

TURNING OVER THE IMPORTANT STUFF
I Corinthians 15:1-11 (*The Message*)

What's the important stuff for you? When I was in Kentucky visiting my mother, the important stuff for her husband, Pete, was memorabilia from his World War II experiences as a flight crew member in the Pacific Theater. For my sister who joined us for Mother's Day weekend---and who lives in Michigan while her husband lives in Anaheim due to jobs and economics---the most important stuff she could name was just having the opportunity again to fix dinner together with her husband, Bob. For Ruth, living without her beloved mother for the first Mother's Day, the most important stuff were memories. And for my mother, among her most important stuff are the furniture pieces that have been in her family for a century or more and paintings of great worth and the pictures of my brother, now dead for nearly a decade.

We all have stuff that has real value to us. It may not be expensive, but it's like a jewel of great price to us. Sometimes it is expensive, like heirlooms and antiques. One family had passed a vase down through the ages. They kept it, almost shrine-like, on the fireplace mantle where everyone could see it. One afternoon the mother of the family came home from shopping, and her teenage daughter met her at the front door. "Mother," she began, "you know that vase that has been handed down from generation to generation? Well, this generation just dropped it."

Having important stuff is only part of the story, isn't it? Handing it down, handing it on is serious business that takes dedication and commitment. It requires a generous and ready spirit to take the time and some care not to drop it once received!

- The wise woman longs to share insights that will help build a better world, whether it be in the field of business and finance or politics and government. Some years back there was a FedEx commercial where an older man was counseling a young man who was fretting about a package he had sent. The older man assured the young man that all would be fine with his package, that is until he learned that the young man failed to ship via FedEx. Whereupon the wise old man concluded, "You're dead!" We want to share our knowledge and our wisdom.

- Certainly that's true for parents who want to pass on their wisdom to the children, longing to protect them from foolish mistakes. They want to give them a boost up on the foundation of their own failures.
- Those facing death often will rally and find extraordinary strength to share last wishes and beliefs with loved ones.

We want to turn over the important stuff and leave the rest behind.

Paul, in his letter to the Christians of Corinth, says that he "turned over... that which I myself received... that Christ died for (us)... that he was buried, and that on the third day he was raised." *The Message* says Paul placed before them what was emphatically placed before him. It's the core of Paul's message, this Easter announcement. Paul doesn't waste any time telling about fantastic births or miracles and wonders. There's no Bethlehem story, no parables. For Paul, the important stuff is the living Christ. He is passing on the essence, the primary, the ultimate. Nothing peripheral here! You know, we get so involved in sideshow Christianity sometimes. We think committee work is ministry instead of people and meeting their needs. We get involved in bean counting rather than faith growing. We become all about safety instead of adventure!

Paul wants to remind the Corinthians---and us---about the really important stuff. Let me remind us today about **the grace stuff, the faith stuff**. It is not-of-my-own-doing stuff. Sometimes we think this faith journey is about earning everything, making the Church of Jesus Christ look like some institution within the current systems of business and government. We dare not forget that we are proclaimers of a new and different, nay, radical alternative. We need to be reminded of how special we are. We need to wallow in the forgiveness that we did not, cannot, earn. Like the little boy who was caught in some misdeed by his father. When the boy's father confronted him with this wrong and threatened to punish him, the little boy drew himself up to his full 4 ft. height and said proudly, "You can't touch me, I'm baptized!" The important stuff is the grace stuff, the faith stuff.

Paul also wants to connect us to **the cosmic stuff**. This good news which we know and live out in our lives was not invented out of thin air. We got it from others who got it from still others who got it from others. Like measles, this Good News is passed on. That which was placed before Paul, which he received, he now passes on. And Paul says, "I received this Good News from lots of people, some of whom are still alive." I believe I Corinthians 15 may be one of the most important chapters in all the New

Testament. For it is here that we find Paul saying that there are witnesses that you can talk to. They saw the risen Christ. Some are dead, but some are still living. Paul says, "You can go check it out!" It may be the closest thing to a scientific proof that we have in all our faith manuscript. This is not a fabricated pseudo truth; this is truth based on cosmic witnesses. We are linked together with all those first folk who faithed a new future into being with their very lives.

In Alex Haley's *Roots*, there is a scene where Kunta Kinte drives his master to a ball at a big plantation house. The slave listens to the music coming from the big house, music that the white folks dance to. Kunta Kinte settles down in the buggy to wait for his master. But a different music begins to waft from somewhere out behind the big house. It's got a different rhythm. Kunta walks down the beaten path behind the big house, down toward the slave cabins, toward the source of this alluring sound. There he finds a man playing African music, the music which he remembered hearing long time past when he was a child---music that he had almost forgotten. Kunta Kinte discovered that the man was from his area of Africa. They talked that night excitedly, in the native tongue, of home and things of home. That night Kunta Kinte lay on the dirt floor of his own little cabin and wept---wept in sadness for all that he had almost forgotten and wept for joy for what he had remembered. Haley wrote, "The terrifying, degrading experience of slavery had almost obliterated his memory of who he was. But the music had helped him remember." (quoted in *Pulpit Resource*, Jan-Mar, 1995, p. 9) We are linked to an incredible past, but sometimes we forget. Then the music brings us back---music of the saints of long ago and yesterday who have handed on the important stuff.

And then, of course, there is the **stuff you've experienced**. This may be the most important because it comes from your own journey. Don't give me dead theory or high faluting theology. Don't speak to me in analytical terms of the construct of famous biblical passages. Don't tell me about the sociological or psychological dynamics that make up faith communities. Instead, tell me about what you know in your heart of hearts.

Tell me about what changed your life, turned you around, and got your attention off yourself and on to others. Tell me about **the saving stuff**. There was a small English parish along the river Thames. It was pastured by a priest who had become very discouraged because he didn't seem to be accomplishing very much. When the bishop visited, the priest confessed, "I

can't say that we are setting the Thames on fire." The bishop looked the depressed priest sternly in the eye and said, "Young man, I am not the least bit concerned about setting the Thames on fire. What I want to know is, if I take you out and drop you in the river, will you sizzle?"

Will you sizzle? Are you encumbered with stuff that has very little worth and value? Or have you gotten hold of the valuable stuff that will change your life---the faith stuff, the cosmic stuff, the saving stuff? It's been placed before you as gift and treasure. Paul says to all believers, "Friends, let me go over the Message with you one final time---this Message that I proclaimed and you made your own, this Message on which you took your stand and by which your life has been saved. (I'm assuming now that your belief was the real thing and not a passing fancy, that you're in this for good and holding fast.)"

Delivered by Tim Tiffany at University Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in San Diego, California, on May 17, 2009