

Sermon for Ascension Sunday June 2, 2019 given at Calvary UMC Somerset by Arnie McFarland
Evaluated and revised May 29, 2019.

Introduction:

Letters are neat! We all like to get letters. Letters are the reason we go to the mailbox everyday, because maybe just maybe there will be a handwritten, personal letter. Letters say, “Hey! I was thinking of you.” Letters make us hit the pause button and turn down the sound. We drop everything to read a letter. And, if it’s a love letter, that’s really special. Love letters don’t get thrown away; they get folded up and put in a place where they can be read over and over again. You keep a love letter close to your heart because someone has sent their heart to you. Oh yes, we all like to get letters, especially love letters.

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In Jesus's day sometimes people used letters as a form of introduction. This letter of reference proved someone was who they say they are, like the things we carry around with us to show folks who we are.

We have similar ways to prove who we are. They are our ID's that we carry with us such as our driver's license or passport. We also have numbers we memorize to show who we are such as our social security number or our address and phone number. These memorized credentials tell people who we are and where we're from.

The Internet has introduced a whole new way to identify ourselves; it's our username and password.

All these cards, and numbers, ID's and passwords are ways of proving who we are to people who otherwise don't know us. Our credentials give us identity. Our credentials are meant to be read by

others. They tell people we are who we say who we are.

So how do we prove who we are as Christians? How can we show people we really are the Christians we say we are? In other words, what credentials can we pull out that tell people we belong to God's church? Now we're talking about a whole new set of credentials. To prove we're Christians, we might point the cross around our neck or the cross and flame lapel pin we wear. We might say we belong to Calvary United Methodist Church and to prove it we could point to the outside of the building where there is a sign that identifies the church and we might show them the cornerstones that mark our presence. . Then we might take them inside and point to the freshly painted ceiling, beautiful stained-glass windows, comfortable pews, and lots of extra chairs. We could show them with pride our simple but elegant altar and

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talk about our outstanding music programs featuring a top-notch organ and piano. We could mention that we worship here. We pray here. We give our tithes and offerings here. Some might people might say it seems like we live here because we come to every activity. So, to show we're Christian, we point to our church as our credential that says we are Christians.

But is a church building an adequate credential to show we're real Christians? Don't we need something more? When I go to vote, my library card is not an adequate credential to get into the voting booth. The Library card might say who I am but I need more proof that says I am who I say I am. In fact I need the proof the county supplied me, my voter registration card. If we want to register as valid Christians to the world, we need to do more than show people our building. We must show them our faith. A few years ago the Western Pennsylvania

Conference of the United Methodist Church did a multi-media campaign of billboards, radio and television advertising. We told everyone we had open hearts, open minds, and open doors. We said if you are searching for a new beginning, you can find it with the people of the United Methodist Church. That's a pretty bold statement to make. How are we going to back it up? How will we prove to visitors who might come that we are God's people and they are visiting God's church? Just saying it doesn't make it so; we must show people that we are who we say we are by doing what our words say. We must show them how we live our faith. If we say we're the church with open hearts, open minds, open doors, then we need act like it by welcoming people no matter how they are dressed or what color their skin is. The church is not the building, but rather the people acting as Christ for the world. So, when we say "We're

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Christian, we belong to Calvary United Methodist church”, we need further proof than just pointing to our beloved beautiful building. We must show the credential of following Christ with open hearts, open minds, open doors.

And guess what? Just like the county issues a proper credential that allows us to vote, God gives us the ultimate proof we are who we say we are—God’s letter of recommendation. It is a letter of recommendation that’s really nothing, but a love letter written on our hearts by Holy Spirit. But this love letter is not addressed to us, it’s addressed to everyone we meet. God’s love letter written on our hearts says to all the world “You are God’s and God loves you.” So, newcomers visiting Park Avenue United Methodist Church will know that we are Christians when, we show them God’s love letter on our heart with a warm and friendly greeting. We might present God’s love letter to a frustrated traveler when we help them change their flat tire or when our helping hands gently guide a lost child back to its mother. The elderly lady with the broken hip

reads God’s love letter when we mow her yard for her. We deliver God’s special letter to the family across the street that just lost a loved one when we take them a casserole and offer to do their dishes. When we tell our state representative, we want stronger enforcement of drunken driving laws we present our Christian credentials. As we volunteer to work for the local Faith in Action organization or give some of our time providing day care for senior citizen, we demonstrate the power of God’s special letter. When we serve at the Swiss Steak Dinner or help make gobs or enchiladas, we put another crease in our love letter from God. Each time we visit the sick, feed the hungry, or clothe the naked we are letting people read God’s special love letter to the world written on our hearts. When we do for our neighbors what Jesus would do for us we unfold God’s special love letter and let it be read one more time. Maybe just maybe somebody has come to church today so they can read that letter God has written to them on your heart. God has placed his heart in our hands in the form of a love letter written on our hearts and we should want his

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**love letter to be read by everyone because it says we are
Christians and we belong to God.**

So you know what having God's letter on our hearts means? You and I are God's postal service. Just like the mailman has a bag full of mail that is not addressed to him, we have a heart with a letter from God that is not addressed just to us. Our job as Christians is to deliver God's love letter to everyone we meet. Now, I know some of you are tired. And the last thing you want to do is add yet another job to the long list of everything you already do around here. I know you have come to this church since you were born. You have chaired every committee twice. You have come to every fundraiser. You have volunteered at food pantry. You've made enchiladas, peanut brittle, gobs and Swiss steak out the wazoo. You have emptied your attics for the annual flea market only to fill them again with everything you bought. You and your many acts of love / are this church. The love letter that God has written on your heart is tattered and worn around the edges from being read so many times. Thanks be to God! But, if you stop giving, and serving—if your letter gets folded up and put it away never to be read again, it becomes a lost message from an

unknown God. The church is supposed to function as a great big love letter exchange where you show your letter to others and they show theirs to you. If you stop coming to church, you miss the chance to read your letter from God. See if you stop showing your letter to others, you'll stop the exchange. You'll miss that precious special love letter from God that is addressed to you. Just as the letter on your heart is meant to be read by others, there are letters carried by others that are addressed to you. God's special love letters are meant to be read over and over. Some of you already know this special truth about what spirit of God has written in your heart because you keep coming to church, and visiting the shut-ins, and helping with the dinners. You have learned that when you give you always get more out of the effort than you put into it. That's the beauty of the Christian way of life. We're just one big postal exchange of God's love letters that we carry on our hearts for others and as many times as we deliver the message from God, we receive one as well.

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Conclusion: How will folks know we are real Christians? Not by pointing to this beautiful building as wonderful as it is, not by seeing our ads on television or spotting one of our billboards; They will know we are Christians by our love letters that are written on our hearts by the spirit of God that are to be known and read by all. These letters prove we are Christians, we belong to God.

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Move1. I want the people to recognize that we still need credentials. Function: Show how our everyday life is full of the need to prove who we are.

Move2. At times we need to prove we are Christian. Function: Explore the many ways we use credentials that say we Christian, but really prove nothing.

Move 3. I want people to realize that the church building is not adequate proof of our Christianity. Function: Begin to think in terms of how the way we live proves who we are.

Move 4. The letters written on our hearts prove we are Christian. Function: Get the people to understand that their Christian acts of love are what prove they are Christian.

Move 5. These letters are addressed to others so there's one out there for you. Function I want the people to feel the need to continue the work of God not only so their letters may be read, but so that they themselves may receive God's letter addressed to them.