

I Yam What I Yam

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters,
of the good news that I proclaimed to you,
which you in turn received, in which also you stand,
through which also you are being saved,
if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you
unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance
what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins
in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried,
and that he was raised on the third day
in accordance with the scriptures,
and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers
and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive,
though some have died.

Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.
For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle,
because I persecuted the church of God.

But by the grace of God I am what I am,
and God's grace toward me has not been in vain.

On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them
though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Whether then it was I or they,
so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

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I.

I'm not sure if it is just me, owing to what I do for a living, or if this happens to others as well. I seem to be constantly moving through distinct cycles of thought, experience and connection which center around particular motifs, notions or questions. Typically, these cycles are blurry at the start and finish and go mostly unnoticed. However, once in the midst of them, they are so vivid and poignant so as to be undeniable and, hence, difficult to ignore. Currently, the cycle in which I find myself has to do with the possibility of knowing who and what one is without first knowing who one has been, or from whence one has come.

II.

Such a question is what lies at the heart of the "nature vs. nurture" debate. "Nature" is what we think of as pre-wiring and is influenced by genetic inheritance and other biological factors. "Nurture" is generally taken as the influence of external factors following conception; that is, the product of exposure, life experiences and learning on an individual.

A couple of weeks ago my brother, Paul, received the results of a home DNA test he did through Ancestry.com, as he and his wife, Amy, are currently digging into their respective family trees; which is an excellent project for a winter such as this. The results were rather interesting, with my brother discovering that he is 42% Irish, 37% Scottish, 18% English and NW European, and just 3% Italian. With a surname like "Catanzaro," to discover oneself as only 3% Italian came as something of a surprise; as you might imagine.

III.

With a father who has always been understood to be half Irish and half Italian, one could assume a 25% share of each. Apparently, though, this is not how genetics works. While it is true you can only get from *your* parents what they, themselves, got from *their* parents, the proportion of that mix is a function of what randomness dictates.

Though I, myself, have not done such a test, and assuming there are no skeletons in the family closet, I would expect to be some mix of Irish, Scottish, English and Italian as well. Regardless of whatever percentage, large or small, I have always perceived myself to be most under the sway of the Italian. Not in terms of cultural affinity, palate or temperament (though there is that); but, rather, with respect to what I call my “Mediterranean blood” which loves warmth and sunshine and abhors the rain, snow and gray. That, and I tan up real well.

IV.

What struck me most about today’s scripture reading from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, was Paul’s understanding of who he is based on from whence he had come; culminating in his statement, “by the grace of God I am what I am.” Now, let’s be clear, for a significant period of his life, Paul was a very bad dude; his fame as an inquisitor was notorious far and wide. In the book of Acts (9:13) we read “how much evil he had done to Christ’s saints at Jerusalem.” In his letters to the Galatians (1:13) and Philippians (3:6) Paul, himself, remembers how he had “persecuted the Church of God and wasted it.” In his first letter to Timothy (1:13) Paul calls himself, “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious.” And, in today’s scripture reading, Paul writes of his own self-understanding as “the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” As I said, bad with a capitol “B.”

V.

Whether Paul intended to or not, his phrase, “I am what I am” harkens us back to the answer God gives to Moses when, after having been instructed to go to Pharaoh and bring God’s people out of Egypt. Moses says to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is God’s name?’ what shall I say to them?” God answers Moses by saying, “I am who I Am,” tell them that “‘I Am’ has sent you.”

Of course, Paul’s statement also harkens back to what was for many of us a much simpler time in our lives:

“I’m Popeye the Sailor man, I’m Popeye the Sailor man,
I yam what I yam and that’s all that I yam! I’m Popeye the Sailor man.

I'm Popeye the Sailor man, I'm Popeye the Sailor man,
I'm strong to the *finach*, cause I eats me spinach,
I'm Popeye the Sailor man" (1933).



VI.

For those of us of a certain age, we well remember the cast of characters from the early comic strip and later animated cartoon: the temperamental but seemingly alluring girl-friend, Olive Oyl; the adorable Swee' Pea; the gruff Poopdeck Pappy; Popeye's nemesis, the bully Bluto (later Brutus); the strange Alice the Goon and dog-like creature Eugene the Jeep (for whom, some say, the vehicle would later be named); and, last but not least, Wellington Wimpy who would gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today.

Then, of course, there was the spinach. When, after taking all the abuse and punishment Bluto cared to dish out, Popeye would finally exclaim, "That's all I can stands, coz I can't stands no more!" He would, then, pop open a can of spinach, eat it, and suddenly become super-charged and super-strengthened so as to enable him to finally and fully obliterate Brutus. So popular was Popeye during the depression era, sales of spinach in America increased 33%, and it briefly slotted in as the third most popular kid's food after ice cream and turkey (if you can imagine that).

VII.

Like the Apostle Paul, Popeye made no pretense about who he is: "I Yam what I Yam." However, while Popeye's existentialism was completed by the qualifier, "And that's all that I Yam," I do not think Paul understood this to be the case for him, nor for any of us who have not come to believe in vain.

While I believe Paul would fully agree that who we are is a function of from whence we came, that's not all that "we Yam." What fundamentally alters the outcome of who we eventually become is the power of Christ's reality in our lives. Paul says, "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day." For the Apostle Paul, then, nature and nurture certainly have their role, but of first importance in determining who we are is God's grace as established and made known in Christ.

VIII.

Today, after our worship service we will be holding our church's Annual Meeting when we elect Deacons, Elders and officers, approve the pastor's terms of call, receive the budget for the new year and review our activities and finances. This year, owing to COVID, we will again undertake the meeting virtually by Zoom. Though a necessary and wise precaution, I nonetheless miss the actual and physical gathering of the tribe and, of course, the tuna and ham salad sandwiches which, normally, Beth Hayes would so thoughtfully provide.

Though the process of gathering the various financial and narrative reports from every corner of our church's work and mission is onerous, this self-imposed hoop through which we ask ourselves to jump is not only a critical exercise in accountability but, more interestingly, the resulting Annual Report leads to a clear sense of self-understanding. We know who we are based on from whence we have come.

IX.

A few weeks ago, I revealed my guilty pleasure of sometimes perusing our denomination's "Opportunity List" of churches that are seeking a new pastor, and reading over the Church Information Form which each church creates and posts to give perspective candidates an idea of their congregation, and that for which they are seeking in a new pastor. However, once mutual interest is established and a conversation has begun, I always give the same advice to colleagues seeking a new church: to request and review the prior three years of annual reports.

While the Church Information Form reveals what a church presumes or imagines itself to be, the Annual Reports reveals a church to be who and what they are in actuality. For instance, how is mission manifested and what is the ratio of mission giving to operating expenses, what is the composition of men and woman on the Session and Board of Deacons, do only a few names appear to fill many roles, what is the funding for Church School, and how is fellowship enacted?

X.

At their best, occasions such as the Annual Meeting serve as a jumping off point for the what the future might be. Other times, however, a sober understanding of from whence one has come, and therefore who or what one is, is taken as a limitation of who or what one may yet become. I can assure you, at this time of year, there are many churches taking an honest assessment of themselves only to arrive at the conclusion that the nature of their work and mission, and the nurture of their ministry must, or will inevitably, continue to shrink and shrivel. In fact, I would argue that this is the controlling narrative at work in many denominations and ecclesiastical bodies these days including our own Presbytery; not necessarily within the member congregations, but among those who have been charged with their leadership and succor.

XI.

Though unfortunate, such an acquiescence to the past is not at all unusual or atypical. In fact, we all suffer from it. We all look back our lives, to the things done and left undone, to the roads left untaken, to the decisions we regret and the bad choices we have made, to the misfortunes that befell us, to things that might have been, to the pain we have caused or the pain that has been caused in us, and determine that whatever our future might have been or could have been has, now, been rendered forever moot and utterly impossible. Worse, such thoughts, experiences and connections entrap us in a persistent cycle or controlling narrative which only serves to limit not only the future we might imagine for ourselves but, moreover, our motivation to strive for a future which is in no way bound by our past.

XII.

Which is what makes the words of the Apostle Paul not only powerful, but authentic: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, but God’s grace toward me has not been in vain.” Remember, for a significant period of his life, Paul was a very bad dude; bad with a capital “B.” If there was ever a person who should let the past dictate his future it was the Apostle Paul. Not only was this a matter of his own self-awareness, his past was certainly known to all he met. We can well imagine, as he says when speaking of the other Apostles, that “on the contrary, I worked harder than any of them.” Of course he did, he had to.

XIII.

It is not a stretch to imagine that his efforts to build (or re-build) the church he once so vigorously persecuted came as a response to a guilty conscience. Guilt, though, is a poor motivator for the positive, as is regret and remorse. Which Paul well knew, as evidenced by his statement: “though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” Grace that over came both his cruel nature, and the zealotry nurtured within him.

While there is great truth to the words of Popeye when he says, “I Yam what I Yam.” There is greater truth for those of us who have not come to believe in vain, is that this is not all that “we Yam.” The power of God is such as to overcome any nature and every nurture, to work through, beyond and with those skeletons we all keep in our closets, to maximize even the smallest percentages and overcome the longest odds for while it may be true that who we *are* is a function of what randomness dictates, who we will *be* is always a function of what grace allows.

XIV.

Not to spoil the surprise, but what will be revealed and shown to be the case at today’s Annual Meeting is a congregation filled with God’s grace. Grace which has, again this year, overcome our base human nature and stood over and against societal nurture. Time and again we opt for faith over fear, we focus on bounty rather than scarcity, and we give generously rather than glean greedily. Even during a time in history when most people are exclaiming, “That’s all I can stands, coz I can’t stands no more!” God’s grace has enabled us to worker harder than most, and as hard as any, to overcome

the abuse and punishment of COVID. We are a congregation which, when needed, calls upon the spinach of the Spirit to super-charge and super-strengthen us to finally and fully move into our future as we hold firmly to the message that has been proclaimed to us; and which, now, we joyously proclaim to the world. Amen.