

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Inheritance”
I Peter 1: 1-13
Second Sunday After Easter
April 23, 2017

Today’s Scripture reading from I Peter opens with a salutation which, despite the name of the book, was probably not from the apostle Peter himself, but from someone living a generation later who had been influenced by Peter’s witness and who wished to pass on the tradition of his teaching and preaching.

The second section of the reading is a blessing. If you can believe it, verses 3-12 are actually a single long run-on sentence in Greek which the translators have separated into seven sentences in English, a big favor to English-speaking preachers so that when we read it, it isn’t necessary to have a tank of oxygen on hand in the chancel to ensure that we aren’t gasping for breath by the time we get to “This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.”

The language in this section is thickly theological, so I will reassure you before I read it that I can’t keep everything that is in this rich passage in my head, and therefore, you have permission not to pay close attention to every word. What is more important is to pick up on the sense of overpowering awe that is here. One commentary describes it as a torrent, unstoppable, overwhelming. (1)

That same commentary suggests that this text is like a symphony that must be heard in its entirety before one tries to analyze its parts. (2) In the sermon, I will be homing in on the theme of inheritance, so note when it is mentioned, but otherwise, simply drink in the music of I Peter’s good news.

Imagine that one day you are doing what you usually do every day – sitting in math class, working at your computer, weeding the flower bed—when a messenger shows up with a thick envelope. He asks you to sign for it, and you do. You open it, and in it, is a sheet of stationery with a letterhead from an uptown law firm. The letter gives you the date and time of an appointment when the last will and testament of a deceased friend will be read.

Mystified, you show up at the attorney’s office at the appointed day and time. When you arrive, you look around the room. No one seems to know a single other person in the room, but everyone knew your deceased friend and as stories are shared, it turns out that the friendship had deeply affected each person’s life. But no one, no one, expected what happens next. The will was read, and one by one, each person has been given a million dollars. (It was like landing on Community Chest in the game of Monopoly. It was like the time Oprah looked out at her audience and said, “You’re getting a new car. And you’re getting a new car! And you’re getting a new car!”) Everyone in the room goes wild with excitement and joy.

What I have described isn't a perfect parallel to I Peter's description, but here are the similarities between the scene that I have just described and the situation of the recipients of the missive that is I Peter.

The addressees of I Peter are "exiles of the Dispersion," that is, Christian communities scattered throughout five provinces at the eastern extremity of the Roman Empire. The vast majority of these early Christians were humble folk. Many were slaves. Many were poor. Very few were "somebody" in the eyes of their world. They were never going to inherit anything from anybody. The few who did have means had cast their lot with a community that society saw as misfits and perhaps, as a result, had been "disinherited" by their own families.

But in Jesus Christ, they had been given a new family, a new home. (You've got a family! You've got a family! You've got a family!) It was an extraordinary thing, that these exiles who had no family, no home, in this world would be called the chosen ones! And what they had been chosen for was more life-changing than inheriting a million dollars. What they had been chosen for was life itself, for faith, for trusting in the living hope that death in all its many forms has been ultimately defeated through Christ's resurrection, and that all of this had come as an inheritance to those who had no reason to expect an inheritance, a gift of sheer grace, granted solely by Christ's merit, as the Heidelberg Catechism says.

There are, of course, any number of differences that one might identify between the situation of the first-century Christians to whom I Peter was written and our situation. But today, I would like to name on one important similarity between their situation and ours.

Verses 8 and 9 of today's Scripture lesson remind us that the readers and the listeners of this letter were among the first to receive Christ as savior without being eyewitnesses themselves. (3) Thus, they were dependent upon the witness of the generation which had come before them so that they who had not seen Jesus might yet love him and learn to live according to his standard of servanthood, walking in his way of love, justice, and peace.

It was through the witness of the prior generation that the good news of Christ had come to them. Thus, it was incumbent upon these Christians who had received a gracious inheritance to pass it on to future generations.

"Therefore, prepare your minds for action!" reads the letter.

Prepare your minds for action in order that the inheritance which you have received may be passed on to the generations which follow you.

I am hoping that you will permit me to be very specific now about Davidson College Presbyterian Church, the inheritance that we have received, and a possible way that God's Holy Spirit is exhorting us, "Prepare your minds for action," in order that the inheritance which we have received may be passed on to those of future generations.

Every time I drive into town from Interstate 77, I am greeted by the sign that reads "Davidson College, Founded 1837." And every time I have the privilege of teaching a new member class here, when I list the things that are unique about Davidson College Presbyterian Church, I share with them that this congregation came into being in that same year 1837. We who are the Davidson College

Presbyterian Church of 2017 are empowered to worship, learn, serve, love, and give in the name of the One whom we have not seen because of the inheritance which those who have come before us have passed down to us.

I believe with all my heart that it is the providence of God which placed Davidson College Presbyterian Church at the corner of campus and community, as we like to say. And today, I want to focus on the campus aspect of who we and the inheritance God is calling us to pass on to future generations.

It occurred to me as I was writing this sermon that four of your five pastors are graduates of Presbyterian-related colleges. This is significant, I believe.

Any of us could speak to our college experience and its impact on our faith and our vocational choice to serve in the church. For myself, while I can point to many people and many experiences which impacted my choice, it was incredibly important that Decatur Presbyterian Church had a called associate pastor whose primary ministry was with college students. I spent many hours talking with Bill Johnston, voicing my questions, shedding tears, going on retreats, eating Sunday night dinner at Westminster Fellowship, sifting through my experiences of God in the context of rigorous intellectual inquiry.

Much has changed since I attended college in the early 1970's. Much! Not quite as much as between the first century and the twenty-first century, though!

But one thing has not changed and that is that one's college years are a time of spiritual, as well as intellectual, exploration.

And we at Davidson College Presbyterian Church have a particular role in passing on the inheritance we have received to students who are students at Davidson College.

I want to make you aware of some exciting conversations which have been taking place recently and a vote which was taken on Wednesday evening by the DCPC Session. Thank you to Marya Howell and Bob Cameron who have participated in the conversations, along with Claire, Robert, and representatives of the Finance Committee. Rob Spach also participated in the early stages of the conversation, and there have been others in our congregation who have been consulted as well.

On Wednesday evening, the Session authorized DCPC's partnering with the Church in Vocation group and Union Presbyterian Seminary to begin moving toward the funding of a fulltime associate pastor for campus ministry. CIV is the group which provided the funding for Claire's additional day during this year. The goal is to prepare a 3-5 year plan for moving toward full funding, hopefully through the establishment of an endowment fund or some other mechanism which would support the associate pastor's compensation and the Ukirk/campus ministry budget. This fits with the Strategic Roadmap which the planning committee recently presented to the Session.

There is LOTS of work to be done to get to the place where this vision will become reality; I truly believe that the Holy Spirit and lots of great Presbyterian energy, from within DCPC and beyond our congregation as well, will get DCPC there.

We have received a great inheritance. And so, as I Peter exhorts us, let us prepare ourselves for action.

1. Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez and Justo L. Gonzalez, *A Faith More Precious Than Gold* (Louisville: 1989-1990 Horizons Bible Study, 1989), 17.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 18.
4. Tom Choi, "Easter Extraordinary: Reading I Peter in Eastertide, Year A," *Quarterly Review*, Winter 1998, 412-413.