

I Corinthians 12: 4-26

History Lessons

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In Colonial America when farm families wanted to establish a new town they had to be prepared to establish a new parish church and provide for the minister. Usually that meant they had to build a parsonage to house the pastor. 300 years ago in November 1711 Needham the church and town were founded. In those days Sunday was the day to come in from the fields. Saturday night people bathed. Sundays were a time to hear the news from England, to learn about the business of the colony, to catch up with your neighbors and to hear a sermon.

This month our worship theme is History. This theme coincides with the 300th anniversary of the town of Needham. In anticipation of the history theme we spent months organizing the archives, and looking through the material preserved there from our church history. With the help of a student this summer we organized pictures of people from the past and read through their letters. We found a Church Archivist – Shala Howell. She organized a history display in the Kimball Room so you can see the faces of people who loved this church long ago and read their stories.

Why spend so much time on history? Why talk so much about the past especially a past which is so different? Why even think about people who got their news from the minister each week when we have apps for our phones to keep news feeding to us all day long? When so much lies in the future, what can we learn by looking back?

It is a great question. On Friday I saw a new movie that just opened in the theatres; it is called the Descendants and stars George Clooney. Set in Hawaii, the film asks the same question –“What good is history? What difference does it make to us today? George Clooney stars as a middle aged dad whose

wife has a serious boating accident. It is while she is in the hospital that Clooney's character re-discovers his role as a father to his 2 daughters. He also re-connects with his past, as he realizes that life has limits today. He is a rich man whose great great grandfather married a Hawaiian princess, and so he has inherited many acres of pristine real estate on a beautiful promontory. Until his wife was in the hospital he had always planned to turn these acres into golf courses and condominiums. But his wife's condition causes him to wonder. As he looks up from all of the paperwork in his office, he gazes at the pictures of his ancestors – their good faces capture something of their resolute energy and the life force they had. At one point he acknowledges that he has inherited this land that was handed down for generations. It was a gift he could never earn. Like so many things in life, it just fell into his lap.

He returns to visit his family's land. As the camera pans across this stunning stretch of beach from the hills behind, you feel like you are looking back in time – to the people who lived here before the Europeans arrived, and this place takes on a sacred aspect. Suddenly you recognize what a responsibility this man has to protect the land. Suddenly you know that he has power to make new decisions, and power to re-think his own life – power that respects the past and changes the future. This inheritance gives him the chance to change history - to make a difference.

For one thing the ancestors were literally watching. Their faces captured in their portraits. For another – and this realization comes to us when we have children or when we belong to a church with young people. As we watch them grow in our midst we see that the younger generation depends on our wisdom. That is what history teaches us - that our lives matter. When we learn about the lives of others who have gone before us, and study their faces, we think in new ways about our own legacy. What will we pass on? As we run this race of life holding the baton of power that has been handed to us how will our race matter. It is history that teaches us that we have inherited this life of ours. It is history that

reminds us that we hold it only for a time. It is history that tells us that others will come after us- who will wonder what we did.

To pay attention to history is a sign of maturity. 2000 years ago the Roman philosopher Cicero said, “Not to know what happened before you were born is to remain a child.” History grounds us, in time and gives us a story that orients us to the past. It also reminds us of the future. History gives us perspective, and helps us see our lives in a broader context. History makes us better thinkers, gives us a cultural framework and satisfies our need for identity. Pulitzer Prize winning novelist, Robert Penn Warren said, “History cannot give us a program for the future but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves and of our common humanity so that we can better face the future. People of faith are but usually use the Bible as our text. Today I want to examine some of the things we have learned from the history of our church – to see what our history tells us about faith today.

This week most of us will gather with family and with friends who have become family to eat a big Thanksgiving meal, and laugh and talk. This is one of those moments in the year when we are more aware of history. For one thing the menu is our modern attempt to re-create the meal that legend tells us our pilgrim forbears shared with the native people they found on these shores when they arrived 400 years ago. Whether we acknowledge it or not the meal is a 400 year old tradition. This is one of the few times when young people sit with older people, and we think about the gift of many generations at the table of life. But it is also a moment when we can sit and ponder our own roles as people who inherit something precious from our ancestors, and who have a chance to pass something precious on to our descendants.

The movie I watched is call Descendants. While it is about the past, it is not called Ancestors. We study history to consider what our legacy will be. As people of faith we look back so that we can make

an impact on the world today, and leave something sacred to those who follow us. We read the Bible as much for our children's sake as for our own.

We have so many blessings this Thanksgiving week. We have inherited so much – in our community, and in our families. Family meals are history lessons. They remind us that nobody is perfect, but people try to do their best- most of the time. These meals take us from the insulation of our own pet prejudices and open us to see things in a new way. They remind us that life holds the potential to be sacred journey. How sacred? That is the question each of us must answer. That is the work of life –to decide whether our lives will be a blessing to the world.

I want to leave you with a story about the Giant Red Woods....