

The True You

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Romans 6:1b–11

On Thursday evening, my family and I attended a high school graduation ceremony. We were among the many at RIT's Gordon Field House to honor and celebrate with the Penfield High School class of 2017, including our own Christopher. There was truly much to honor and celebrate, and the various speeches (several, but not too many and none too long) again and again lifted up for all there the joy we shared in our remarkable and beloved young adults.

There was a depth in this ceremony I don't always find at graduations, a sense of the profound touched on by every speaker. You see, two members of the class of 2017 were not receiving their diplomas Thursday night. The reason why is that they had died, taken from us by suicide.

Penfield High has suffered four such losses in the last two years. Four of them. This has shaken the school community deeply.

Fully aware of such tragedy, the commencement speakers all addressed the graduands with great compassion and encouragement. And all those receiving their diplomas responded with a spirit of celebration and gratitude and hope — knowing, it seems, the blessing they all had simply to be there at that moment.

Young people, it is often said, think they're immortal. That night showed otherwise, at least for those graduates, at least for a time. They were keenly aware of their shared mortality and their common humanity,

as they honored the dead in accepting the acclamation of the living,
as they remembered their past by way of anticipating their future.

Young people, it is often said, are discovering who they are. That night showed that this is *blessedly* true, yet not only for those graduates:

true that their stories (and ours) are as yet incompletely written,
true that figuring out who you are is, for most people, an unfinished task.

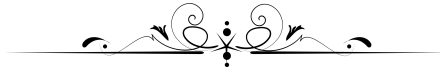
The other night, I think many people went from the ceremony feeling positive about that unfinished task. Yet it may be that, after the thrill of celebration, reality may once again crowd in, and they'll remember, or realize, or even be a bit overwhelmed with what they never had really forgotten, that figuring out who you are, who you *really* are, is hard, *so* hard, a job for which there are few instructions ... or maybe it's too *many* instructions, or *instructors*, with legions of people seemingly wanting to advise you on who you are and who you should be, who you aren't and who you shouldn't be.

There's wisdom in recognizing that tension, of course, the necessity and the difficulty of self-discovery and self-determination. But it's wisdom that comes with some pain, as you

realize that discovering who you are is also *lonely* work, because it is *you* who has to discover who you are, even as you may have the help of a few or many others.

The work is hard because it is so easy to fall into a false understanding of yourself. It is easy to latch on to one aspect of yourself and then raise that up as the defining principle of your life.

But what you've centered on is not really who you are. It is a false self, not your true self. Sometimes, you find out that the "you" you think you've found is not the true you.



Some of you may know this, too. But I've found that who I most truly am may not be who I thought I was. Sometimes there's a false self, pushing in, causing problems, and generally being a nuisance. This false self claims to be the real self, the "true you," but it's not. It tries to take over, and by God's grace it does not. It cannot. Not really. Not finally.

In faith I know I'm more than that, better than that. In Jesus I am and will be other than that. I know that in Jesus there's open to me a version of me

that breaks the death grip of the false self,
that forgives the past by effectively forgetting it,
that redeems the old self by leaving behind its lies
for the sake of the new self prepared and held for me by Jesus Christ.

I know this. And perhaps you do, too.

We know this maybe from years of life but even more from years of following Jesus Christ, discovering more and more what it means to be joined to him.

We have seen it in personal experience and had it validated by scripture; learned it from scripture and had it confirmed by personal experience.

The Apostle Paul talks about this. In Paul's day, there was a bit of a misunderstanding going around, one that seemed to be based on things Paul had been saying, but which ended up with conclusions Paul could never accept.

Sure, for Paul, God's mercy is shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Sure, God forgives those who cling to Jesus.

Sure, through faith in Jesus, we are forgiven and set free.

All this Paul could affirm, did affirm.

But with some people their understanding of this good news got a little askew and went off the rails. And it really caused quite a train wreck for them and also for other Christians. They started thinking that, well, because God is shown in Jesus to be so merciful, then we might as well sin all the more! If God's response to our sin is mercy, then wouldn't it be good to sin more to give God the opportunity to show even more mercy? If God's response to our sin is love and forgiveness, then why not sin a whole bunch so we can enjoy God's grace a whole bunch?

Sounds fun!

Well, no. Sounds wrong. Sounds deadly.

This won't fly for Paul. You see, when you're baptized in Christ Jesus, then you're joined to him. More specifically, you're joined to his death and to his resurrection. In baptism, what Paul calls our "old self" is crucified with Jesus and undergoes his death. As Paul puts it, "Our

old self was crucified with Jesus so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.”

That old self is the version of our self that is locked into sin.

It’s a self defined by sin and disobedience.

We see it in the one who thinks her worst aspects are the most real things about her, in the person who sees in his vices his truest self.

It’s the one who thinks authenticity is found when one

expresses rage,
or vents cruel and withering criticism of others’ imperfections,
or maintains a jealously guarded and self-centered comfort.

It’s the kind of person who feels most real when

receiving the approval of others,
or smothering others with attention (wanted or not),
or wallowing in self-pity.

It’s the individual who believes that the truest self is embraced

by escaping into an isolated inner fantasy world,
or giving voice to all the fears that lie within,
or gorging on physical pleasures and sensual delights.

What Paul is telling his friends — and telling us, too — is that none of these are the true you. They are all dead ends. They are all expressions of a self that is dead, not only because they all lead to death, but even more because for the one who is joined to Jesus, that self has been buried with Jesus, and is now

a thing of the past,
a reality that is no longer real,
a detail that no longer defines.

All those versions of the old self — and they differ from person to person —

no longer have the final say,
no longer set the terms,
no longer lay out the possibilities
of who you may be
and how you may act,
not for the one who has been joined to Jesus,
not for the one whose old self has been buried in Christ’s death,
not for the one whose true self is being prepared for the resurrection he will
give.



In the light of all that, Paul tells his friends — and he tells us, too — that we “must consider [ourselves] dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

This is the new possibility open to the redeemed.

This is the new horizon of action for those beloved and made lovely in Christ Jesus: to consider ourselves dead to sin, and to consider ourselves alive to God in Christ Jesus.

This is where we will find and meet and rejoice with “the true you” that belongs to each of us.

Alive to God in Jesus: this is who we are, this is who we will be, and this is who we must be.

Alive to God in Jesus: this summarizes “the true you” you should be and *can* be, right now, today and tomorrow and the next day.

Alive to God in Jesus:

with joy,
with love,
with humility.

Alive to God in Jesus:

earnestly,
kindly,
truthfully.

Alive to God in Jesus:

forgiving the enemy,
feeding the hungry,
welcoming the stranger.

Alive to God in Jesus:

guiding the lost,
healing the wounded,
demanding justice for the oppressed.

Alive to God in Jesus:

befriending the friendless,
helping the helpless,
giving hope to the hopeless.

Alive to God in Jesus:

showing love,
and compassion,
and mercy to all.

My friends, I urge you (as I urge myself): put aside the “you” that is not really you, and embrace the true you, given to you in Christ Jesus, seeking to make this true you more and more apparent in all you say and do.