

What Spiritual Legacy Will You Leave?

Philippians 4:4-9

Sunday, May 29, 2011

I've been thinking about Spiritual Legacies, both what we have received and what we leave after us. I'm sixty years old, so perhaps I've begun to really wonder about these things. I remember what I have garnered from past generations of my family. I'm an ethnic mutt with Swedish, German, Dutch, English, Scottish and Polish in me – that I know of! From all this mutty American mix my heritage seems to be an attraction to things of the mind and intellect, an independent religious streak, a low tolerance for pompous individuals, and a taste for starchy foods.

Not everything I cherish has come down to me from my family. I have had mentors and coaches and teachers who have taught me a great deal. My seventh grade History teacher, for example, was a Quaker and a Freedom Rider in the Civil Rights movement of the early 1960's. While I spent spring vacations playing baseball, spring vacation found him in places with names like Selma, Montgomery, Birmingham and Little Rock. One year he came back from spring vacation with a sling on his arm and a bandage on his head. He never told us what happened exactly, but he taught me that history is more than books and memorization. History is alive and we don't just remember it, we change it.

There is something besides history I'm after when I talk about spiritual legacy. Call it a spirit, a song in the heart, a tangible presence, a way of living more than the facts. I cherish something my grandmother taught me. She was a hard working woman, a farmer's wife the last half century. But my grandmother had fun and mischief in her heart. Once when I was college age and I was explaining to her some hare-brained scheme I'd got myself into, Granny – that's what I called her, Granny – looked at me with those piercing Swedish blue eyes of hers and said to me: "Boy, if you're going to skate on thin ice, you might as well dance!" What a legacy! I'm still living into it: don't pretend, don't justify, don't try to please, don't look back, put everything you have into your choices.

What have you received? John Mann, whom many in this church know as a friend and colleague, shared with me recently some wonderful advice his father James T. Mann left for him. John and his sister have put together a collection of their Dad's favorite sayings. One saying of the elder Mann's I just love. It goes this way:

When other people run, you walk.

When other people walk fast, go slow.

When other people are standing around, sit down.

At the end of the day, you'll be better off.

Do you hear the independence of spirit, the eyes wide open, keeping your own counsel and listening first to the beat of your own heart? The word that comes to mind is *trustworthy*.

At some point, though, we don't just stand on the shoulders of giants. Future generations depend on us *to be giants*. What good, after all, does it serve for us to play small? God intends us to *live large*. Paul in the reading from Philippians this morning sets a tall bar for us: "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise.....{then} keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me." That's asking us to be giants in our own time!

The amazing and wonderful heritage we have as followers of Jesus Christ is that we are more than the sum of our own history. You are not just what you have received – you are what you do with it! And more!

Listen to Paul: *Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, Rejoice! The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

In our faith, you are not alone! You can ask for help. You can ask Christ Jesus to come be at the center of your life. He won't make your life pretty or nice, but he will give you the opportunity to thrive in the midst of all

circumstances. In Jesus, we have choices about what we bring to the world and what we leave after us.

Everyday we're given opportunities to practice our choices. I remember a man who taught me about choosing to thrive every day of his life. He was a guest pastor at the seminary I attended. He had come to talk with us students about living with disabilities. He had no arms, you see. He had been born without them. He spoke in chapel about learning to advocate for himself. His prayers had power -- they didn't whine and they didn't blame. His prayers asked for the fullest life he -- and we -- could live.

But his words didn't really hit home with me until the next morning. He was staying in a guest room down the hall from me in our student housing. That morning early I opened the door to the spacious men's bathroom, and there standing in front of one of the sinks was our guest pastor. Standing there in his boxer shorts *on one leg -- his right leg -- while his left leg was fully extended up and he was shaving with his left foot*. It was quite a sight. He prayed for the fullest life possible. But Jesus didn't grow him arms. Jesus didn't give him a private barber. Jesus didn't leave him to grow a mountain man's beard. Jesus just gave him a spirit of willingness to make do and ask for help every day in his heart.

What spiritual legacy do I aim for? It is this: a spirit of *rejoicing*. Yours may be different. Your spiritual choice may be a spirit of fearlessness or a spirit of forgiveness, or a spirit of playfulness or a spirit of generosity or a spirit of recovery. Mine is a spirit of rejoicing. My mentor, my teacher, my coach is Jesus who changed the water of the life he found around him to the wine of rejoicing in all things. Jesus never, never, never in any circumstance backed off from rejoicing -- not from enemies, not from strangers, not from disappointment, not from displeasing friends and family, not from good company nor bad -- no, not even from a cross -- so that we who choose to learn from his Spirit may not back off from the life we face.

I am far from perfect. I can't say I'm proud of all the choices I've made in my days. But I have this in front of me. Whenever a spirit of fear takes over my day, or a spirit of self-pity or a spirit of angry defensiveness, or a spirit of

temptation, I ask Jesus to come replace it with his Spirit of rejoicing. And I trust that he will get me there.

Friends, there is a strange spirit about in our land today. I call it a spirit of Gotcha. It's Republican vs. Democrat. Tea Party against Beltway Insiders. America against everybody. Christians against Muslims. Us vs. Them. It's a spirit of one-upmanship, of dancing on your enemy's grave, of posturing, taking down and gloating.

I remember another spirit in this land. I remember the spirit of John Kennedy's *Ask not what your country can do for you* speech. I remember the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr's *I have a dream* speech. I know these memories date me. But I honor their fierce refusal to be cynical and play Gotcha. These are my spirit's heritage.

My part today is to counter the spirit of the land. My part is to rejoice in all things, *in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to let my requests be known to God*. And then every day to practice the spirit I give allegiance to. I choose to be known for my rejoicing. I ask God for broad shoulders and to live large! I pray that those who come after me may believe that they, too, can be giants!

What Spiritual Legacy do you choose to leave?

Amen