

Part 1: Identity in the Wilderness

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Timothy Treadwell didn't just live among the grizzly bears, he lived like a bear. He mimicked their movements, sounds, and patterns for more than a decade. In his diaries he wrote as if the human world felt oddly strange and foreign to him. A filmmaker set out to capture the story of a man who, as he said, "Desired to leave the confines of his humanness and bond with the bears." The film was titled, "The Grizzly Man."

A man who identifies as a grizzly is a story as interesting as it is tragic. In 2003, both Treadwell and his girlfriend were attacked, killed and partially eaten by a grizzly. Wildlife experts concluded that what Treadwell thought was acceptance was nothing more than toleration.

Acceptance and identity are two very different things. He was momentarily accepted by the bears, and yet the only one confused as to his true identity was Treadwell himself. Eventually, he lost his life as a man and he lost his acceptance as a bear.

Today we are beginning a study in the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians. Corinth was a wild place. When Paul first arrived there in Acts 18, he spent 18 months with them and preached the gospel amidst persecution from the Jews and opposition from the fast and worldly Corinthian culture.

As Paul traveled, he and the Corinthian church exchanged several letters, but this one comes with a unique urgency. As the church lives in the wild, Paul fears they are becoming wild. He fears that in order to solve the tension of feeling like outsiders—the Corinthian church has begun to live as Treadwell lived among the grizzlies.

The title of our sermon today is: "**Identity in the Wilderness.**" These Christians might live in the woods, but they aren't bears. They might live in Corinth, but they aren't primarily Corinthians. They are Christians. To forget that identity is to play a deadly and dangerous game. That's the title of our sermon this morning: **True belonging comes from true identity.** As the Grizzly Man reminds us, to safely live where you are, you must know who you are.

Paul reminds them of their identity in three parts. First, **Remember who you are**, (vs. 1), then in verses 2-3 he calls them **Remember What You Are**, and finally in verses 4-9 he encourages them to **Remember Where You Are**

While we would put the information of who wrote the letter and to whom it is sent on the outside, during this era of history they would include that information on the inside as the first part of the letter. This is how Paul opens up this letter as he begins with our first point: **Remember Who You Are.**

He begins by calling them to remember who he is, **1 Corinthians 1:1**, "Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus and our dear brother, Sosthenes." Paul opens by reminding the church who he is—he is Paul the apostle, called by the will of God.

Why does Paul's title as apostle matter to Corinth? The same reason it should matter to you. When Jesus appointed his apostles it was to speak for and as Jesus.

Today, we don't have the Apostles, God didn't choose to make this a continual office. But we do have the ministry of the apostles in God's word. The apostle Peter reminds us that no one wrote scripture on their own interpretation but only as God carried them along by the Holy Spirit. Paul's words are authoritative words, not another stream of content for them to process. Paul's words to us, like the rest of scripture, are God's very words. It's this divine authority that made Paul's words relevant to the Corinthians, and it's the same authority that makes it relevant to us today. Circumstances have changed, but our need and God's grace hasn't.

Paul gives a simple and brief note on himself before turning at greater length to reminding the Corinthians who they are. They are **1 Corinthians 1:2a**, "...the church of God that is in Corinth."

While their land was Roman, and the culture Corinthian, but the church was God's. The church of God, in Corinth. The order matters.

Let's talk a little about Corinth since the city itself is an important character in this letter. Whatever picture you might have of Athens, by Paul's day Corinth had surpassed it in every way. It was the center of commerce, spirituality, entertainment, athletics, and leisure. Your Amazon packages were delivered that day, within the hour. You could move from the classroom to the club in a few steps. You could not only catch a play, but watch the famous Isthmus games live and in person. Who wouldn't want to live there?

To live in Corinth was to achieve a status of pride and honor. As Frank Sinatra said, "If you could make it there, you'd make it anywhere." Corinth had everything and so it had an appeal to everyone. To be a Corinthian was to be, regardless of where you were from, someone. In a very real sense, it was to be made new.

In many ways our own culture is just as visible and vocal in Missoula. The priorities of play, pleasure, progressive thought and pluralism is on our crosswalks, yard signs, and in our neighborhoods. The badge of belonging, the badge of "making it" are clear.

And because culture is so defined, Paul defines the church's true identity: "the church of God." One commentator noted that the entire letter can be summed up in those two words: "of God."

In other words, the church is the property and the possession of God. The word "church" means "assembly." It is a meeting, a gathering, a people coming together. Because it is the church of God, whatever believers do and whoever they are when they assemble is directly connected to whose they are. They are the Lord's church.

A good analogy is that of an embassy. When traveling abroad, you might visit the US embassy in Berlin. That building might look like the rest of the buildings in Berlin. And yet to be in that embassy is not to be under German law, but under the laws of the United States. While Germans may come in, they cannot change the laws. The church lives in the world but the church belongs to God. The world might have preferences, but God has priority.

This means that when we consider what we do, how we act, and who we worship as a church—we don't belong to the world's standards. We belong to God. This includes not only how we live outside the church, but what we do as the gathered church!

This distinction presents an ongoing temptation for Christians in any culture. As we encounter the culture of our city, our nation, or our immediate community, we quickly realize that its influences, priorities, and values often do not align with the culture, priorities, and commands of God.

Missoula has lots of priorities, and so did Corinth. But the church is driven and defined by God's priorities because they are his church. Peter calls the church "a people of God's own possession."

Which means that in whatever culture the church meets, the church must look like God's church. The purpose of an American embassy abroad isn't to present Japan's culture to Japan. It's meant to live in Japan while relationally and representatively presenting the culture and norms of their homeland.

We aren't free to just decide for ourselves what the church is, or what the church does, or what the mission of the church is. We are the church "of God." Which means what we do when we assemble and how we live when we go home—may reflect priorities and practices that seem out of place at school, work, or in our city. But we ought not try to solve the tension we feel as Christians by becoming the church of Corinth anymore than Treadwell should have solved the tension of the wilderness by becoming of the bears.

We want to be a Missoula church, and the church in Corinth should be a Corinthian church. They live there. They work there. They share the gospel there. They love people there. So how do we do this without losing our identity?

First, it is through our practice. God tells the church what they are to do when they gather. They are to sing the gospel, pray the gospel, preach the gospel, and show the gospel through baptism and the Lord's Supper. Your style of music should reflect your culture, we don't need to have gregorian chants. But we must worship. Your preaching must be understandable in their language and culture—but it must communicate the gospel clearly from God's word. We don't get to decide for ourselves what the church does because Missoulians would rather do something else when they gather. We are the church of God.

But second, we remember who we are as the church of God when we live it out in our priorities. We are tempted to try and solve the tension we feel as cultural outsiders by baptizing our appeals. In other words we say, "If we don't look like Corinth, how will we share the love of Jesus with Corinthians?" But doesn't this assume you have already forgotten your identity! Don't you already live in Corinth? Aren't you already a Missoulian? You are the local appeal, you are their neighbor. And while we want to appeal to the world around us, our appeal is not the world! Our appeal is what the world needs: the gospel of Jesus Christ. It doesn't look like the world. It doesn't sound like the world. But that's because the world doesn't save people. Jesus saves. We appeal to our city, we love our city by being the faithful church of God and prioritizing his mission, and his message as we gather together and as we share Christ evangelistically with the lost.

To be a faithful church in Missoula we must be a church of God. That's what makes the church a church. If you forget that identity, you'll lose your sense of reality. We are the church of God. True belonging requires true identity.

The church belongs to God—but what exactly is a church? This is where Paul goes next: **Remember What You Are.**

What is the church? He gives us two identifiers: sanctified in Christ, and called together as a confessing community.

First the church is, **1 Corinthians 1:2b**, “Those sanctified in Christ Jesus.” Have you ever wanted to be part of something cool? Maybe it was a sports team, a book club, or a friend circle. That is, to a degree, what it means to be sanctified.

Our world has standards of sanctification. To be on that sports team you have to be this fast. To be in this program you have to have this GPA. To be my wife you have to be the most beautiful woman in the world. Only one has achieved that, and therefore while I know many women—one with Sarah Velin—is sanctified from the rest.

The church is a sanctified, set apart community. But not because of anything we have done. They are sanctified “In Christ Jesus.” That word, “in” shows up 10 times in these nine verses. If you want to know where you belong in life, you must know who you are in Christ. And Christ sanctifies the church.

Maybe you’ve seen the cliché rom-com where the girl next door who is dorky and unpopular does the work to take off her glasses, get a glow up and finally be noticed by the popular crowd? This is not what is meant by sanctification here. Paul’s language expresses that of total finality. Jesus did it all. We are not hidden gems who need a make over. We are all sinners.

This reality of sin is actually what drives our desires and the problems of belonging. We know we need to be accepted by someone or something, but we also know that there are parts of us that are unacceptable to others.

We might try to cover those parts with makeup, but it just adds the anxiety of getting found out. But here’s the relief of true belong to God and it is in Jesus alone. Finally, fully, freely.

The result is that we have a new name—we are called saints. He calls us that. God makes saints, and he makes them in Jesus. The Catholic Church has saints, but the church makes saints, you have to make yourself a saint, you have to be recognized as unique enough, special enough, strong enough to be a saint. But this is not how God makes saints. God makes saints in Jesus Christ. Do you wrestle with insecurity? God calls you perfect in Jesus.

You might think that if you could convince others around you that you are a Christian, then maybe God will accept you too. But that’s just as silly as Treadwell thinking that because some of the bears accepted him, he was a bear. You can’t find acceptance with God by belonging to a community. Instead, your acceptance within the Christian community flows out of your acceptance with God.

This acceptance isn’t what you’ve done, or what you could do, it’s tied to calling out to Jesus in faith. The church is sanctified in Christ Jesus by calling out to him in faith. **1 Corinthians 1:2b**, “Called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.”

Here Paul is using the language of **Joel 2:32**, “And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Paul is saying, this community is the community of God’s salvation. The church is where those who have called out to God for salvation in Jesus Christ are now called together in the assembly. To call out to God in faith in Jesus Christ is to be called together into a church.

One commentator said about this letter, “**1 Corinthians is not only a letter that is addressed to the church; it is also, from start to finish, a letter about what it means to be the church.**” Our world today prioritizes the individual above everything. Its message is your own individual joy and autonomy is king. But Paul reminds us that our greatest personal joy is tied to our personal and corporate identity that comes through Jesus Christ. As he will say later on in the book Christians are in the church “individually members of one another.”

What’s the ground of that belonging? We better be careful because if we lose this identity piece we can flatten our church community as being something that is only attainable to those who belong to a certain age range, music preference, or income bracket.

Paul gives the true standard of belonging, the church is a confessing community. That’s what it is. You can attend here because you like the music or the community. But you can only belong here if you call out to the Lord in faith and repentance. The church is for converts.

But even so, it’s not a finally perfected community. Paul calls the church those who continually call upon the name of Jesus. The church is not a community of perfect saints who once confessed faith and now are done. It’s a community who is constantly reminding each other of that identity. We need Jesus still, not because our salvation is at risk, but because sin still wages war against us. We must help each other continually call out for faith, repentance, and growth in the gospel. The gospel is not only the entry point into the community of faith—it is the ongoing reality of it.

That’s why the church practices baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is the church body giving the public sign of belonging to those who are genuinely converted, and the Lord’s Supper is that ongoing mark that sets apart those who are baptized in the church and reminds everyone of our constant need and Jesus’ constant provision.

We call that clarity and relationship church membership, and the way in which you belong to the church is by together confessing and living as if we belong to Jesus even if we feel like we live in the woods. We need each other.

Life in the wilderness is hard, and you can’t do it alone. But neither have you been called to do it alone. To be in Christ by faith, is to be placed by God under the responsibility to belong to a local church by faith. We can’t forget this because as Paul reminds us next—we must also remember where we are on God’s timeline. **Remember Where You Are.**

Those who belong to God, who are in Christ Jesus as his church are also those who are in a period of waiting.

Paul says this, **1 Corinthians 1:4-8**, “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— so that you are not

lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

There are bumper stickers that you can see around town that say, “Keep Missoula Weird.” It’s a reminder to everyone, for better or for worse, that what makes Missoula distinct is something that needs to be maintained. It’s intentional.

Paul’s first letter might well be titled, “Keep the church weird.” How will Christians stay wonderfully weird? Through the calling of God, but faith in Jesus Christ, as the community of believers and in the power of the Holy Spirit. If the church will make it, that’s what it takes. But by God’s grace, it’s what is already theirs in Christ.

Despite the problems that this church is going through, Paul opens this section giving thanks. Knowing what we will know later this should shock us. They don’t look like a good church. They don’t act like the church of God. They don’t gather like saints.

You might feel that way too, but Paul’s grounds for confidence are your grounds for confidence. He rejoices because while this time of waiting demands effort, it is wrapped in the wonderful promise of who you already are in Christ.

God has given the church and all her mess, grace in the gospel of Jesus, and if you have faith in Jesus—you too have not only Jesus’ saving power but Jesus’ sustaining power. As hard as it may have been for Treadwell to live like a human—the reality was he *was* a human. He had everything he needed to stay true to who he was.

And so do we, by the power of God’s grace. We live in a world which cannot see Jesus. He has been resurrected. He is not visible, we are “awaiting his appearing.”

Have you ever seen someone dancing to music you can’t hear? If we are honest, they look like crazy people? Have you ever seen a Christian who follows a Christ the world can’t see? The world will see a crazy person.

But we are equipped as the church to live aware of our distinct hope but under the mighty and sustaining power of grace. God’s grace in Jesus reminds us that while we are saved, we are not yet home. There is still work being done in us and in the church. In the Christian we are still learning how to apply grace to put sin to death. We are still realizing what it looks like to let all of our speech and knowledge be infused with the grace that saved us.

And yet it seems the more the work of Jesus is confirmed in us, the more visible it is to the world, the harder it feels to live faithfully. The more their stares continue, the more the days go on, the more foolish we might feel. The world might condemn you and you might have no idea who you are anymore? Where will you go? Who will affirm you and embrace you?

You might have started out crushing sin. But as temptation continues, and life goes on, we wrestle with the battle. It feels like we are making little progress. Are we even saved? Did Jesus really do anything? Can he do anything? You might find yourself condemned by your own experience.

But remember who you are. You are the church of God. You are sanctified in Christ Jesus. And while you are in a season of waiting, and sometimes weariness, you do not lack any gift as you wait.

The church is only hopeless if we forget our identity. God defines us, Jesus refines us, God's spirit empowers us to live as witnesses in this world. He surges into our mind not only with the reminder to keep the church holy, but with the very power to do it.

How certain is this? Entirely certain. He will sustain you. He will do it. You will constantly be tempted to lean into the world for your assurance and comfort. But it never provides it.

Instead it more often accuses us. Try harder. Do better. But sustains the church blamelessly. He will be pleased with those who walk in light of who they are in Christ.

And though the world accuses you now while you wait, as we together labor as the church we will reach the end blameless when Jesus comes. Where are we? We are in a world that often makes us feel weak, silly, and foolish. But we are where we are in the sanctified status of Christ, as members of a living church, under the power of God's sustaining and enlivening grace and in the faithful and powerful hand of God.

This world is hard. It is attractive. But Christians can no more safely live as the world lives than a human can safely live as a bear. Why? Because identity matters. We are not sinners, we are saints saved by grace.

And this time of waiting is a time of God calling all those confused creatures back to himself.

1 Corinthians 1:9, 'God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

God will do it. And in the meantime he's shown you how you might avoid a terrible case of mistaken identity. You are a sinner, but you can find your sainthood in Jesus. In the church you will find the resources and relief you need to endure. In the Holy Spirit you will find the power to live in light of who you are. And one day, when Jesus comes back, we will see who we really are for we will see him for who he is.

So as we leave today, let us not forget our identity so that we might enjoy our true belonging.