

“Clergy Influences”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 6, 2017

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 3: 5-10

1 Corinthians 3:5-10 (NRSV)

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⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. ⁹ For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.

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Clergy Influences: The Stuff of Legends

This congregation was founded on Christmas morning, 1921.

After a series of ministers served as pastor, each lasting an average of two years,

the church hit its stride in 1933.

Successive pastors served 9 years (Rev. Garrison); 30 years, (Dr. Schwab);

14 years, (Rev. Smith); 10 years, (Dr. Boyte) and 19 years (moi),

totaling 5 senior ministers over 84 years.

This rare feat of longevity and consistency

speaks volumes about how well you, the congregation,

respect the role and responsibility of the Christian ministry.

And it speaks to how well your clergy have fed and watered your spiritual selves.

This morning as we converse on the topic of clergy influences,

Fred B. Craddock's name must be added to the mix.

He stood five-feet-something and appreciated

the carpet-covered wooden Coca-Cola box when he preached here.

His voice had an odd pitch;

he had a twinkle in his eye

yet lacked the presence that demanded or commanded attention

when he entered a crowded room.

As a youth, Fred took a risk to confide in his pastor

at Central Christian Church in Humboldt, Tennessee.

He confided that he felt a call to be a preacher.

You must be mistaken, Fred recalls his minister telling him, in effect,

"You don't have the voice, stature, or presence to preach the Gospel."

The world's roadsides are littered with called souls who were told they were lacking.

Not Fred.

Privately, quietly, determinedly,

young Fred went out into the fields of his family farm in Humboldt

and practiced proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the cows.
Tennessee bovine were the perfect congregation for Fred
because they never, ever denied his call to love,
and they listened while they chewed,
Craddock earned advanced degrees in ministry and theology;
became ordained a Disciples pastor; married Nettie and raised a family;
evolved into a master storyteller and writer;
taught New Testament and Greek and Preaching in seminaries;
and was recognized as one of the top ten living preachers in the world.
Fred Craddock humbly served as an Elder here at Decatur First Christian Church
while teaching at Emory University's Candler School of Theology,
He was the Bandy Professor of Homiletics and New Testament for 16 years.
When Fred retired, he and Nettie left Decatur for new pastures.
They started Cherry Log Christian Church in Blue Ridge, GA.

Dr. Craddock, born on April 30, 1928,
passed away on March 6, 2015, surrounded by his loved ones.

At his funeral, the Cherry Log sanctuary included so many souls,
each one ready to give witness to the positive influence
Craddock had on his or her spiritual formation.
A 55-year-old pastor and good friend was seated near Betty and me on the church pew.
With a wistful look in his eyes
he told us about his well-read edition of Craddock's early tome,
As One Without Authority (1979).

He said, *"I read his book when I was a wandering, directionless 22-year-old.*

Craddock's teaching gave me purpose and direction. I will be forever grateful."

Craddock's stories, his storytelling,

his pointing us to the true story of God's love in Jesus,

served to shape faith journeys from Tennessee to Timbuktu,

shaped the faith journeys of the popular and the outcast,

shaped the faith journeys of both Bible thumpers

and overhearers of the Gospel.

We will be forever grateful.

Clergy Influences: The Stuff of Legends

One day in the context of worship I heard Craddock

tell a version of Ben Hooper's life story,

a story he presented in a collection of anecdotes (2001).

As the story goes, Ben W. Hooper -- born in 1870, died in 1957 --

was born out of wedlock in Newport, Tennessee,

on October 13 to Sarah Wade, daughter of an Italian immigrant,

and Dr. L. W. Hooper,

a physician who had served in the Union army.

It was a well-known fact in their Tennessee town

that Dr. Hooper refused to marry Sarah

because he was engaged to another woman.

Soon after Bennie's birth,

Sarah's father moved the family to another town.

Through the age of eight, the boy lived in a number of small towns in Tennessee
while his mother looked for work.

Dr. Craddock quoted Ben Hooper, letting him tell his own story:

*"When I went into town with my mother, I could see people staring at me,
making guesses as to who was my father.*

*At school, the children said ugly things to me,
and I stayed to myself during recess, and ate lunch alone."*

*"One Sunday [in church] some people queued up in the aisle before I could get out,
and I was stopped by a large, heavy hand on my shoulder.*

Turning, I caught a glimpse of the minister studying my face.

I knew he was going to make a guess as to who my father was.

*A moment later he said, 'Well, boy, you're a child of...'
and he paused.*

I knew it was coming;

*I knew I would have my feelings hurt
and I would not go back to church again!*

He said, 'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.'

Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go claim your inheritance.'

*I left the building a different person;
in fact that was really the beginning of my life."*

A preacher looked past and beyond the human condition and saw a divine identity.

A spark was kindled; a life was born again, from above.

A sacred inheritance was ripe to be harvested, claimed, lived into, fulfilled.

One day it came to pass that Ben Hooper was elected Lt. Governor of Tennessee.

Talk about clergy influence!

Followers of God's love have influence, clergy and laity alike.

This week, whose life are you going to spark with the love of Jesus Christ?

Whom will you look at and see as a child of God,

noting aloud that you see a striking resemblance?

Someone in your midst is ready for you to communicate in word and deed

that he or she is to "Go and claim your inheritance."

Clergy Influences: The Stuff of Love

It is good to give credit and honor to those who shaped and shifted our faith.

There are names we need to give voice to,

profound, influential spiritual guides who touched our souls

and formed our faith.

When we asked last Spring for names of spiritual influences in your life,

you remembered and gave thanks for:

Susan Blanton of South Carolina

Beverly Sprinkle of South Carolina

Bishop John Shelby Spong of Atlanta

The late Minister Kirkpatrick of New Jersey

Pastor Paul Turner of Atlanta

The late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. of Atlanta

Rev. Dr. Barbara Sims-King of Atlanta

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa

If you would like to add another name to this impressive list, say it aloud now...

My list of clergy who influenced my spirituality

includes -- but is not limited to -- the reverends

who spoke at my ordination to the Christian ministry:

Bruce McKay, Phil Washburn, the late George Calvert & Roger Shinn, of New York;

plus *Rev. Don Brewer* and his brilliant daughter *Betty Brewer-Calvert* of GA.

Honorable mention goes to *Rabbi Harold Kushner* of Boston,

Dr. Nadia Bolz Webber of Denver,

and the late *Rev. Yushi Nomura* of Japan, who passed away this week.

Yushi's beloved wife Karin and daughter Yuka are in our prayers.

Some of our clergy influences were in training when they touched our lives.

We gladly salute the seminary interns we have been blessed

to learn from, students who taught us so much about the Holy.

--15 of the 16 interns we've supervised here in my tenure are still in Christian ministry! [1]

Ministry is about relationships; Lone Rangers in ministry do not last long.

Paul worked with Apollos & many others to teach and preach and reach people for God.

The Apostle Paul wrote an encouraging word to the struggling church in Corinth.

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each.

⁹ For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it.

Paul relates his work to a skilled master builder, an architect.

Apollos and Paul are the planners of the building someone else will build.

Once the foundation is laid, no one else can change the foundation of the building.[2]

Paul says, "that foundation is Jesus Christ."

The life and teachings of Christ are the bedrock of the church.

Build God's temple on a solid foundation of Christ's love and mercy,

and hopefully, prayerfully, faithfully
it will stand the challenges of time and trials, tragedy and temptation,
and throughout its days the church will give glory to God.

Those who have shaped and impacted our faith,

given our spirituality form and function,

who have shown us God's light and love and community

share this in common: content and context.

By content we affirm that pastors, preachers and priests offered solid teaching.

They presented the Word so that we might be in awe of God's love for creation.

They presented the Word in a way that we could absorb, assimilate, and apply

the elements, exegesis and essence of God's will "for such a time as this."

Paul said, "I laid the foundation."

I.e., I gave you the content, the core, the kernels of truth and grace of Jesus Christ.

We stand on the shoulders of spiritual guides

who laid a foundation of content.

And that content foundation is Jesus Christ.

They filled our minds with Good News, good teachings, and good good vibrations.

They welcomed our questions and wonderings and doubts as natural.

They laid a formative process brick by brick, tenet by tenet, one upon another.

Content and context.

By context we affirm the personal relationship of those who mentored us.

By personal I mean

you knew their name and they knew yours.

By personal I mean

the love they had for Christ and His Church

was expressed in the context

of a professional, safe, holistic relationship with you.

If a doctor doesn't love people, she won't heal anyone.

If a teacher doesn't love people, he won't educate anyone.

And if a preacher doesn't love or listen...heaven help us!

Yet here we are in the context of worship

giving testimony that someone loved us in the context of a relationship.

Someone heard God's call to love.

That same someone said "*Here I am, Lord. Send me.*"

That same someone loved us just as we are.

That same someone made room for the power of God

to become channeled through their prayers and presence,

praxis and preaching to you, to me, to us.

Here we are, people who have been saved, redeemed, healed,

exorcised, counseled, engaged, inspired, reconciled, liberated,

and, yes, Jesus, we have been “transformed by the renewing of [our]

minds, so that [we] may discern what is the will of God

—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12: 2)

Here we are – we are here because someone said. *“Yes, Lord, I accept your call.*

Send me to give your people a solid foundation & my solid bond.”

Content and context...church dogmatics and personal connections.

Content and context...religious instruction and spiritual formation.

Content and context...go together

because one plants and one waters...and it is God who gives the growth.

Clergy Influences: The Stuff of Legacy

One day in your life a preacher looked beyond your human condition

and witnessed a divine identity, your divine identity.

A spark within you was kindled; a life, your life, was born again, from above.

A sacred inheritance, your sacred inheritance,

was ripe to be harvested, claimed, lived into, fulfilled.

Maybe that happened in your past. Give thanks!

Maybe God is preparing the fertile soil of your life for tomorrows to come,
for future planting, watering, feeding, empowering, laying a solid foundation.

Maybe it is happening right now, my Lord and my God, here and now!

Claim your inheritance of grace and purpose; live into a new life in Christ!

We are so blessed.

Clergy like Apollos and Paul, Fred and Susan,

Martin and Barbara have watered us and planted good seeds of peace in us.

Clergy continue to do their part as best they/we can, and offer up to God their charges.

It is God who gives the growth, who uses you and me to be God's building.

What will be the legacy of legends and those who love?

Will God's building stand the test of time?

The trials of challenge and conflict and conformity?
The temptation to be small-minded or self-centered or vainglorious?

What will be our living legacy?

Do you believe?

What do you think?

Do you believe it will survive and thrive?

We certainly hope so!

The sustaining factor is love.

The love of God purifies the faith we embody...

...for if it is holy,
if it is of God,

if it is for God,
then it will be, forever and ever.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] Dating back to 1986, I have been honored to supervise seminary students as Interns. The following order is imperfect. FCCD Interns will have an asterisk. **Linda McCrae (NYC); Lonnie Woods (Dallas); William T. Chaney*; Amy Erickson*; Cheryl Underwood-Williams*; Chris Carathers*; Amanda Musterman*; Barbara Sims-King*; Austin Dickson*; Carolynn Miller*; Chris McCreight*; Anita Renahan-White*; Paul Appleby*; Melvin Bussey, Jr.*; Sarah McClelland*; Thomas Smith*; Anna Marie Strickland*; Amanda Tatlock*.**

[2] William H. Willimon, "Pulpit Resource" Vol. 39, No. 1.