

“Our Family’s Future”
Psalm 96:1-7
Romans 12:1-2, 9-17, 21

The Rev. Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Last summer the Session set before our congregation three priorities: proclaiming the message of the gospel, providing a community of spiritual nurture, and promoting God’s vision of justice. These three elements constitute our core business, if you will, without which we should either shut our doors or call ourselves something else – a community center, a philanthropic foundation, whatever. Put positively, with these three key purposes, we can measure whether we’re being effective – effective individually and collectively as a church that bears Christ’s name.

But as any business leader knows, identifying our core mission isn’t the same as carrying it out. The work before us now is to put legs under that vision, beginning with our first core mission: how do we proclaim honorably and competently the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

This is the final segment of my sermon series laying out a framework for answering that question. As Christians we do not bear the message of the gospel as much as a UPS carrier hauls a package, but more in the way a family carries its signature DNA. The identity we receive in baptism – as a child of the covenant, marked as Christ’s own forever -- the identity we receive in baptism makes each of us a carrier of the spiritual mapping of Christ’s family. Regardless of our blood family origins – blue-blood or fresh off the boat, educated or ignorant, legitimate or suspect – regardless of our fleshly DNA, the Holy Spirit gives us a new and overriding identity in baptism. St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians puts it this way: “Now there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ... [now] you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28-29). Now we share the same sacred lineage; now we dare to see in ourselves and in one another the same noble blood ... the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord.

What does this mean for us? I have tried to say this: the message of the gospel is far more than a creed we recite, or a statement of beliefs we convey or defend. Instead, the message of the gospel is conveyed in the family traits we prize, Christly traits like compassion,

humility, and grace. And the message is conveyed from generation to generation in the telling of our family story -- the identifying narrative by which we trace our heritage. And the message is conveyed in the family values to which we aspire, values like devotion to the one sovereign God and esteem for the gifts of each individual believer. And the gospel message is conveyed in the family tree we share, the saints of old and saints of late to whom we owe a debt of gratitude.

And today, as I draw this sermon series to a close, there is but one more thing -- a crucial thing -- to say: the gospel message is ours to convey now. A family -- any family -- is always just one generation from its stories, its treasures, its traits disappearing. It is up to our generation to keep the message going, so that it may thrive for generations still to come. I want to name some concrete ways for us to do that.

Let me start by returning to the image of DNA again for a moment. I am indebted to Jeanne Lane, who sent me an article she'd just read about genetic replication within our bodies, and saw a wonderful analogy to what happens to us in the body of Christ. The article notes that it's not enough for our body simply to *have* genetic information. For our body to *use* the genetic information, "a copy must first be made and transferred to the outer parts of the cells. ... The copying process is called transcription." In order to stay healthy, we must constantly replicating this material -- a lifelong process first discovered by researcher Roger Kornberg. Transcription is so necessary for life that:

"If transcription stops, genetic information is no longer transferred into the different parts of the body. Since these are then no longer renewed, the organism dies This is what happens in cases of poisoning by certain toadstools, like the death cap, since the toxin stops the transcription process. ... Disturbances in the transcription process are [also] involved in many ... illnesses such as cancer, heart disease and various kinds of inflammation." (Citation unknown, from an e-mail from Jeanne Lane on 10/05/06 in reference to this sermon series.)

The healthy body *uses* its genetic information by *transcribing* it. Is this not also true for the body of Christ? As long as our spiritual DNA keeps being renewed and replicated, our faith

remains strong. But we face potential disturbances in the transcription process – the toxicity of materialism and entitlement; the flabbiness of occasional spirituality; the nutritional deficiencies of fast-food-faith, even the atrophy of keeping our faith unarticulated and unshared. When we cease replicating our spiritual genetic information, when we cease transmitting it, carrying it, replicating it, then our spiritual well-being suffers. But when we engage in practices that pass it along to other parts of the body of Christ, we are actually reinvigorating ourselves. This is what I think St. Paul is saying, if unscientifically, when he says, “Present your selves as a living sacrifice Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12:1-2).

It makes sense to me empirically. The people I know whose faith is most vital are the ones who have shared something of their faith with others. Sunday School teachers who literally tell the family stories to the children ... businessmen and women with transparent integrity, who pass on Christ’s values by the tough decisions that they make ... youth who put their faith to work in Ocean Springs, Mississippi – their spiritual DNA is fresh and strong because it’s constantly renewed – and it’s renewed by the very act of replicating it, copying it, transmitting it to other parts of the body of Christ. As a congregation, then, one of the keys to our effectiveness will be to identify ways we already share our faith and increase those opportunities. For example, one of the most moving experiences is our Wednesday morning Chapel services in Lent, when members of the church are invited to give a brief account of their faith. There’s something incredibly powerful about hearing an “ordinary” person talk about God’s presence – and I know that it is equally transforming for the speakers to put their faith experience to words. My hope is that we will become increasingly comfortable in articulating our faith – and I look forward to growing the number of safe and appropriate settings, like small groups, or even committee meetings, in which we can do that as a normal practice.

It’s also important that we grow more familiar with the content of what we’re called to pass along. Not all traits are Christly traits, are they? It’s hard to aspire to them if we’re not clear what they are. Not all values are Christian values. Can we confidently identify the values we inherited from our Christian forbears, especially the Reformed branch of our family tree?

Even the family story is a bit murky for many of us. Many of us who are still this side of 50 grew up in a time when denominational curricula didn't focus on the Bible stories, so they never lodged in our sweet little heads. How can we tell the story if we don't know how it goes? My hope is that by next fall we will have a plan in place to be especially intentional about these priorities – offering opportunities for all ages to have a baseline knowledge of our Christian identity. For example, I'd love to see something like "50 Bible stories we all need to know." Frankly, even I could use a refresher. And I'd love to see Sunday School somehow connect with worship, so that what happens with our children in their classrooms is not unrelated to what happens to their parents in the pews, so that in the car on the way home and at the dinner table after church and even mid-week when we tuck the kids in bed, there is a common thread, a shared experience, that our household at home can link with our household of God in this place.

Why does this matter? I love the way the great preacher Tom Long talks about it. Tom, who teaches at Emory University in Atlanta, describes the way we connect the everyday experiences of our lives with the identity we have in the family story that we hear in worship every week. He says,

"One of the things that worship does is tell the story, the great sweeping story of God's love affair with the world, from creation to the end of time, and then point the finger at every last one of us and announce, 'You're in this story. This is your story, too.' When we were baptized, we crossed the Red Sea with Moses and the Israelites, and we plunged down into the Jordan River with Jesus. Every Sunday, we walk right into God's house, dragging along with us the anxieties and joys of life – like worrying about our kids and drugs or trying to figure out just which way to turn next in our job or feeling so grateful for that new grandchild we spent the week bouncing on our knee – and we place the whole confusing episodic tangle of it in the offering plate and say, 'God, make sense of this.' And God takes the little half-baked subplots that make up our lives ... and does a little rewriting, and behold, they have become part of the biggest, best, most hopeful drama of all. No matter how episodic our life may seem when we are living it day to day, worship lets us see that we are actually key actors in a grand and holy narrative, and if we are paying attention, we walk out of worship knowing that life is a sacred drama and

ready to tell whoever will listen that we are all playing important roles, sacred roles”

(Thomas G. Long, *Testimony* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 124-5).

We are all playing sacred roles indeed. In fact we are all playing the most sacred role – the role of carrying on that which we have received, of handing down the treasure of our sacred story, and our family values; of replicating Christ’s family traits; of bearing the fruit of our Family Tree. We have a sacred role now, of carrying the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ – in our story, in our daily lives.

Someone told me that one of our beloved pastors – I think it was Herb Anderson – always ended his charge and benediction this way: “Your service now begins.” This is, in fact, an ancient tradition, which the earliest Christians understood as their charge. You who know the church’s story especially well may remember that in the Latin Mass,

“the last words of the service were spoken by the deacon: *‘Ite, missa est,’* which means ‘Go, you are dismissed’ or, even more literally, ‘Go, you are sent.’ The Latin word for *send* has the same root as the word *mission*. So when the blessing has been pronounced ... and we are gathering our coats and purses to leave the church, we are to think of ourselves as missionaries, as those who are sent. What are we sent to do? To be witnesses, [to be messengers of the gospel, carriers of the good news]. ... Where are we to go? To the world, of course, and for most of us, the world is not a mission field in some distant land but an ordinary place – a home, an office, a school – and the ... witness begins on Monday morning when the alarm clock sounds” (Thomas G. Long, p. 65).

How are we to do that? Not by beating people over the head with a Bible, but by humbly claiming who we really are: we are members of Christ’s family, bearers of Christ’s name, messengers of Christ’s DNA. To the extent that our own traits reflect Christ’s own traits of compassion and grace and truth-telling in love; to the extent that our own story becomes interwoven with the sacred story; to the extent that our personal and political values align themselves with God’s sovereign will; to the extent that the fruit we produce in our daily lives – over the course of a lifetime of conversations and choices – bears a resemblance to Christ’s family tree ... to the extent that we do these things, we are messengers – sacred messengers -- of the gospel of Jesus.

Every family is just one generation from disappearing. Someone, somewhere, passed on to you that which you have received. A few weeks ago I asked you to write down a name – of a person, of a teacher, of a church – that handed on to you the treasure of the good news that you hold now. I asked you to write that name down on a leaf, which was then hung on our Family Tree out in the Narthex. Now, I am asking you to write again. Only this time, I am asking you to write your own name now. If you are grateful for the gospel that you have received ... if you are committed to passing on the treasure that is yours now ... if you are ready to take hold of your sacred role as a messenger of the gospel of Jesus Christ, then in a moment I will ask you to take a pen and write your name now, on a leaf that's been placed in your bulletin. When it is time for the offering I will invite you to come forward – with your offering, with your financial pledge card, if you have it with you, and with your leaf: your spiritual pledge card, if you will, your pledge to carry the gospel ... to carry it in your very being.

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship,” St. Paul once wrote. May it be so, for every one of us here. Amen.