

### Portrait of Grace

Over the past few weeks, we have spent time with the Apostle Paul and his words to and for the church at Corinth. He has at times sounded frustrated and even angry. As he winds down this letter to his beloved, befuddling friends in Corinth, Paul is determined to end on a high note and to make sure the Corinthian church understands the essential message he wants them to hear. [Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-11]

Some of my most beloved treasures are hand-me-downs, including my great-great grandmother's table, a box of recipes handwritten by my grandmother, and a faded pinkish Victorian settee that once belonged to my great-grandmother. It has seen better days, and there have been times when we have wondered about recovering it or giving it away, but that little sofa has now survived two different moves and seems to be a permanent fixture in our home wherever we may be. We hang on to it because of who handed it on to us. Over that sofa hangs a portrait of my brother and me, one of my mom's most beloved treasures. Painted between my middle school and high school years, I have what can only be described as big, woofy hair. My brother—two years younger—barely hides a smirk in his smile. And I'm wearing a white dress that I remember buying with my mother and great-grandmother. This painting has been a source of laughter and frustration in recent years because it is one portrait of two people, and it is not small, so since splitting it down the middle is not a viable option, finding a spot for it has been a challenge. There are times when I wish mom had opted for individual portraits of my brother and me—making it much easier to rehome. Despite my joking about sawing it in half, it remains one portrait and it has a home—at least for now in our daughter's room, at her request.

Paul's closing words to the Corinthians are about another hand-me-down, the Christian faith. In very clear terms, he spells out for the church at Corinth that he and they stand in a tradition that has been given to them, handed down to them. As the Voice translation reads:

Let me remind you ... of the good news that I preached to you *when we first met*. *It's the essential message* that you have taken to heart, the central story you now base your life on, and through this gospel, you are liberated. <sup>1</sup>

He goes on to spell out the crucial basics of the gospel: Christ died, Christ was buried, Christ was raised after three days. This essential story is an early creedal statement. In other words, it lines out a formula that the Christian tradition adopts as a way of saying what we believe. That same formula, that same practiced way of saying what we believe makes its way into the Apostles' Creed a few hundred years later. It is a way of telling this story over and over again, a way of reminding others and ourselves of **THE** story that is central to who we are, who the church is. Paul did not create the story. He received it and he handed it on. We have received it, too, and it is our calling to hand it on, not simply as a collection of words but as a way of living. It is not about a litmus test or a threat—*believe this, or else*. It is instead an invitation to the Body of Christ to show with our lives and with our words what it means to be loved, claimed, and saved or made whole by Christ and to help others know what it is for them to be loved, claimed, and saved by him as well.

Today is another good and joy-filled day in the life of this congregation. Fourth and fifth graders received bibles in the hopes that they can read the story for themselves and wonder about the ways their lives connect with the story of God and God's people who have come before them and who will follow them. It remains our calling to help them with making that connection as we grow in faith together. And of course we baptized sweet baby Ava. She received a bible, too. We give every child we baptize a story bible that offers families the opportunity to share the story in simple ways with their children until those little ones are able to read the story for themselves. This practice mirrors our tradition of baptizing infants where parents make promises for their children until the children—with the nurture and support of the larger church—can choose to make those promises for themselves at confirmation.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:1, The Voice

It is easy to claim, to point to, and to lift up God's goodness and grace on high holy days like this one. Most of our lives are spent in the in-between days, however, the days when the life of faith is lived out in real time, the days of doctor's appointments, laundry, late night texts and phone calls, baseball practices, mortgage payments, childcare, and pink slips. Our challenge as Christ's body in the world is to help one another and the world at large claim, point to, and lift up God's abundant goodness and saving grace in those days, too.

As many of you know, as a rule younger generations are not interested in inheriting our stuff. Not everyone wants the dishes, crystal, linens, or the flatware that we, our parents, and grandparents collected. Few younger adults have the time, energy, space, or desire to care for all of these things. That said, in this time of tremendous change and upheaval, we have something worth handing on. We have received something far more valuable than the finest antiques. The faith that has been handed on to us is an invaluable legacy that we are called to hand on to others. The stuff will fade, rust, break, wrinkle, and tarnish. The grace in which we stand will not.

My faith in Jesus Christ did not originate with me, nor is it simply mine. I am only handing on the story I received from my parents who served on session, drove me to choir practices and youth group and taught Sunday school themselves. I also learned the story from Miss Jean who loved on me in the church nursery, from the Bondurants who taught my sixth-grade Sunday school class, from the Harwells who did their best to guide a bunch of restless and rowdy eighth graders through confirmation, and from the Turnbills who taught high school during the week *and* enthusiastically volunteered to hang out with high schoolers on Sunday evenings. Yes, I am indebted to pastors who faithfully preached and taught from a pulpit resembling this one. It is the larger church, however, who told me—and even more significantly who *showed* me—that I was unfailingly and abundantly loved by the God we meet in Jesus Christ and what that love looks like beyond Sundays in the way they cared for me and others the rest of the week, and the ways they lived—and still live—their faith in real time.

Now that I am more than a decade older than my mother was when that portrait was commissioned, I am able to see something in it that I hadn't before. My brother and I were growing up before her eyes, and

together we were her greatest treasure—yes, she called us that a lot, adding an extra syllable or two as she did with just about every word in the English language. And now I can see it. Behind careful brush strokes capturing my abundant hair and ruffles and my brother’s barely hidden smirk, there is a deeper story. The portrait tells a tale not simply of pretty colors and adolescent angst, but also of our parents’ fierce love for us, love that sought the best for us, love that called us to bask in the grace we had been given, love that urged us out to love and serve others. In that moment captured on that canvas, we were standing in that love while it swirled around us, whether we recognized it or not.

Paul is painting a similar portrait for the church at Corinth. With bold strokes and vivid images, he is creating a picture in which he invites the Corinthians and the church throughout the ages to see ourselves. He is telling a story—THE story—that he is hoping to hand down to us. We stand in a rich tradition—not one made of buildings or pastors or projects, but a tradition of grace and love that has been poured out for the entire creation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By no effort of our own, we stand in the midst of grace, the great good news of Jesus Christ. It is the most precious gift we have received. It is the air we breathe and the ground on which we stand. Paul and a whole host of saints have painted a portrait for us so that we can see that truth for ourselves. And it is our blessed calling to paint a portrait for Ava, for our 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders, for all our children, for one another, and for the world in real time, on glorious Sunday mornings in here, and in every beautiful, difficult, dark, or glorious moment out there. The canvas is stretched and primed. It is now our turn to pick up the palette and the brush and get to work.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.