

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta

“The Love of Christ Urges Us On” (2 Corinthians 5:14-17)

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

My all-time favorite television show is *The Office*, the longtime NBC comedy classic starring Steve Carrell as Michael Scott, who manages the Scranton branch of a paper company. This show has countless hilarious moments. One of the recurring storylines is the tension between Michael Scott and Toby Flenderson (played brilliantly by Paul Lieberstein). Although Michael is the manager, Toby actually works as the HR rep (human resources representative) for the corporate office based in New York, so that Toby does not report to Michael but to corporate. Toby is the consummate wet blanket. Throughout the series Toby is Michael’s foil and killjoy—the one who always undermines him.

In the episode “Casino Night” (Season 2, Episode 22) Michael organizes a fundraiser for the Boy Scouts—a casino themed event that is completely inappropriate for kids. While discussing his ideas with the staff Michael addresses Toby, “We, at the end of the night, are going to give the check to an actual group of Boy Scouts, right Toby?” In reply, Toby, per usual in his nasally voice, rains on Michael’s parade: “Actually I didn’t think it was appropriate to invite children since it’s...you know, there’s gambling and alcohol, and it’s in our dangerous warehouse and it’s a school night...and, you know, Hooters is catering. You know, is that enough? Should I keep going?” In one of the funniest moments of the entire series Michael glares at Toby for and asks him, “Why are you the way that you are? Honestly, every time I try to do something fun or exciting, you make it not that way. I hate so much about the things that you choose to be.”

In your life you may be like Michael Scott, with lots of fun and exciting and perhaps crazy ideas—and you can immediately identify the Toby Flenderson’s in your life who always rain on your parade—or perhaps you are the Toby Flenderson in the lives of others. Either way, Michael’s question to Toby is an important one, “Why are you the way that you are?”

Why are you the way that you are?

If you are afraid and on edge—why? If you are happy and easy going—why? If you are anxious and stressed out—why? If you are generous and kind—why? Why are you the way that you are? Maybe you do not have a clue. Certainly genetics plays a role, for in the battle of nature versus nurture, nature usually wins. And yet in addition to all that, every person on the planet has a backstory—including you. You know your backstory—and more importantly, God knows your backstory—and most importantly, God cares about your backstory, and cares about you, more than you could ever imagine.

In today's passage from his Second Letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul answers the question "Why are you the way that you are?" You may remember that before his conversion, Paul was a brilliant and zealous Pharisee who knew the Old Testament law backwards and forwards. He therefore hated anyone or anything that would appear to undermine or contradict the Old Testament law—which meant he hated Jesus and hated the church because the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the church are not based on the law, but based on love. Paul himself describes what he was like prior to his conversion: "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence" (1 Timothy 1:13)—"as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church" (Philippians 3:5-6).

And yet Jesus loved Paul the same way he loves you—unconditionally. Jesus personally appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus and literally blinded him with the light of God's love. And once in Damascus Paul's eyes were opened again not just physically opened, but spiritually opened to the reality of God's unconditional love for him. Paul later wrote, "I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost" (1 Timothy 1:13-15). The unconditional love of God changed Paul, transformed his backstory, and became the one and primary motivation for the rest of his life—as he wrote to the Galatians, "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). In other words, Paul's answer to "Why are you the way that you are?" is "because Jesus the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me."

Paul unpacks this in today's passage from his Second Letter to the Corinthians:

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Corinthians 5:14-17).

The “love of Christ” was the sole motivation of Paul’s life. Paul was convinced of the love of God expressed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and had personally received that love. Then Paul spent the rest of his life giving that love away. That was why Paul no longer regarded others from a human point of view, which is always judgment—but instead regarded others from a divine point of view, which is always love. The love of God that Jesus offered Paul changed his life and redeemed his backstory—for in Christ Paul, like you, was a new creation.

Time for a music reference...growing up in the 70’s and 80’s I have always been a fan of Billy Joel, whose radio hits were a part of the soundtrack of my childhood. One of his biggest hits was a familiar ballad in which he sings these familiar lyrics:

Don’t go changing to try to please me, you never let me down before
Don’t imagine you’re too familiar and I don’t see you anymore
I would not leave you in times of trouble, we never could have come this far
I took the good times, I’ll take the bad times
I’ll take you just the way you are...
I said I love you—that’s forever, and this I promise from the heart
I couldn’t love you any better
I love you just the way you are
(From “Just the Way You Are” on his 1977 album *The Stranger*)

In other words, God’s love for you is not the question “why are you the way that you are”; rather, God’s love for you is a statement, “I love you just the way you are.” Along these lines, as I have preached many times before, the late preacher and writer Brennan Manning puts it this way in his final book, *All Is Grace* (2011):

My message, unchanged for more than fifty years, is this: God loves you unconditionally, as you are and not as you should be, because nobody is as they should be. It is the message of grace...Some have labeled my message one of “cheap grace.” In my younger day, their accusations were a gauntlet thrown down, a challenge. But I’m an old man and I don’t care (192).

That is the gospel. That is what Paul experienced. Paul had received the love of God because the grace of God overflowed for him—as the grace of God overflows for you. Paul knew that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom he was the foremost. And so he spent the rest of his life preaching about God’s love and teaching about God’s love and giving God’s love away to others.

“The love of Christ urges us on” Paul writes, “from now on therefore we regard no one from a human point of view.” Again, the human point of view is always judgment—judgment about your appearance or your education or your political opinion or your social-economic status—judgment about what kind of car you drive or your personal life or your sexuality or your theology...you fill in the blank—human judgment never ends. That is the bad news.

But the good news of the gospel is that God’s point of view is always love—that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16)...that “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). God chose love over judgment—as Jesus said, “The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22)—and during the week of his passion Jesus further said, “Now is the judgment of this world...and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:31-32). God gave all judgment to Jesus, and Jesus took that judgment upon himself on the cross. Jesus commands us to respond by doing likewise: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” (Matthew 7:1) and “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

The love of Christ urges us on...the love of Christ urges us on...regardless of why you are the way that you are, God still loves you just the way you are—always has, always will, world without end.

Amen.