come to understand that what God is calling you to do is what is available for you to do right now.

Then the present moment becomes a gift of incalculable value. There is delight in the sheer busy energy of this moment, or the gentle tranquility of that one; or the chaotic confusion of another one. You live in gratitude.

Here's a hymn written by Robert Lowry in 1860. You can see the words and hear the music at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org). It's called, "How Can I Keep from Singing?"

My life flows on in endless song;  
Above earth's lamentation  
I hear the sweet though far off hymn  
That hails a new creation:  
Through all the tumult and the strife  
I hear the music ringing;  
It finds an echo in my soul—  
How can I keep from singing?

What though my joys and comforts die?  
The Lord my Savior liveth;  
What though the darkness gather round!  
Songs in the night He giveth:  
No storm can shake my inmost calm  
While to that refuge clinging;  
Since Christ is Lord of Heav'n and earth,  
How can I keep from singing?

I lift mine eyes; the cloud grows thin;  
I see the blue above it;  
And day by day this pathway smoothes  
Since first I learned to love it:  
The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,  
A fountain ever springing:  
All things are mine since I am His—  
How can I keep from singing?

I can easily test whether I am living in gratitude, in the peace that passes understanding, when I'm caught in traffic on I-95 and I'm late already. If I can remember to name gifts one by one—high among them the gift of the people of St. Paul's, then I'll be singing the new creation, no matter what. Even then.

—Rev. Ben Brockman