

This Is Who We Are: Conversions and Convictions

Become...Who God created you to be—fully human, fully alive

[Mark 10:15-22](#)

I was in a meeting this last week where some experts were talking about branding. Not this kind of branding (on a cow); this kind (corporate logo). But actually, they said, the brand that a company or organization puts out into the world is not just a logo, or even a slogan; it's a promise. What a company says with its brand is a promise about what you can expect when you buy what that company sells, or when you do business with it. Here are a few examples I think you'll recognize right away:

GEICO - "15 minutes or less can save you 15% or more on car insurance."

BMW - "The Ultimate Driving Machine"

Walmart - "Save money. Live better."

Starbucks - whose mission is not to sell coffee, but "To inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time"

Those are big promises, aren't they? Walmart says if you come here to spend less money on what you purchase, the quality of your whole life will be better. Starbucks could almost be a church, as it promises to "inspire and nurture the human spirit" while you're drinking their coffee in pretty much any neighborhood in the world.

Churches have brands too—promises we make, sometimes out loud, and sometimes not so visibly—inviting people to come and be part of our communities. Most of the time we're not nearly as creative or thoughtful about branding as our corporate neighbors; churches don't usually think of ourselves as in the business of selling something. But it's a good exercise to think about what it is we promise, especially to people who are thinking—or thinking again—about whether this is a place that might be 'home' for them.

So for the next few weeks—the rest of this month—we're going to be looking at Campbell United Methodist Church's 'brand'. What is it we promise the world? And maybe more importantly, what can this church actually deliver?

This conversation seems important to have now. First, because the world seems like a pretty unsteady place right now. Some of the institutions we've counted on—trusted—to lead us and to give us confidence seem not so trustworthy. Our community and public relationships—what you might call 'the social fabric' have gotten frayed. Many people are asking, "Where are the places where I can safely bring my whole self? Who can I talk with honestly about what I hope, and what makes me afraid?"

Second, because this church is changing in some ways. We're growing. In a couple of weeks, you'll meet the next class of new members to the church. Twenty new people will have joined this church in the last four months. Every time we welcome someone new, and every time we let someone go, the shape of the congregation changes a little. That's a good thing. Who we are as a congregation ought to always be changing, as it includes and reflects the individuals who are part of it now. There are some things that don't change so readily, and shouldn't. "Conversions and convictions" we're calling them in this series—commitments that hold us together and that keep us looking together in the same direction.

And finally, this is a good time for us to think about what Campbell UMC promises to the world because we're thinking over the next few months about whether that promise should change a bit. We've started a process of thinking big, dreaming about what the bold vision is for this church in the next few years. To try and hear what difference God needs this church to make in this community and in the world. (It's not too late for you to get involved in that discussion. There are some details in your blue addendum this morning.) Before we talk about what's next for us, it's important to be conscious about how who we've been before, what we've already promised this church to be.

The church's website is the place where we have put those thoughts most clearly. We've done that for people who are wandering around on the Internet, looking for a faith community that might feel like home, a place that shares your sense of God and what you hope your spiritual life will look like. It's for visitors who have met someone who goes to Campbell UMC and who wants to know more about what makes their new friend who they are. Here's what we say, what you can expect here: an invitation to *you* to BECOME...to BE FOUND...to BE UNAFRAID.

We're going to talk more about each of these over the next few weeks. Today I want to focus on the first one: Become. The longer version of that promise is *Become who God created you to be—fully human, fully alive*. I love those words. But I hope they're more than pretty words.

"Become" implies change. Whatever you're becoming, you're not already that. That's not only true for people who haven't yet found a church; it's true for all of us, our whole lives long. This is fundamental to our understanding of faith here: that we've embarked on a journey of our own constant transformation. That being "who God created us to be" is not obvious or automatic; it's something different than just waking up in the morning and breathing. We are being re-shaped, all the time. If you want to be left alone; if you are looking for a place where the answers to life are fixed and timeless; if you just want to have reinforced the things you already know and what you learned to believe when you were a child, this may not be a church that appeals to you. Because what we say here is that change is integral to the Christian life...and change—in each of us and in the world—is what this church intends to help happen.

What happens when you let yourself in for a conversation like that? I think that's the conversation we saw in the passage from Mark we read this morning. In the other Gospels' versions of this story the man Jesus meets is sometimes referred to as 'the rich young ruler', so I imagine him as kind of young and well-established; confident, maybe even a little cocky. He comes to Jesus and says, "You're the teacher; I've heard good things about you. What's the meaning of life?" (Not exactly that, but isn't that what it means to ask "what shall I do to get eternal life"?)

"You know the commandments," Jesus says. Everyone knows those are the rules for living a good life. Jesus is thinking, *You've already got this figured out, don't you?*

"Yeah, I've already done all those things." the successful young man says. *Really?* I imagine Jesus wondering; *Then why are you here? What's missing for you?* There was something in that guy, some longing, that pulled at Jesus' heart. The Bible says Jesus "looked him hard in the eye—and loved him."

"Well, there's one thing left for you to do, then," Jesus said. "Go sell your assets. Give the money away. Then you can come follow me." The young man's face "clouded over", Mark says. He walked off with a heavy heart because, it says, "he was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go."

This is one of the few stories in the Gospels where we see someone turn away from Jesus, refuse his invitation to come follow. I think maybe Jesus' heart leaned toward this guy because he understood him so well. This all-together young man said he wanted to do the right thing, wanted to get himself right with God. But what he really wanted was to be told that he was already good. Jesus saw right through him, to the thing that was most important to this young man. The thing he couldn't let go of, even to put something more true in its place. The thing that tied his hands and his feet.

In this young man's case, what held him in place was his money. But this is not a story about money. This is not a lesson that says only people who give everything to the poor can get into heaven. This is a story about the things that we can't let go of. Sometimes it's our money, or our success. Our certainty. All good things, but they can keep us from being available to the next step in our own growth. "Hands-off," they say. I know this. I hesitated for years to leave a career I was unhappy in, because I couldn't imagine being a beginner again.

The natural progression of our lives is to develop a harder and harder shell around ourselves the longer we live. More layers of protection against being challenged, more arguments to bolster our sense of being right. Think about it: children are learning all the time. They know they have to grow and change; they don't start with much knowledge to protect. For adults, it's what we already know that keeps us from learning more. It's what we already hold that keeps us from letting go enough to change.

Richard Rohr says, "Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control, power, money, pleasure and security. Then [Christians] tend to be pretty much like everybody else. [The Church] gave them a bogus version of the Gospel, some fast-food religion, without any deep transformation of the self; and the result has been a spiritual disaster—'Christian' countries that tend to be as consumer-oriented, proud, warlike, racist, class-conscious, and addictive as everybody else."¹

In this church, we are searching for—and I hope we're offering—something more nourishing than fast-food religion, the kind that leaves you alone and never challenges you to be anything other than the way you already are.

Here there's an invitation—to the process of your own *becoming*. Not for the sake of change alone, but because we are a people who believe that there is something more than the kind of life we're likely to find on our own, casting around for what we can accumulate, working harder and harder for some elusive reward. We are a people who know from our own experience that no matter what life throws at us, no matter what we might be asked to give up along the way, all through a life that no doubt will include many losses and setbacks, God is a trustworthy partner in shaping and defining our hearts. That we are invited to a life that will take us to what God has wanted for us all along: to be fully human, fully alive.

That's a promise.

¹ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, p. xxi