

Giving Out Of Our Formation

The Charleston Naval Shipyard opened in 1901, on over 1500 acres located on the west bank of the Cooper River. As most of you know, for many years the Naval Shipyard provided tens of thousands of jobs until it officially closed in 1996. For the area economy, future and geographic morale, the closing of the shipyard appeared to be devastating. In a 1997, New York Times article Mayor Riley said this about the base closing, "It was like a death," he recalled. "No one had ever imagined Charleston without the Navy. The citizens loved the Navy, and the Navy loved our citizens, and the Navy's presence here was so big that every citizen in Charleston was touched by it."¹ Some of you sitting here this morning worked and retired from shipyard. The Naval Shipyard had a large impact on the local community, the tri-county area and the State of South Carolina. During the shipyards lifetime, two hundred and fifty-six vessels were built and millions of dollars poured into the economy.

When years of rumors that the shipyard was closing became reality, many people predicted the end of Charleston, North Charleston and the Lowcountry. Indeed, for a while it did feel like the sun was setting hard and fast. Slowly businesses closed, housing prices plummeted and people moved out of the area. However, people were determined for this condition to be temporary. Overtime business leaders, politicians and resolute citizens wanted to develop a new identity and image for the community. Hopelessness, despair and the predicting dark abyss was not going to be the final chapter written for the Lowcountry.

In the gospel of Matthew, identity and image are the issue, where the author writes, "When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say, John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others,

¹ New York Times, *Charleston Bounces Back After Closing of Base*, Philip Shenon, June 12, 1997

Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” **“But what about you?”** he asked. **“Who do you say I am?”** Simon Peter answered, **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”**² It was a self-defining moment for Peter. In stewardship, you are looking at your fundamental identity in Christ. Jesus’ question is an invitation to take personally and seriously the necessity to stop taking refuge in the answers of others and answer this important question for ourselves. How you answer this question, will affect everything you do, especially in stewardship. Answering this question helps us come to a deeper understanding about our identity in Christ. It is an invitation to stand with our hearts wide open as possible, before Jesus in whom our existence takes on new meaning and declare to the world, he is our Lord and Savior. **“Who do you say that I am?”** Peter, through the grace of God, had discovered himself in the presence of the one who disclosed God and revealed the Way of God—the way of love and justice. He spent the rest of his life figuring out what that meant, who he was and how he should live. Jesus Christ was now part of his identity and he wanted to nurture, cultivate and let his identity grow in Christ.

We seek stewardship to be a daily way of life, because a large part of our identity is that we are formed in the image of God. In Genesis it says, “So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”³ Because we are formed in the image of God, you would think stewardship would be easy. When we think of God, we think of God being generous, full of compassion and the ultimate gift giver. Why can’t we share with the world, as the Divine shares? The answer to this question is found in the life of Adam. For “Adam’s most basic sin was the loss of faith and gratitude, and with that, the loss of the knowledge that everything true, good, and beautiful is God’s gift. And that’s our

² New International Version, 2009, (Matthew 16:13-20)

³ New International Version, 2009, (Genesis 1:27)

most basic sin, too.⁴ When we look at the possessions and the life we have built as our own doing, then we lose the power that comes from being created in the image of God. At this point life is seen as burden and we daily compete with others, either implicitly or explicitly, to maintain our created image. However, in Christ we are seeking a new way of life. This life is filled with love, hope and reconciliation through our Lord.

The “new self” that we have obtained, is our identity in Jesus Christ. Through baptism and the Holy Spirit, we belong to God. We are created by God for God. Psalm 100:1-3 says, “Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before Him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture.”⁵ Scripture tells us of our identity in Christ, and reminds us of the primacy of God in our lives. We are as it says in Ephesians, seeking “to put on the **new** self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”⁶ The good steward recognizes that he or she is not their own entity on this earth. The things they are blessed with from God are not theirs either. Understanding what it means to be formed in the image of God, only comes with the understanding of our identity in Christ?

A movie that I enjoyed seeing years ago is “Cast Away”, with Tom Hanks. He played the part of Chuck Noland, a man who went down with a plane and ended up on a remote island. When I first saw the movie you just knew he was eventually going to get off that island. He may have been marooned on an island, but he still had hope. The hope Hanks had was to prepare him for the possibility of sailing away from the island. For years, he gathered the necessary material.

⁴ Volf Miroslav, *Free of Charge – Giving and Forgiving In A Culture Stripped Of Grace*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005, Pg. 95.

⁵ Ibid. Psalm 100:1-3

⁶ New International Version, 2009 – (Ephesians 4:24)

At one point, he had to climb a high, rocky cliff in order to retrieve some rope that would be used to tie logs together. Little by little, the essential pieces he needed to build a raft drifted ashore. He completed his raft then waited until the wind was blowing in the right direction. That day eventually came and Hanks sailed away from the island. His identity would no longer be that of a **castaway**, but as a survivor.

God beckons us not to be castaways. Castaways are adrift in this world, without any direction and not knowing their identity in Christ. Through a deeper understanding of what it means to be “formed in the image of God”, we can every day, claim our Christian identity. By claiming our Christian identity, stewardship can be a daily way of life. Through our identity in Christ, we are not aliens in foreign place, but loved by the grace of God. Life in Christ has meaning, purpose and hope for a better tomorrow. Amen.