

“Messengers of the Gospel: Our Christian DNA”

Psalm 8

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

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As I begin my second year among you, I feel we've turned a corner. The initial “getting to know you” is drawing to a close, and the next phase of our life is opening before us. One of my clergy friends quipped that the second year of ministry is a little like, “Great Act I – what are you going to do for Act II?”

I want to take a moment to give you a glimpse of what Act II will look like: it will be about helping us personally and institutionally work toward the three priorities set by Long Range Planning: equipping us

- to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ;
- to provide a community of spiritual nurture; and
- to promote God's vision of justice.

That's a tall order, and it won't happen overnight. In fact, we'll never completely arrive. But our committees and boards are beginning to plan so that at least we're all moving in the same direction – starting by exploring the first of the three priorities: what it means for us to proclaim the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To support their work, and to draw us all toward the same goal, today I begin a six week series on what it means for *us* –you and I – to be messengers of the gospel. Today I want to lay the groundwork for how this message gets carried by the likes of us. A reading from the book of Hebrews

A stranger knocks on the door, and we know there is a message waiting for us. A stranger in a police uniform knocks on the door, and we know the message is not good: has there been an accident? Is our child in trouble? Are the neighbors complaining again? A stranger in a UPS uniform knocks on the door, and we trust the content being delivered is welcome indeed, especially if it's Christmas and the sender is someone we know. A shorter stranger in a Brownie uniform knocks on the door and we are certain without a doubt that we want the product that she's bringing. And all of them are messengers, carrying some information, or a gift, or a product to convey to us.

As I've been thinking about what it means for us to be messengers of the gospel of Jesus Christ, this is the first image that comes to mind: that we are people commissioned to carry this particular information, gift, or goods to convey to others who dearly need to receive it.

But there is another, but another, deeper way in which we carry messages – unthinkingly, through our very DNA. And that's the image that I want to explore with you today: how we are messengers of the gospel – not just in content that we carry, but in very being, in our Christian DNA.

We say it all the time, but rarely think about what we're saying: when we're baptized into Christ, we become brothers and sisters in him. I began to think about this image earlier this

year when we celebrated Pentecost, and a friend helped me see something completely new: In exact parallel to the way the Holy Spirit came upon Mary at the Annunciation, bringing forth the person of Jesus, so it is that the Holy Spirit came upon the early believers at Pentecost, bringing forth the body of Christ the church. The parallels between these “birth stories” at the beginning of the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are uncanny. What happened at Pentecost tells us this: when any of us is baptized by the Holy Spirit, *we* become children of God, heirs with Christ, offspring of the Spirit. In other words, the Holy Spirit is in our DNA. (as described by Leanne Pearce Reed, pastor of Montevallo Presbyterian Church, Montevallo, AL in her paper for the 2006 Moveable Feast).

How does DNA work? We all know our biology: the double helix, a work of art, carries the traits of one generation to the next, copying and combining them with other DNA, over and over and over again. So it is that I have my mother’s blue eyes; I have my father’s insatiable intellectual curiosity. And if I go back another generation I discover in my grandmother the source of my stocky legs and solidly Armenian nose. All my physical and many of my emotional traits can be traced, generation back to generation back to generation, through Germany and England on my mother’s side and Armenia on my father’s. And I have passed that DNA onto my daughter, who has her father’s big brown eyes but has my thick brown hair; and if we are blessed to have grandchildren some day, she will pass along some of that DNA as well.

I’m convinced that’s one of the ways we carry Christ’s message, and in the weeks ahead I seek to test my hypothesis. If I am right, then just like any family we will find distinguishing marks and traits that keep turning up. And just like any family a family story or two will keep turning up, shaping the way we think about ourselves, and how we face the world. And just like any family some cherished core values will keep turning up, not just folkways but deep-seated principles without which we wouldn’t recognize ourselves. And just like any family, some heroes and characters will also turn up, the people on our family tree who loom large in their impact on us and on our world.

This is how the writer of Hebrews put it: “God’s Son, whom God appointed heir of all things ... is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being. ... And the one who makes us holy, and we who are being made holy, all have one Father. Jesus is not ashamed to call [us] brothers and sisters, saying, ‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.’” (Hebrews 1:2; 2:11-12)

Maybe a story will make it all more real.

Twenty years ago, my dearest friend Bob Dunham, himself a preacher, heard renowned Southern preacher Fred Craddock tell a story that Bob has passed on to his church and I now pass on to you. Like good DNA, it is a story that bears repeating.

“Fred ... told the story about a day when he and his wife stopped for a meal in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Fred was a native Tennessean and knew the area, so he chose a

restaurant that had a marvelous view of the mountains. They were just perusing the menus when a man walked up and began to talk. He asked if they were from around those parts.

‘No,’ said Fred, ‘we’re from Atlanta.’

‘What do you do in Atlanta?’ the man asked Fred. Fred told him he taught at a seminary there.

‘Oh, you’re a preacher!’ the man said, and he pulled up a chair and said, ‘I’ve got a preacher story to tell you.’ Fred said he winced internally, but politely kept his smile as the man began to speak.

‘I was born right up here in a small town back in these mountains,’ he said. ‘But my mother wasn’t married, and folks didn’t take very kindly to her or to me. It wasn’t easy growing up there. Everywhere I went I heard the whispers, even at church. The other boys and girls used to shun me, or call me names. Everybody asked me things like, ‘Who’s your daddy, boy?’ So I kept pretty much to myself for the longest time. I stopped going to church at all.

‘Then one day a new preacher came to town. He was tall and thin and wore a black coat. People were talking about what a good preacher he was, and I wanted to hear for myself. So one Sunday I went. I didn’t want to be part of the crowd, so I sneaked in after the first hymn and sat on the back row, and left before the last hymn was over so I wouldn’t be seen. I liked his preaching, so I started doing the same thing every week.

‘Then one Sunday someone came in even later than I did and crowded in after I did. I was stuck and couldn’t get out. After the benediction I started trying to make my way through the crowd, when all of a sudden I bumped into a man. Looking up I saw it was the preacher. He looked at me and said, ‘Whose boy are you, son?’ And I thought, oh no! Not right here in church.

‘Then he looked intently at me, and spoke again, ‘Well, I declare, I know who you are. I can see the resemblance as clear as day. Why, you’re... you’re... you’re... a child of God.’ Then he slapped me on the backside and said, ‘Now, go on out there son, and claim your inheritance.’

As the man got up to leave, Fred thanked him for sharing the story, stuck out his hand, and said, ‘I’m Fred Craddock.’ The man replied, ‘I’m Ben Hooper.’ Fred said, ‘Ben Hooper. Ben Hooper. Seems to me my mother used to talk about a man who was born an illegitimate child, and who was twice elected governor of Tennessee, whose name was Ben Hooper.’

‘That’s right,’ said the man. ‘That’s me. And I tell you, preacher; I was reborn that day in the church right up there in these mountains.’ [This story was first heard by Bob Dunham at a preacher’s conference in the 1980s; Bob serves as Pastor of University Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, NC.]

Here’s the thing: we *all* are reborn by the Spirit of God. No matter what our parentage, no matter what our lineage, we are family now – bearing resemblance to each other – bearing a resemblance to our brother Jesus. And now it’s time – it’s time we reclaim our inheritance – our inheritance as messengers of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.