

“People of the Inheritance”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

I hope that, as we talk about storytelling this week and the next month or so, that you think of your own story, as we share some of our own; and, I thought I would take one of Jill’s family’s pictures and put it on the bulletin cover today. This was from 1929, we think maybe 1930, but it looked like the fall of 1929. Jill’s mother is in the first row, third from the left – the littlest girl, and Jill’s grandma is in the back, row third from the left – the real tall lady. I knew them both and cared deeply about both of these women later in their lives. I was so envious, when I was growing up, [of] the people with large families. I came from a very, very small family, so we didn’t have many opportunities to have extended family come to see, and experience that.

So, when Jill and I started dating, I was surprised when she started talking to me (we met in Florida), of all of the family that she would just bring up in conversation here and there; then when we knew our relationship was getting serious, because we decided to go back and meet her family in south central Pennsylvania, about 60 miles south and west of Harrisburg in the mountains, and it was just beautiful country. We flew in and – that night was a harrowing experience because we had to land quickly in Virginia, because the wings of the airplane had frozen and we barely got in. They sprayed the wings, got all of the de-icing, and we finished flying to Harrisburg and – we were so happy when we got there we nearly kissed the ground.

When we got there her sister and son-in-law picked us up. I was so disappointed – we got there late enough at night, for a midwestern boy – because I wanted to see the mountains, but couldn’t see them. So the next morning I got up, went downstairs and nobody was up yet. I was just anxious so I went outside. They lived in a town called Waterloo, Pennsylvania, hence why we later moved to Waterloo, Iowa, because we wanted to get all of the Waterloos. [Laughter.] I think there is one in New York, we have to catch one of these days.

I walked down the street and, in this town of 30 people, there were like 31 of them down the street here, and I knew something big was happening. Here it was – the Shoot farm – and they had all of these caldrons of things going on, and on long tables. This was Thanksgiving and they were doing their “butcher day,” and the farmers would go from one farm to another, and help each other butcher all of their animals. Then they would dump all of the lard and everything into their vats. The kids were cutting the lard, and the older they got and the more skilled they became, they were down the table cutting up the different parts of the hog, or cow, or whatever they were working on at the moment.

Of course, being a city boy, I was down with the children cutting the lard. [Laughter.] I was visiting, but the funny thing was, as I was walking up everyone said, “Oh, you’re Jill’s boy.” [Laughter.] The thing about a small town – you have to get used to real quick – they sometimes know what is going to happen in your life even before you do.

So we were talking, and it was great, and Jill and her folks, woke up by that time, and they were wondering where I went. The town of 30 and if I got lost, that is kind of scary, so finally I wandered back home, and they are making breakfast, and it was just kind of a fun time, and I got to know everybody in town.

The next day, or I guess it was Thursday, we went to church on Sunday, and I got to meet everybody in her church. It was a little Presbyterian church in the little neighboring town. The one in her town was the older one in Waterloo, Pennsylvania. The church was built in 1766. Now, apparently people were littler then because the doors were quite narrow, and, it was the wildest thing, but her church was a newer church. You know, in Pennsylvania, it was only built in 1783, so it really had no respectability, as far as age. [Laughter.]

We walked in the door. Everybody greets me like we were old friends, because they had heard about the incident at the farm earlier in the week, and it was just such a neat experience, because I couldn't tell who were extended family and who were friends, because the lines in a small community blur between family and friends.

Now part of that is because there are only three names in her valley and blood tests are essential [laughter], but also because everybody cares, supports and loves each other to such a degree that family isn't as important as being part of that community. When you need help you don't worry about who's blood and who isn't. Everybody supports one another as if they are *all* family.

Those of you from Iowa, for example, and grew up in small towns, you know what I'm talking about and, those of us who grew up in the city, sadly, not so much; that kind of care and love and comfort was so idyllic and I long for it so much.

We had such a good experience that a month later I proposed [laughter] and, thankfully, she said, "yes." Ever since then I have felt like I had inherited her family. And, when I mean "her family" I don't mean her siblings. I don't even mean her extended family. I mean that whole community.

Whenever we go back, they know your name. They know your story. They know everything about you and they accept you in spite of that. I have gone back and preached in their congregation, I have spent time with their people and it feels like family; that was 33 years ago when I went back to see them the first time, and things have changed. Most of the people there are gone now that we felt really close to.

I have another story about another time when her uncle Freeburn and I, Freeburn was a very conservative Presbyterian and we spent the day with the Hare Krishna's, so ask me that story another day.

But there were so many moments that I remember about that first trip to Pennsylvania. I remember going and spending time with the third woman from the left in the picture at her house and she held court, because she was the matriarch of the family. By the time I met her she was, of course, in her 80s, but she was still as tall – stood just as erect – and looked at you with the piercing eyes of someone who would make you shudder just a little bit; and, I missed not having the chance to know her now. Most of the people in that room 33 years later are gone, from that

first big family event I spent with them, but I still have that inheritance. I still have those memories of who they were, and what they meant to me, and what they meant to Jill and I, as a couple.

You have similar experiences, I'm guessing. The wonderful gift when you move into a family and you experience their traditions, their love, their cares and their support. Church was one of the greatest meaningful moments that Jill and I shared – both of us being Presbyterian – experiencing some of the same stories, the same repetition, and liturgy, and respect for the same denomination, we have held true all of these years.

That experience is what the writer of Ephesians was trying to share with the church in Ephesus: You are starting an inheritance that comes from Jesus Christ; you are the first ones in the earliest Church; how you formulate your faith will be handed down from generation-to-generation. You need to prepare what you are doing now, to hand on to your children, your grandchildren and for all of the generations to come, all the way up to today. And, they did it so well.

The same thing happened here. This church was a tent, out by the north parking lot, back before 1928. You've heard that story over and over again, about how they built this amazing place, what was then "out in the country," in Des Moines. They had the faith and the trust that the city would grow out to them, here, and then, right after it was built, in less than a year later, you have the stock market crash of 1929 and they were barely surviving, and at one point went through bankruptcy, and still found a way to stay open and then grow like wild fire, because they had a pastor who God blessed them with, who could grow this congregation back, not only to solvency, but to transform this community forever through Westminster.

All of those things that happened were an inheritance that's been handed down from generation to generation. I look around this room and I see different ones of you who were here as children growing up. You sang in the choir just like the children did today, you were part of the church school program that was not only Westminster's, but Rev. Orr had it used throughout the entire country and, as Bill said before, what he used in his father's church in California, all originating at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Des Moines, Iowa. From bankruptcy to transforming a nation's faith all in just a few years – that is what an inheritance embraced through the power of the Holy Spirit can do to transform.

All of these candles that were lit – it was all I could do not to tear up, because there is a story behind every one of those candles. Every one of those people, I can think of something amazing that they did here to strengthen our family, to nurture our inheritance that we are handing down to our children. Then when you stand over here and you lift up the water [in the baptismal font] as the names are shared, even my own grandson was here, and you realize that what they did allowed for this to happen.

If they did not share their lives, care for others in this room the way Jill's family cared for each other in that little tiny church, in that tiny little community, in southwest Pennsylvania, this wouldn't have happened.

You are part of that inheritance. What you do today, will be whether we continue to lift water out of this font on this day each year, or whether the font dries up, all that will matter is whether you continue to worship here, pray for this place and serve God here.

When you do that, you are handing down an inheritance of Jesus Christ. The Triune God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – continue to be moved forward in faith, so that when this generation is having a candle lit for them, there will be others to receive the baton and move the faith forward. As I have said before, it is an extremely difficult time to be the church, in a time when so many people have given up on organized religion.

If I hear one more time, “I’m spiritual, but not religious,” you know what that means? “I don’t know what I believe and I don’t do anything with it, but I want to feel something.”

When did religion become a bad word? The religion is the theology, it is the faith, it is the expression of God organized, so that it can be handed down from one generation to another. That is our inheritance.

Financial inheritances go away. I shared one other time with you that my great-grandparents were wealthy in North Dakota, but then the Great Depression happened, and my grandparents had to start over with nothing. It can go away that quick. But the inheritance that does not go away is the one that these candles – these individuals – handed down to you, and what you are handing down to the children on these steps, and the infants and young ones, who were recognized today.

We are the church in Ephesus. We are reclaiming and rewriting what it means to be Church, in a difficult, painful period in Christian history. And, I thank you for being a part of it. For honoring the inheritance you have received and the inheritance you continue to give. I thank you on behalf of Christ, and may the power of the Holy Spirit continue to move in and through us, so there is an inheritance to share in the next generation and for the next two thousand years.

May God bless and keep us, as we do that holy and sacred work. Amen.