

2 Corinthians 2:12-3:6
You Are My Letter
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
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Jay and Diane Nida are one of those couples who just stands out in a crowd. Their unmistakable appearance is surpassed only by their unparalleled soft-spokenness. Growing up in the large Presbyterian Church in the Twin Cities, they were a couple who I had recognized from as far back as I can remember, but because of the size of our church, never took the chance to get to know personally. So, a few years ago while home on vacation, in a moment of great courage, I boldly approached them and said: I grew up at this church and I have recognized you from the time I could remember but know nothing about you, my name is Jonathan.

Jay turned to his wife, from their first-row seat, with a glint in his eye, and then turned to me and wryly said, you may not know us, but we know you.

Huh? I think you've got me mixed up with someone else.

No, we don't Jonathan Paul Cornell.

They knew my middle name. Who were these people? And why were they stalking me?

You probably don't remember, but we were your Kindergarten Sunday School Teachers, and we have watched you grow and become a young man in this church.

But that was like 30 years ago.

We know, we keep track of all of our former students and continue to pray for you individually as you grow.

You see the Nida's have taught Kindergarten Sunday School at Hope Church for nearly 40 years. In those years, they've always attended first service. Then walked immediately down the corridor to the same classroom, where year in and year out they shared the stories of God's love to a group of lively 6 year olds. Quietly and inconspicuously, they are writing God's story of covenant love and faithfulness on little hearts year in and year out.

You are a letter of Christ. Written not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

The Philosopher Alistair MacIntyre says, we cannot know what it is we are to do in this life, until we first answer the question of what story are we a part. And the story of which we are a part is one that has been passed down, not just in books and ancient manuscripts, but in the lives of real people. People who have had an encounter with the living God. This is why we are here. The Holy Spirit is unfolding God's story in our lives each and every day.

Throughout this fall we are looking at a number of the great attributes of the Reformed Christian Faith Tradition. Last week we looked at the doctrine of election. How God not only chooses you, but more importantly appoints you to go and bear good fruit for his kingdom. Today we see that

God chooses us and calls us into covenant relationships in this peculiar community called the body of Christ.

We worship the God who is yearning to be in relationship with you and me. The Bible is the story that unfolds the lengths to which God will go to establish and maintain that bond. It's the story of God, in love, choosing to bind himself in relationship to us through a promise to this peculiar little tribe of Hebrews. The story of that community is a lot like our story, it's a story of success and failure, faithfulness and unfaithfulness, joy and sorrow, heartbreak and triumph. And the red thread that runs through it all is the God who never gives up. You and I are the evidence of God's work in progress, what Paul will later say in 2 Corinthians 5 that **God, in Christ, is reconciling the world to himself.**

One way God invites you into this community of grace is through witnessing that grace at work in others.

We live in a society that has a certain amount of built in suspicion towards others. Case in point: think about the last time you got an unexpected solicitation over the phone or in person. Take a moment and turn to your neighbor and show them with your face how you responded. By a show of hands, how many of you have asked the telemarketer for their phone number so you can call them back when they're sitting at dinner with their family?

The reality is that human beings are wired with caution, and this goes all the way back. During his first century journeys the Apostle Paul was a part of a culture that would often send a correspondence ahead of visits, these letters were validation of the trustworthiness of the person coming to visit. In Acts chapter 16 Paul, in a dream, is beckoned to come to Macedonia to share the gospel. Problem is, he's never been to Macedonia, and proceeds without a letter of recommendation. But what he does have is even more powerful, he has the Corinthian Community as his living recommendation. They are a living example of the Gospel's authenticity.

A few years ago one of our ministry partners, The Access Youth Center, had a tragedy in their midst. One of their kids had a parent pass away unexpectedly. This family had no church community to of which they were a part, and were in need of a place to hold a funeral dinner for the family, and someone to prepare it. You were the ones Laura and Liz looked to. And I remember, as you were serving fried chicken and green beans, filling lemonade glasses and bussing tables for these perfect strangers, we got word that there was a boy, a member of the family, who was standing out on Miami Street, not coming in. "I can't go in there, I'm not welcome in there, they'll judge me, they'll know who I am and what I've done."

So here we are standing inside wondering how we're going to convince this teenager to come in and have lunch. And up walks Bev Trantum. Hand him this. It was an envelope with his name on it.

So, the three of us went outside and handed the boy the envelope. He opened it and inside was a picture of classroom of kindergarteners, it was his class, his picture, his teacher...Bev Trantum. She had remembered him, she knew it was his family who had endured this tragic loss. Bev you were the letter of recommendation God used to get that young man in the door to share a meal with his family in a place he had previously felt unwelcome to enter.

The Christian Community has long been known, not primarily by their official doctrinal statements written on paper, and more for the witness of the Holy Spirit written upon the hearts of its people. There is an early Christian Document called the Epistle of Diognetus written by a man named Athenagoras (anyone here have a brother named Athenagoras?), in it is this description of the Peculiar people who call themselves CHRISTians:

The difference between Christians and the rest of mankind is not a matter of nationality, or language, or customs. Christians do not live in separate cities of their own, speak any special dialect, nor practice any eccentric way of life... They pass their lives in whatever township—Greek or foreign—each one's lot has determined; and conform to ordinary local usage in their clothing diet, and other habits. Nevertheless, the organization of their community does exhibit some features that are remarkable, and even surprising. For instance, though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behavior there is more like transients... Though destiny has placed them here in the flesh, they do not live after the flesh; their days are passed on earth, but their citizenship is above in the heavens. They obey prescribed laws, but in their own private lives they transcend the laws. They show love to all men—and all men persecute them. They are misunderstood, and condemned; yet by suffering death they are quickened into life. They are poor, yet making many rich; lacking all things, yet having all things in abundance... They repay curses with blessings, and abuse with courtesy. For the good they do, they suffer stripes as evildoers.

You are God's letter. We do not live in separate communities, but make up the fabric of this one. We are at the same time residents and aliens to the places in which we live. And because of that our lives read as a letter pointing to the community we call home—the family of God.

There is an old Young Life saying that says you may be the only Bible someone ever reads. The Catholic Spiritual writer Brennan Manning has this arresting statement: "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."

In Christ, we are adopted into the family of God and find our new identity as brothers and sisters of one another, since we now share one Father. Jesus in his longest extended prayer recorded in the Gospels, John chapter 17 says **I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us.**

We live in a world of such hostility and division that it sounds almost absurd to us that Jesus would call us to be one. And yet, even where institutional unity does not seem possible, we are bound to other Christians as our brothers and sisters. In Christ, the dividing wall of hostility created by nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, and language differences is brought down. God created people so that the rich variety of His wisdom might be reflected in the rich variety of human beings, and the church must already now begin to reflect the Kingdom dream of our Lord. Where every tribe and tongue and nation would bring their lives before God and be joined around the banquet table. Or where a teenager with a chip on his shoulder, would feel the warm welcome of a meal with his family freely offered by God's people.

We are a peculiar people. And our activities bear witness to that peculiarity.

1. Hearing God's word preached
2. Sharing the sacraments
3. Mutual encouragement and accountability.