

## Four Big C's

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The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
The Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Holy Communion  
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Deuteronomy 6:1-12; Philippians 2:1-13

“Work out your own salvation, with fear and trembling. . . .” -- Philippians 2:12b

Today is the first in a month-long series of sermons I'm calling "Four Big C's," which I hope will not become for some of you "Four Big Z's." I'm not ordinarily a great fan of sermon series because they often feel forced and artificial to me, but the four words that I want us to consider in some depth during the month of July were given to me, as a group, a few days ago by a recent graduate of Ashland Theological Seminary. Cheryl Lindsay, to whom I owe the idea for this series, was interviewing with the Discernment of Call Working Group of the Western Reserve Association, which I chair, to be accepted as a candidate for ordained ministry. As she told us about the journey of faith that had brought her to a sense of God's call and the training she undertook in response to that call, she explained that Ashland Seminary organizes the structure of its Master of Divinity program around what they call "The Four C's": Core Identity, Character, Calling, and Competency.

Hmm, I thought, that group of words sounds like something ordinary Christian folk could benefit from if somebody helped them do some systematic reflecting on them, and that's what I want to do this month. I'd like for us to think and feel and pray about what it might mean for our Christian identities if we looked at them from the perspective of our core, our character, our calling, and our competency.

Let's begin with our core, because that's where we all have to begin. If we're going to think about ourselves, we have to have some "self" to think about, and that "self" is another word for our core. It's who we think we are or imagine ourselves to be. It's that stable, enduring imaginative construct that persists over the course of our lives.

Or at least that's the idea, and there's the first problem with core: some of us don't have one, or not much of one, or one that's been poorly formed, or one that's been badly damaged.

As social creatures, we all consist of two types of identity: our several public identities, and our private core identity; and one of the signs of maturity is that we bring our public identities more into line with our private core identity, and we bring our core identity more into line with God.

Our core is where the things that matter most to us lie. Whether we're conscious of them or not, the values that shape us and ultimately identify us come from our core. We commonly refer to these as our "core set of values," and individuals say they have them, churches say they have them, non-profits say they have them, and corporations say they have them. We all, in fact, do have them. We all have things that matter to us, and some of those things matter a great deal and some of them no so much, and another of those signs of emotional and spiritual and psychological maturity is sorting out those

values.

This can get tricky. In the first place, we can confuse values with things that are valuable but aren't values in and of themselves. Family, for instance, is one example. If I asked most of you what's most important in your life, the majority of you would say your family because that's the collective entity that you love most. And that great love may make family valuable, but that doesn't make family a value.

A value is an infinite good; no family is infinite. Every family is finite, and sooner or later you're going to run out of family. You can have a big family or you can have a small family. You can have a family extending back many generations or one that extends back only a few. You can have a family that's part Italian and part Irish, or part New England and part Southern. But however you define it or think about it, family always comes with discernible limits and boundaries. That's what allows us to recognize one family from another.

Values don't work that way. Values – things like honesty, integrity, compassion, sympathy, empathy, and honor – those are distinguishable but they are not limited. You don't run out of honesty. Integrity has no limits. Compassion doesn't make exceptions. Empathy has no black holes. Being without limit is what makes them values and distinguishes them from the things we attach them to.

Let's take an example. Most of us attach the value of honesty to our personal relationships. We think it's important to be honest in our dealings with other individuals. But what about our dealings with institutions, like our courts or our government or our schools? How important do we think being honest is when we deal with them?

According to the Educational Testing Service, in the 1940s, about 20 percent of college students admitted that they had cheated in high school; today, that figure is between 75 and 98 percent. Virtually everyone, it appears, cheats, and most people get away with it.

How about your income tax return? How about off-shore bank accounts? How about Internet pornography? What role does honesty, that value that we say we value so highly, play in these contexts?

This past Thursday evening, some of us were discussing honesty and integrity and making and keeping commitments in the context of the Edward Snowden affair. When do we sacrifice one commitment for the sake of another, as Edward Snowden appears to have done? If we agree not to tell and then we tell, what have we done? What credibility do we retain?

How we think and feel about issues like those reflect our core – our core values and our core identity – and much of Jesus's ministry was an attempt to get us to examine that core more carefully and in a new light.

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell into the hands of robbers. . . . Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

The answer is obvious, but the implication of Jesus's famous parable is not. The parable of the good Samaritan was Jesus's answer to the question, "And who is my neighbor?" and that question was in response to the command "And you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." The point of the parable of the good Samaritan – the real, sharp point, as opposed to the blunt, user-friendly point – is that we are to love as ourselves the ones we prefer to hate. Terrorists. Abusers. T. J. Lane.

When we ask ourselves what our core really consists of, as opposed to what we say or even think it consists of, the answer may disappoint us, because it's been demonstrated time and again that we think more highly of ourselves than we ought. We think we are better than we are. We think other people do bad things while we only

make mistakes.

The Christian tradition says to abandon such duplicitous thinking and to admit to ourselves and to God, and in the presence of one another, that we are sinners, in need of redemption, just like everyone else. We may be able to mask our baser drives and murkier motives better than others, and we may be able to hide our misdeeds from prying eyes and inquiring minds better than others, but woe betide the Christian who is foolish enough to say, with Jesus's famous Pharisee, "I thank you, God, that I am not like other people. . . ."

We are like other people, much more than we care to admit, and the only thing that saves us from despair is our desire to be better than we are, and that desire is the first step in redemption.

The desire to be better than we know we are – that, above all else, is the core of the Christian. To be more loving, to be more generous, to be more thoughtful, to be kinder and more gentle in our handling of one another and God's creation, to be more willing to sacrifice ourselves rather than sacrifice others, to be willing to look beyond the easy answers to the harsh demands of love in action – those are the marks of a Christian core. With those in place, the rest will follow.

There is a saying in our tradition, that when the heart is fixed, the hands are free; and what it means, I think, is that when our core identity is anchored in the reality of God's love for the world, shown to us in Jesus the Christ, we are free to act without fear, without embarrassment, without apology, and without regret. As Paul told the Galatians so long ago, "For freedom Christ has set us free," and as Jesus told his disciples in John's gospel, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

We are free, friends, you and I, we who claim the name of Christian. We are free to love, free to share, free to be the selves God created us and calls us to be. Let us use our freedom to love the world as God loves it, and to rejoice and to be glad in it.

Let us pray. Help us, Lord, to become masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take our hands and work through them. Take our minds and think through them. Take our lips and speak through them. And take our hearts, and set them on fire, for Christ's sake. Amen.