

WHAT I ALSO RECEIVED

February 7, 2010

Text – Isaiah 6: 1 - 8
I Corinthians 15: 1 - 11

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received,” we hear Paul say. I didn’t make this up. It did not start with me. Yes, you heard it from me first, but I have no pride of authorship here. Indeed, he says, this message of ours has a lineage. You can trace it back.

“He [the Risen Christ] appeared to Cephas [which is to say, Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” [I Corinthians 15: 5-8]

Life works like this, doesn’t it? First impressions notwithstanding, each of us stands in a long line. You can see it as you leaf through the family scrapbook. Sometimes the physical resemblances are uncanny. We’ve a picture of our son Gabriel gathering dust on a shelf at home; it was taken thirty eight years ago when he was three months old. His son, Tao (who will be 4 in two weeks), was almost his twin at the exact same age. I can see a similar likeness in my own photographs from childhood and in the pictures I have of my father when he was a boy. It gives fresh meaning to that old saying, “The nuts don’t fall far from the tree!”

What is true of our physical bodies is also often true of our spiritual selves. *“I am reminded of your sincere faith,”* Paul’s second letter to Timothy begins, *“a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and (which) now, I am sure, dwells in you.”*

[II Timothy 1: 5] So often that’s how it happens, isn’t it? Attitude, spirit, disposition ... call it what you will ... it gets passed down from one generation to another. That isn’t to say, of course, that who we are and what we believe is pre-determined by the circumstances of our birth, but we are heavily influenced by our family heritage, are we not? This is why the work we do as parents is so important. For better or worse we do and we will pass on to our children, and our children’s children, not just physical attributes but spiritual attitudes – outlooks and temperaments which

will influence their experiences of life for better or worse. And yes, it's a lot of work – demanding, exhausting, exasperating no doubt. But it's worth it. It's worth it.

So Paul writes – *“I delivered to you (I passed on to you) as of first importance what I also received”* . . . and that's exactly what goes on around here on Sunday mornings as well. Adrienne and I “pass on” . . . we try to “deliver” . . . what we have first “received.” Received in the course of our living and loving. Received through the privilege we've had to study scripture and theology. Received by the grace of God through the medium of friendship and discipleship with the Spirit of the Risen and Living Christ who dwells wherever two or three gather together in His name.

All of this came home to me with fresh meaning two weeks ago when I was invited to preach at the C.S.I. church in Kirathoor, a small village in Tamil Nadu, India. The invitation (as usual) came quite late; there was no time to prepare a manuscript. There wasn't even time to “borrow” one from my well-loved collection of “oldies but goodies.” The sanctuary in Kirathoor is brand new, and easily as large as ours here. It was full to overflowing that morning, just as ours is on Christmas Eve or Easter morning, but of course this was the third Sunday of Epiphany, which is nobody's idea of a “high holy day” even in southern India.

“Will you please bring your American cassock with you?” the pastor there wrote in his letter of invitation to me; “it will be a nice change for the people here.” So I did. I took my robe and stole and wore them even though it was a sunny 90° day. It made for quite a contrast. C.S.I. pastors wear white cassocks to lead worship which contrast favorably with their mahogany skin color; there I was dressed in black with my white skin! We were quite a pair, he and I – although his ebony was far more handsome than my ivory.

I found myself thinking that morning about the contrasts not just between our clerical garb but also between our sanctuaries. Both are large and spacious, but where we have windows they have doorways which stand open to the fresh air. Their pews are wooden benches without benefit of the padded cushions which adorn ours, but for all of that still just about as comfortable (!).

What message shall I bring? I wondered. What is it that we share in common? And then

I thought about our 167 year-old sanctuary, and in particular about the pulpit which our forebears placed so prominently in the center of the chancel. It is the focal point of the room; your eye is drawn to it immediately. More than a pulpit in the traditional sense, however, it is designed to be a stand upon which the Bible lies open.

“Those who gather in this place,” the (this) room says, “come to hear the Word of God read and proclaimed. We are the people who believe that the Bible – when read with reason, faith and conscience – is the sufficient rule for life.”

Now that, of course, is in fact the heart of our reformed Congregational faith tradition, and has been so for nearly half a millennia. But our church has taken it a step further, for on the back side of that pulpit – facing the place where the preacher must sit – are five words in bold relief: “We wish to see Jesus.” They come from the 12th chapter of the Gospel of John.

George Lawrence put them there nearly fifty years ago. They remind me every time I stand there that nobody comes here to see Bob Lee on a Sunday morning; they come – we come – because “we wish to see Jesus.” It is Jesus of Nazareth who gathers us together. It is Jesus of Nazareth we would know more about. It is Jesus of Nazareth who holds the key to life.

That is the message that has been “passed down” to us, isn’t it? It is as true in Kirathoor, South India, as it is in Burlington, Vermont. We wish to see Jesus. But how do you do that? What does he look like? Does he have dark skin and a white cassock, or white skin and a black Geneva gown? Neither answer works, does it?

If you open your Bible to the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians, you will find an answer that works, whether you are preaching in India or New England. It says to those who would stand in the pulpit – “If I speak in the tongues of men or angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I possess prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

If “we wish to see Jesus,” in other words, eloquence and wisdom and even self-sacrifice will not suffice, for Jesus is to be seen in only one way.

“Love is patient and kind. It is not jealous or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. It doesn’t rejoice in the wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

If you wish to see Jesus, I hear the message to be, then look for this love. And if you would be a Christian – literally, “like Christ” –, then model this love in your life. None of us will ever do that perfectly. “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but one day we will see face to face. Now we know only in part, but one day we shall understand fully, even as we have been fully understood.” That’s the way the Bible puts it. And it’s true. It works ... in India and here.

That’s the message I have come to pass on to you. It’s the message I have heard and received from others, and have found in my own living to be absolutely trustworthy. It has a lineage. I have become part of it. Won’t you carry it forward from here by the way you live ... and above all, by the way you love? I hope so. Amen.