

Year A, August 31, 2008
13 Pentecost (Proper 17)
Christ Church, Mexia

The heading above the scripture from Paul's letter to the Romans today is "the marks of a true Christian." We're used to "marks" in today's society. I think it started with the Izod Alligator when I was fairly young, and now almost all "good" clothes, designer clothes, bear a distinguishing mark. And the trademark is one of the strongest legal claims there is, provided you defend it. For example, years ago authors who published in the journal I edit used the term "skunk works" - a term made popular by Peters and Waterman in their book, ***In Search of Excellence***, circa 1982. However, Lockheed Martin, whom they referenced, actually registered that term as a trademark – ®. I know that because of the letters I got from a San Francisco law firm on each occasion that it appeared in the journal without the circle R and credit being given to Lockheed Martin. I was so glad when people no longer used the term!

Such marks, brands, etc. are important to businesses so that they can distinguish themselves in the minds of the consumer and differentiate themselves from the competition. Many of you are most likely familiar with Tide, the washing detergent. (read the funny, fictional letter to the makers of Tide)

A Thank You Letter to Tide Detergent Manufacturers

Friday, February 11, 2011

I am writing to say what an excellent product you have. I've used it all of my married life, as my Mom always told me it was the best. Now that I am in my fifties I find it even better! In fact, about a month ago, I spilled some red wine on my new white blouse. My inconsiderate and uncaring husband started to belittle me about how clumsy I was, and generally started becoming a pain in the neck. One thing led to another and somehow, I ended up with his blood on my new white blouse! I grabbed my bottle of Tide with bleach alternative, and to my surprise and satisfaction, all of the stains came out! In fact, the stains came out so well the detectives who came by yesterday told me that the DNA tests on my blouse were negative. And then my attorney called and said that I was no longer considered a suspect in the disappearance of my husband.

What a relief! Going through menopause is bad enough without being a murder suspect I thank you, once again, for having a great product.

Well, gotta go, have to write to the Hefty bag people

Well, everyone likes to hear from satisfied customers

These brands can even be adopted by us. I mean wouldn't it be cool to say you drive a Mercedes, wear a Rolex watch, carry a Louie Vuitton bag, for example - and we really don't have to say it, people can see it for themselves. And, in a way, it becomes a part of our identity quite often.

Churches have marks too. In the earliest days of the church, when Christians were being persecuted, the fish became a secret symbol, to allow Christians to identify fellow Christians, without risking exposure to authorities or people who would turn them in to the authorities. The cross, however, is probably the most familiar and recognizable mark of a Christian today, as the Star of David is to Jewish people.

The different denominations of Christianity have different marks: the Methodists, the flame and the cross, the Lutheran Church (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) – a globe with a cross dividing it into 4 multicolored quadrants and the saying, "God's work. Our hands." The "tag line" has become an important addition to the marks today. And we even have our own mark for Christ Church, based upon the rose window at the front. It is prominent on our website and communications.

It is easy in today's culture to identify with the marks, everyone seemingly does, and to use them to help shape our own identity. But there is a caveat saying, "Clothes do not make the man (or woman)." It's not the outward physical appearance that counts.

Nothing in the passage from Romans speaks directly to marks in the sense we think of them today. Most of those "marks" were acts or behaviors, not physical things visible to others and those that were visible were not intended to be things that called attention to the person doing them. Almost all of them are difficult and run somewhat counter to human nature. For example, "...outdo one another in showing honor. ...Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ...do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly... Do not repay anyone evil for evil – so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Tough things to do; but this is what Christians are called to do – these are the **marks** of the true Christian according to St. Paul. Not the outward physical symbols that we use for our institutions, but loving and caring for one another, whoever the other may be - poor, disgusting, hateful, trying, one who makes our life miserable....

To say that we have been a politically divided country for most of this year is an understatement. But in the wake of Hurricane Harvey we see all manner of people helping each other, caring for each other without regard to race, creed, political viewpoints, whatever... People helping people, putting people first – not worrying that the building might sustain some damage while letting people find sanctuary there. Not worrying that the people sleeping and living in your warehouse may lessen the value of the inventory. Feeding people for free with your mobile food truck, not worrying about the monetary cost. We have witnessed so many incredible acts. It's just a shame that it took an unprecedented natural disaster to bring this about. Why can we not do more of this in ordinary times?

When I was a child, we knew our neighbors well, watched out for them and they did the same for us, so much better than we tend to do today. Sadly, the ethic of "self" identified by sociologists and futurists appears to have diminished our concern for others during normal times. We seem to be focused more on ourselves than others; we tend to be disconnected more often than connected. And even if we aren't, we are so busy that we have little time left for sabbath and relationships.

Christ tells us in the gospel today to deny ourselves, pick up our cross, and I don't believe he meant the wooden one he carried at the end - but rather the reality of living in this world among non-Christians and not-so-true Christians and all that means, and yet to follow him (his example), for aren't the marks of a true Christian really a description of the way in which Christ lived?

We will have a chance today and next week to share our wealth with those who have suffered and lost so much of theirs to Hurricane Harvey. And let's not forget the devastation and over 1,200 deaths caused in India and neighboring countries by the monsoon rains and flooding there. Hopefully, we can find other ways to assist, but I know that age and other factors limit us in many ways. Still I encourage us to be as generous as we can, and to demonstrate the marks of our Christianity however we may.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.

Amen.