

## RICHARD RUSSO'S ADVICE

I Corinthians 15:3-11

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 14, 2008, at the 8:30 service at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The service was conducted by National Capital Presbytery as a Service of Installation for The Reverend Patrick Hunnicutt as Associate Pastor.*

### Focus Text

*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 someone 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 his grace towards 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.*

I posted the title for this sermon, and then Patrick told me that Richard Russo is one of his favorite authors. Patrick is probably not alone in that, though I confess all I have read of Russo is one short story, and his comments on its creation, comments which have led me to this installation-themed sermon.

### I.

The story, called “Horseman,”<sup>1</sup> is about a female professor who confronts a male student about plagiarism; in the course of the confrontation she learns several truths about herself, truths that can never be plagiarized.

The story itself is good, but let me read you part of Russo’s explanation of how he came to write it:

...Several years ago [he says] I [was] asked to give the commencement address at Colby College. My daughter Kate was in the graduating class, so I wanted to do a good job and thereby avoid humiliation (hers and my own)... I wanted to say something that I believed to be true and maybe even important....

This made me think of a woman I’d known maybe a decade earlier...She was a faculty member in another academic department...She was smart and attractive, but also guarded in the extreme, the way academics can be. In the language of *Star Trek*, she’d diverted all power to her shields....

I was startled one night when I happened to catch her with her defenses down. My wife and I had gone to a party that was a mix of faculty and grad students...I saw the woman in question dancing with great joy and such unexpected abandon that I found myself smiling and actually liking her for the first time....

Later, I came upon her in the kitchen where she sat with her head in her hands, her shoulders quaking uncontrollably.... “All I ever wanted,” she sobbed, “was to play a little rock and roll.”

Russo then reflects:

What I wanted to tell my daughter and her fellow graduates was that over the next two decades they had but one real job, and that was not to become this woman. Don’t, I would warn them, wake up some day to the terrible realization that you’ve somehow managed to ignore the simple thing you wanted most in life and know it’s now too late.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Russo, “Horseman,” in *The Best American Short Stories 2007*, edited by Stephen King (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 341-364.

My armchair psychology leads me to say that this woman had inherited a template of what she thought she was supposed to be—a professor at the college level. But the template didn't match “the thing she most wanted in life.” Hence, the confession: “All I ever wanted was to play a little rock and roll.”

## II.

In his own life, the apostle Paul is aware of this dynamic between a template we inherit and the need to be who we are really called to be.

The template Paul inherited was the core beliefs of the early church into which he was called as a young adult on the road to Damascus. Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth:

...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.

This is the template Paul has inherited. But unlike the woman who inspired Russo's story, Paul is able to appropriate the template in such a way that it has become his own.

Last of all [he writes], as to someone untimely born,  
[Christ] 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 his grace towards 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.

Paul has received the basic beliefs of the earliest church:

- that Christ died for our sins
- that he was buried,
- that he was raised on the third day

and appropriated them into his life in such a way that they have become his own. “By the grace of God I am what I am,” he says. “And God's grace toward me was not in vain.”

What this says to us is what Richard Russo said in his commencement speech: “Our job is not to become” the woman at the party, but to probe the inheritance we have been given, poke against it, stretch it to its limits – all as part of claiming those parts of it that match who we are created and called to be. The point is this: whatever template we choose to claim as our inheritance we must make our own.

## III.

Russo goes on to reflect on the template he had claimed for himself – that of reading, writing, teaching literature.

The study of literature has had what I believe to be a salutary effect on my own character [he says], making me less self-conscious and vain, more empathetic and imaginative, maybe even kinder...As I've gotten older I've

come to wonder if maybe this is what reading all those great books is really for—to engender and promote charity. Sure literature instructs, but to what end, if not compassion?<sup>2</sup>

What Russo writes about literature can be said also of the template that is at the core of our faith: scripture. Listen to his words again, this time with substitutions that fit our situation.

The study of [scripture] has had what I believe to be a salutary effect on my own character, making me less self-conscious and vain, more empathetic and imaginative, maybe even kinder. Perhaps it's an oversimplification, but as I've gotten older I've come to wonder if maybe this is what reading all those [Biblical stories] is really for—to engender and promote charity. Sure [scripture] instructs, but to what end, if not compassion?

When we receive the faith that we have inherited, and so make it our own to the point that we say “by the grace of God I am what I am,” we cannot help but be more compassionate, more charitable.

#### IV.

Russo's advice, applied to faith, is the same for a minister being installed in a pulpit, a member who has been attending church for decades, or a newcomer or recent returnee to matters religious.

As you think about why you have come to this place, at this hour (except for those who are here because you have to be!): Is it so that you don't become the woman in Richard Russo's story, so that you don't wake up someday and realize it's too late to do what you are really supposed to do in your life, too late to be the person God has really created you to be?

As you come to this place, Sunday after Sunday, I promise that if you will allow the scripture and the preaching and the music and the prayers to become a part of who you are, they will have a “salutary effect” on your character. They will make you “less self-conscious and vain, more empathetic and imaginative, maybe even kinder.” They will “engender compassion” within you.

You will move from “All I ever wanted was to play a little rock and roll” to “By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.”

Come here,  
long enough,  
and this will happen.  
I promise.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> King, “Contributors’ Notes,” 409-410.