

Consensus

Volume 22

Issue 1 *Canadian Lutherans and Social Justice:
Sampling of a Heritage*

Article 9

5-1-1996

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Recommended Citation

Harris, Mark W. (1996) "Remember Who You Are (A Confirmation Sermon)," *Consensus*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol22/iss1/9>

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Remember Who You Are (A Confirmation Sermon)

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The 18th Sunday after Pentecost

When I was growing up, my family would often go to visit my grandparents who lived in Pittsburgh. My grandmother was a quiet woman of soft voice. She kept an immaculate home, was a wonderful cook and would lovingly, but firmly, reprimand my siblings and me whenever we tried to sneak a slide down the bannister on the front stairs. My grandfather, I remember as a giant of a man, who smelled of Old Spice aftershave and was always impeccably dressed. He would give us magnificent, warm hugs whenever we arrived for a visit. And whenever we were leaving, he would hug us again, and do something which, for many years, I thought was rather peculiar.

One by one, he would take my brothers and sister and me into his arms, and then, for a moment, he would rest his enormous hands on our shoulders and look deep into our eyes. "Remember who you are..." he would say, and then the moment would break as he moved on to bid farewell to the others.

"Remember who you are..."

When I was a child, I really thought that it was a rather silly, grandfatherly sort of thing to say. To be quite frank, I didn't really think, that much, about who I was. And if someone would have asked me I would have said, "Well, I'm Mark Harris. That's who I am and I am not likely to forget it!"

"Remember who you are..."

When I was a teenager, I recall that his words caused me to wince. Not only was it embarrassing to be hugged by your grandfather, but, to be quite frank, I didn't have the slightest

idea who I was. And though his words were meant to be gentle and admonishing, they simply highlighted, for me, my own inner turmoil and confusion.

“Remember who you are...”

As a young man, I began to understand, somewhat, this mystery of myself. But I also began to see and appreciate that none of us are who we are in isolation. We are profoundly shaped by our relationships, our family and church and community. I am who I am... because of that which has been given to me, passed on to me, entrusted to my care. I was starting to grasp what my grandfather had been saying all those years.

The last time that I saw him, my grandfather gave me the warmest hug that his feeble frame would allow. He put his hands on my shoulders but said... not a word... for words were beyond him now... the result of his last stroke. But with his cloudy, aged eyes gazing deep into mine own, I knew what he was trying to say. “I’ll remember...” I whispered, “I’ll remember.” And with that, we said good-bye.

It is a puzzlement, really, that none of us needs to turn very far to find those who are only too eager to tell us who we are, trying to tell us how we should act and what we should wear, the music to which we should and should not listen, the things that we should believe. If we look closely, we will often see that their suggestions are more for their benefit than for our own. But their voices taunt us, nonetheless, and we constantly hear them, and often take their words to heart, so that they begin to influence how we understand ourselves.

Why even within our own skin, the sanest of us will often find ourselves wrestling, contending with the many sides of our own hungers and convictions, trying not only to figure out what is right and wrong, but trying to figure out and live out the mystery of who we really are.

But the effect of this clamour of voices, trying to shape our self-understanding, and the outcome of our own inner wrestling, is that many of us are often confused about who we really are. It’s as if we are lost, wandering in a wasteland in which we can find no clear guideposts, to direct us home.

It is because of that, because of the confusion and wandering in all of our lives, that we gather here today. For in this short hour, as we sing our praises and lift our voices in prayer, as

we celebrate the baptisms of Kelly and Mark and as we hear and share in the affirmation of all these young people who sit before us, we are all awakened, once again, to remember who we most truly are... children of God and heirs of the Kingdom.

Today, you as a group of young people, turn the table on us, your parents, pastors and congregation. For many years, since the time that some of you were carried into this community in your parents' arms, we have sought to guide you, to teach you, to care for you (sometimes with greater and sometimes with lesser success). But today, today as you stand on your own feet, and speak with your own voice, and make your own affirmation of faith, it is you who guide and teach and inspire us. With a clarity and idealism which is often lost with the years, you not only embrace that which is most precious to us, today, but you serve as a messenger of the Gospel, bring us back from the wastelands, by reminding us who we really are. More than men and women of our own making, more than students or professionals or retirees, more than consumers or any other name by which this world would label us, we are God's own, precious, chosen and gifted, to be a blessing to the world and a light to the nations.

Who you most truly are will not always be as clear to you as it is today. Like many of us you will often, over the course of your life, find yourself confused and wandering in the wastelands. But that is why this day is so important for you... a moment of grace from God. For as you now prepare to stand and confess your faith, in response to the call of Christ and the grace of God, allow this moment, our own joy, and God's delight in you, to engrave itself upon your memory. For then, no matter how the years may pass, no matter where you will roam, you will always remember and be guided by the hand of God which lays claim upon you this day.

In short, you will always remember... who you are... as a chosen and precious child of God.