

“An Unclaimed Heritage”

a sermon by

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Text: “...and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joints heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:1-17).

One of the questions that people often ask ministers is: “Where do you get your sermons?” It is a fair question and one that could be answered in a number of ways. In the Presbyterian Church preaching has always been viewed as an exposition of Scripture.

One of the traditions of the Presbyterian Church is what is called “lectio continua” whereby the preacher will take a book of the Bible and preach through it verse by verse. This was certainly the style of preaching adopted by the Protestant Reformers of the 16th Century: John Calvin in Geneva, Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, and others as well who would often preach verse by verse through an entire book of the Bible sometimes spending a year or more on a book such as the Gospel of Matthew.

Now, at times this could become quite tedious. Someone once told of a minister who decided to preach one Sunday morning on the whole Bible. He began in Genesis and was working his way through all of the books of the Bible. After about two hours he had worked his way through the Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. As he made his way through the twelve so-called Minor Prophets, he paused for a minute. “Now,” he said, “we come to the book of Habakkuk. What shall we do with Habakkuk?” One tired listener jumped up and said, “He can have my seat. I’m leaving.”

Another answer to the question of “where do you get your sermons?” would be to say that most preachers get their sermons from a lot of places. After years of preaching, one develops a kind of sense that allows the preacher to find materials for sermons: in movies and books, in conversations and classes.

Those of us who are preachers are aware that there is a rich heritage of preaching on which to draw. Richard Lascher, who teaches preaching at the Duke Divinity School, has written a remarkable book on the preaching of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King was drawn to the oratorical style of Billy Graham as well as to the theological writings of Reinhold Niebuhr. Lascher points out that King, like almost every other preacher, borrowed sermon ideas and illustrations from many of the well-known preachers of his day.

On one occasion, Lascher points out, King joined a group of civil rights workers one night after a series of marches. At the end of each day, the group would have a prayer together and each person had the opportunity to offer a prayer. On that night a young white girl offered a prayer. In her prayer she said, "I have a dream that one day we will live in a country where people are not judged by the color of their skin." The prayer moved King in such a way that he could not get in out of his mind. It became the basis of the speech he made in 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

All of us who preach are aware of the great heritage in which we stand.

I.

This morning, as we come to the last Sunday of the year 2007, I would like for us to think of an unclaimed heritage. To be sure, most of us bear the name of Christians. We have supported the institutions of the church. We have sought to live an ethical life. But the question that I raise is this: Do we see ourselves as those who have received an unclaimed heritage?

The eighth chapter of Romans is one of the most important in all of the New Testament. In the latter part of this chapter, Paul speaks of the great hope we have in God's love for us and promises that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ."

But in the first part of this chapter (verses 1-17), Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the trinity. He speaks of the Spirit of God who dwells in us, gives life to us, and who allows us to speak of God as "Abba" or "father." But then, Paul goes on to say something else. He describes us as "heirs of god, and joint heirs with Christ."

I wonder how many of us think of our religion as a form of wealth? We may think of our faith as something to be believed, as something that needs to be done, but have we ever conceived of our faith as though it were wealth, available riches, and a bank account from which we might draw funds.

The New Testament speaks that way frequently. The disciples of Jesus were ordinary people—most of them were fishermen or tent makers, "not many mighty, not many noble." And yet they continually speak of their religious experience in terms of wealth—"the unsearchable riches of Christ" or "the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God."

We have, according to the Apostle Paul, a great heritage. We are "heirs of God and joint heirs of Christ." So, how do we live in such a fashion that acknowledges that we have received a great but unclaimed heritage?

II.

For one thing, we need to acknowledge that there are two dimensions of our faith. One dimension is what is given to us. The other is what is expected of us.

Paul reminds us that we are “heirs of God and joint heirs of Christ.” Our religious faith is an unsearchable richness. The New Testament affirms and is filled with this notion. Listen to the words of Jesus:

“Peace I leave you, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives give I to you. Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid.” (John 14: 27)

“Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.”
(Matthew 11:28)

That is Christianity conceived as privilege, happiness, enrichment, joy and its natural expressing is in a song, “Bless the Lord, all my soul and forget not his benefits.” (Psalm 103:1)

But there is another dimension to our religion. It is duty and obligation. When Jesus was asked the greatest commandment, he replied by saying “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might.” Then he went on to say that there was a second commandment, “That we love our neighbors as ourselves.”

There is a stern side to the words of Jesus. He minced no words about the cost of discipleship. On one occasion he told a man to follow him. When the man hesitated, Jesus was quick to condemn him. “No one, he said, “who puts his hand to the plow and then turns back is fit for the kingdom of God.” On another occasion, when Jesus commanded a person to follow him and that person said that he must first bury his father, Jesus condemned his lack of commitment. “Let the dead bury the dead,” said Jesus.

Nor did Jesus cut much slack to the religious leaders of his day. Matthew 23 contains one of the most acerbic attacks on organized religion in all of literature. Jesus called the Scribes and Pharisees of his day “blind guides.” They tried to lead others but were unable to walk themselves. He called them “whited sepulchers.” They were like burial vaults—white and clean on the outside, but on the inside, filled with the bones of the dead.

But there was another side of Jesus that many of us have missed. He had a remarkable way of reaching out to those who were on the fringe of his society—particularly to women and children. He counted among his followers women such as Mary Magdalene. When he encountered a group of men about to stone a woman taken in the act of adultery, he challenged her accusers that the person without any sin throw the first stone. And to the woman he said, “Go, and sin no more.”

And on another occasion he called to him a small child and set this child in the midst of his disciples, saying to them, “except you turn and become as little children, you shall in no wise inherit the kingdom of heaven.”

That was the winsome side of Jesus, which is so often forgotten. He loved people. He loved nature as well. “Consider the lilies of the field,” he once observed, “they toil not neither do they spin; yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed as one of these.”

That was the religious side of Jesus that drew people to him. “I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly.” That is the heritage he has bequeathed to us—wealth, enrichment, privilege, and joy.

III.

Surely, one of the great challenges that faces each one of us is the challenge of balancing the great comforts of our faith with the great challenges. Dr. John Leith once observed that the church in this country for many years has been divided between two distinct groups of people. On the one hand are those who understand their faith in terms of the comforts of heaven. On the other hand are those who see religion as a means of changing society. Now surely only those who are very wealthy and privileged could imagine that our religious faith is exhausted in enjoying the privileges of faith. On the other hand, one does have to live very long before one understands that there are some things in our society that will not be changed.

This past week I came across a remarkable piece in the Charlotte Observer by David Broder about Senator Barak Obama. In this article, Broder noted a rather dramatic change that had come across the campaign of Senator Obama in Iowa. Broder traced the change to an incident that happened several weeks ago in Greenwood, South Carolina. The Obama campaign was losing momentum. The crowds were getting small. On this occasion Senator Obama was speaking to a small group of people that had gathered in Greenwood. It was a lackluster speech and it was obvious that the candidate was trying to find some movement, some enthusiasm to pump into his campaign. At the end of his speech, he stopped and looked out at his audience as if to say, “What do you think?” And that point an elderly woman spoke out and began to chant, “Fired up. Ready to go.” Soon the others began to join her as the chant became louder and louder. That speech has become the defining moment of the Obama campaign.

There is, I believe, a correlation to our faith in Jesus Christ. It is one thing to say we believe, but it is quite another to take some action.

As we approach a New Year, my question for you the members of First Presbyterian Church is this: Are you fired up and ready to go?

We have an unprecedented opportunity here with a growing downtown and the prospect of 10,000 new people who will move into our neighborhood in the next few years. Are we fired up and ready to go?

On Christmas Eve at 5:00, over 800 people crowded our sanctuary to the point that we had to turn members of our church and their children away. For several years we have said that we need more space in our sanctuary. But are we fired up and ready to go?

For years now we have lamented the terrible plight of many of the neighborhoods in our city that resemble third world countries—children without adequate food, shelter, or education. But are we willing to get fired up about it?

The Apostle Paul said that we are “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” Now is the time to move from indecision to action.

Amen.