

“The Greatest Gift”

December 19, 2010

Grove Presbyterian Church

II Corinthians Chapter 3 begins with one of those wonderful images that describe the community of those who follow the Way of Jesus. II Corinthians is a letter itself (actually a collection of letters) sent by Paul to the church at Corinth.

Letters were how Paul communicated with the people he loved. Here he describes how they are a living letter.

The sender is Christ.

Paul is the postal carrier. Mister McFeeley – speedy delivery!

The ink (*me-lan* in Greek, since black ink was created by soot, gum, and water) is the Spirit of Christ. With it they would *egge-gram-mene*; that is, to grammar, to trace, to letter, to draw.

Their very hearts are the material upon which the message has been lettered.

The message? The message is the authenticity and effectiveness of Paul's preaching. “You want to know what I believe,” he asks? “Simple,” he answers --“See what has happened.” This is a message meant for all to read. All to read them and their living. The Corinthians are both the message and the messengers. They are his letter of recommendation.

As we here at Grove, as Grove, are Christ’s own letter of recommendation to the world.

How else will others hear the message unless we are the messengers? And the message is the messengers. At work, in our homes? Trips to Haiti such as Steve is trying to put together to construct clinics in April, either the 9th or 16th.

Who will publish the good news?

Listen, please:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

How exciting it must have been back then to get a letter. We have copies of letters going back to the Sumerian Days millennium before Jesus. Young men writing home in cuneiform on clay tablets to dad from school asking for...more money.

We're no different. We might use keyboards or ballpoint pens instead of styluses – our technology may be changed – but what we say, who we are hasn't changed in six thousand years.

With love from me to you...

Still is exciting to get letters. Thank you cards. Postcards. Birthday cards. Christmas cards. Take out the paper knife, open up, remove the paper, receive the message.

Right now I'm writing our family's annual Christmas letter, bragging of course of all our awards, accolades, successes. Well, mostly grateful how no one in the family been arrested or found out -- yet.

Well, annual also might be a stretch. Last one we sent was 2007.

Elaine reads the Christmas Cards we receive right away, as soon as she comes home from work. I like to bunch them. It's fun to discover who is still is alive, what they're doing, even more remarkable that they still remember you.

What types are there?

- The Christmas letter – either tedious or delightful
- The regular Christmas card, some with notes, most with just a smear of a signature – sometimes it takes a while to figure out who they are.
- Then the fun photograph, usually taken sometime in summer with the kids wearing Christmas sweaters in sweltering July.

I shall let you in on one of my rules. Like Leroy Jethro Gibbs, I too have a list of rules. Most of us do. One of mine is that I will always open first letters addressed by hand, preferably by fountain pen. Love fountain pens.

Second are those hand typed.

I toss aside till later those with gummed labels, computer produced.

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Letters always best. Even if a dying art. Where would John and Abigail have been without their letters to each other when apart for so long?

So much better than boring, shallow, and impersonal instantaneous communication:

- Email I bewail
- Facebook I can overlook
- Emoticons, please be gone!
- You-Tube turpitude
- Blackberries, blueberries, electronic boysenberries
- Ipads, Ipods, ‘egad
- Tweating, Tweaking, texting...
- Social networks really aren’t, social that is...

Words into the ether, deleted into the vapor. Un-memorable, un-remembered, un-lasting. Like smoke from a candle. They have their purpose. I’m not an entire Neanderthal. I’m not a complete Luddite.

But how many young couples today – romancing by texting -- will be able to sit down someday in their gray years and unwrap the red ribbon and read those yellowing love letters?

Give me paper and pen. Give me the surprise of a letter in the mailbox. Give me the anticipation of the reply, for it is hard to ignore writing a reply when someone has sent something so personal. Give me the excitement of reading a letter, for letters require far more deliberation and intention when you letter out the words, the message.

They are so much more personal. And better? They are tactile. You can hold them. They are real. Folded and unfolded. Kept and reread.

With love from me to you...

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I’ve always loved words. I’ve always been fascinated by the idea of words.

Imagine for a moment, where’d we be without words. Remove words from our lives where would we be?

How could we connect?

How could we communicate? Even if we use hand signals or grunts, we still have to use words in our minds to make intelligible the idea. Without words there are no ideas, no knowing, no understanding, no relationships, no transcendence possible. Words alone make intelligible the unintelligible, bringing form to ideas, making visible the invisible.

How can we know anything?

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Dear Grove (the salutation),

Thank you for everything. What a wonderful, sad, happy, year. Merry Christmas. See you soon. (the body)

With love, (the valediction)

Bob

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Dear World (the salutation)

Thank you for being mine. I hope you will enjoy what of mine I now give you. Enjoy the word I send. For if you notice, the message is the messenger. Merry Christmas. (the body).

Yours truly, (the valediction)

God

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Dear Friends, (the salutation)

I'm finally here. Thanks for waiting. So now, what do you want us to do? I've got a few ideas. (the body)

With love from me to you, (the valediction)

Jesus (aka The Word)