

Text: I Corinthians 15: 1-11  
Title: I Am What I Am  
Date: 02.10.19  
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Sam Henry stood in front of me in his underwear.  
His white t-shirt was barely covering his big black belly.  
His drawers were saggy,  
his eyes were blood shot,  
his speech was slurred,  
and his stance was defiant.

I was in my early twenties, serving as the live-in manager in a home for homeless men. It was Roseland Christian Ministries first attempt at responding to the homelessness. We had no idea what we were doing. I lived with anywhere from 4 to 10 men. A year later we opened a shelter that housed 75 men.

On this night Sam Henry stood in front of me drunk and delirious. I didn't know when or where he started drinking, but I came home to find him singing, cooking beans and rice, hollering, and dancing in his underwear. He was a colorful-powerful-Haitian-immigrant who was remarkably delusional. He drove a taxi and loved wine, women, and song. He was passionate about faith and fancied himself to be quite a preacher. Most of the time he was a gentle soul; this wasn't most of the time....

As I tried to get him to bed to sleep it off he bellowed, "I am a man!" Through tears and spittle and the stink of stale malt liquor he slobbered on about being a man.

Against the leveling forces of poverty,  
against the relentless tide of racism,  
against the diminishing of alcohol and mental illness,  
against a young white guy wrestling him to bed,  
against everything that pushed him down,  
he shouted, "I am a man!"

After pushing him into his room I locked the door, slumped to the floor, and listened to him curse and cry out, "I am a man!"

Maybe it was just *en vino veritas* ~ in wine truth. But, I remember it as a picture of the struggle to define self. Sam Henry, in some fundamental way, was screaming into the indifferent winds of this world that he wasn't a nobody,

or a waste,  
or a mistake,  
or a failure,  
or the "n-word."

He was a man, created in the image of God.

Dear friends, the dynamics are endlessly different, but we all struggle in some way with self-definition. We are all trying to figure out who we are in relation to God, family, faith, dreams, place, vocation, health, history, friends, body, politics, belonging, etc. The struggle to understand and define self is a life long journey. Bartenders, pastors, and therapists will tell you that at every age and every stage we are all trying to make sense of who we are....

It's said that all theology is autobiography and Paul's letters are liberally sprinkled with him defining or defending himself. He is often telling and trying to make sense of his own story ~ all of it the light of his experience with God through Jesus Christ. And our text this morning is part of that work at self-definition.

Paul passes on to the Corinthians what was passed on to him; he gives a recounting of the resurrection as the essential core of the gospel, and he details when, in what order, and to whom the resurrected Jesus appeared. But then there's this peculiar line:

*And last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.*

Now. I guess one way to read that line is that Paul believes he was born too late, that his timing was untimely, so he didn't get to see the resurrected Jesus with the other apostles.

But, that reading glosses over the curious, sort of obscure word, that Paul uses to describe himself. What our translation has as "abnormally born" is actually the word for a still born birth, an aborted birth, a birth that usually results in death.

Translators and theologians have twisted themselves into knots trying to make sense of this phrase. It gets translated as:

*one born at the wrong time,  
one untimely born,  
an aborted fetus,  
someone who wasn't born at the right time or in a normal way.*

You get the idea.

There is the possibility that it was a common turn of phrase in Roman political parlance and that it meant someone who was in a role for which they weren't qualified and got there by bribe or favor. They circumvented the normal process and were "abortives."

I'm not sure what to make of it. In some way any of those translations can be made to fit with Paul's sense that he wasn't worthy.

*And last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.  
For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle,  
because I persecuted the church of God....*

But, what's lost in simply making it a matter of timing is the allusion to death. In a world where historians believe that only fifty percent of full-term births reached the age of ten, a premature baby had little to no chance of survival. Paul writes that he was like a still born baby – the epitome of weakness, a symbol of death.

And yet he was made alive in Christ.

It strikes me that Paul can't extract his own journey, and his struggle to understand that journey, from the resurrection. His story is intertwined in God's story. He sees his story in the light of the resurrection. And he is trying to make sense of it all. So, then he adds:

*But by the grace of God I am what I am...*

It is a remarkable, honest, tender, humble, confessional line.  
Maybe it is the best for which any of us can hope.  
By the grace of God, I am what I am.

Bill Lenters ~ friend, gifted former pastor of Hope, part of the body of Christ, feet of clay like the rest of us, that Bill ~ wrote a book in the nineties that didn't get picked up by a publishing company. It was classic Bill: provocative, creative, colorful, grace-filled, smart-alecky. Early on he writes this:

*I sometimes suspect that we are hopelessly locked in to who we are; that we are forever scripted or we are hopelessly cabined within the framework of our genetic holds. Is our middle name Popeye? "I yam what I yam."*

And from there he explores the possibility and process of change that is ultimately linked to surrender to God and acceptance of self.

Paul and Popeye: I am what I am. Maybe that's good news enough. The fullness of who we are, is accepted and forgiven by the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

And every mistake,  
and every stumble,  
and every struggle,  
and every malady,  
and everything that defines who we are is part of that embrace.

That is to say that God doesn't just take part of our story, he takes every page. Paul's past is part of the grain that God mills in the gin of grace. Paul has a dramatic story of transformation, but he still carries, uses, enfolds, wrestles with, writes about, and comes to accept his whole story.

It is not cut off.  
It is not thrown out.  
It is not passed over with a nudge and a wink.  
It is part of defining who he is, loved and accepted by God.

...by the grace of God, I am what I am...

You may not have a dramatic story of transformation, but whoever you, whatever you struggle with, and whatever shadow follows you: You are loved and accepted by God through Jesus Christ.

And for Paul, the lens of that acceptance is the resurrection.

He sees his whole life in the light of the resurrection. He persecuted the church of God. He was zealous about his sense of right and wrong and he went after the followers of Jesus with a single-minded devotion. He was dead, still born, with religious fervor. And yet....

And yet God appeared to him in Jesus Christ and gave him new life. As the resurrection is true than every expression of death is not the final word.

The hard part seems to be accepting all of who we are by the grace of God, and responding to that grace with a life of gratitude. The hard part is accepting the genetic make-up, family history, cultural shaping, weakness, beauty, brokenness, failing, every good gift, every shadow, and every last little thing that makes up who we are.....

and knowing that all of that is laid bare before God,  
and all of that is accepted, loved, and forgiven,  
and all of that will finally be resurrected and restored to *shalom* by God through Christ.

Sam Henry, Paul, Popeye, Bill, me, you ~ by the grace of God, we are who we are.

You belong to God in Christ.

You are gifted for the common good.

You are the Body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.

You are loved to love until love wins.

You are who you are in the triumphant light of the resurrection.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.