

My nephew Jeff was very close to his grandfather, my father. Jeff's mother, my sister Barbara, was a divorced single mother for several years, until Jeff was about eight years old. So, my Dad filled in - taking Jeff fishing, to ball games, just hanging out and watching television.

My mother died when I was ten years old. So when my father died in 1991, my sisters and I divided up his stuff. Then, three years ago, Barbara died. A few days after her funeral Jeff asked me what I wanted as a keepsake of my sister. Among the first items I thought of was a wooden, hand-carved, hand-painted head of Jesus. Jeff knew immediately what I was talking about. He grew up seeing that *objet d'art*. For 20 years he saw it whenever he visited his grandfather. For almost 20 years it hung on the wall of his mother's house.

Jeff was happy to let me have this memento, but was a little surprised that it held such meaning for me. He left the room for a moment and came back holding the small carved face of Jesus. When he handed it to me, I immediately turned it over, and examined the unfinished back.

"You can barely see what is written; the words were written in pencil," I said.

Jeff was surprised. "There's writing on the back?" he asked.

"Yes," I told him, "you can make out most of it. It says, 'With all my love, Roy.'" I went on to explain to my astonished nephew that his grandfather worked in a furniture manufacturing plant before he was drafted in WWII. My dad carved this head of Jesus as an engagement gift for my mother. He wrote on the back of it, "With all my love, Roy." I handed the carved face of Jesus back to Jeff so he could see the writing. He examined the piece as if he were seeing it for the first time.

Jeff looked up as if remembering: "When I was six or seven, Grandpa and I went fishing. While we sat on the dock waiting for the fish

to bite he started whittling a piece of wood. An hour later, he handed me this tiny carved duck he made. I couldn't believe it. Now it all makes sense."

The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians:

I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which you stand, through which also you are being saved... For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn received: that Christ died for our sins ... and that he was buried ... and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

In reading these words you can almost feel the Apostle's urgency as he wrote. He does not want, he cannot let the Church in Corinth lose the memory of the Gospel of their salvation. It is of "First importance," that Paul tells them what he was told. It is all about the Story. Telling the story. Receiving the story. Re-telling the story... to those who never heard it ...to those who are starting to forget it.

There are many threads that bind together to make the fabric of the Easter liturgy, but one of the most important is this thread that is spun from the importance of telling the story. "Go," the women are told by the angel at the tomb of Jesus, "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." In the book of the Acts of the Apostles Peter speaks to the Gentiles and reminds them, "You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ - he is Lord of All. That message spread throughout Judea..." Peter goes on to remind them of the content of that message: how Jesus was baptized by John, how Jesus performed miracles of healing, how Jesus was put to death and raised by God on the third day. Peter ends his witness with

this justification for these reminders: “He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the One ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the Prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his Name.” Commanded to preach, Peter cannot remain silent about what he witnessed, about what the Prophets declared.

There is an old adage that any religion is always one generation away from extinction. As a Christian, I believe our Lord’s promise that he will be with us always, even to the end of the world. I do not believe that Christianity will ever become extinct. However, it can and it has faded in certain areas. Those of you who know your history also know that Northern Africa was unquestionably Christian, at one time. St. Augustine was Bishop of Hippo, in what is now Algeria. Alexandria in Egypt ranked as one of the premier Christian centers along with Jerusalem, Constantinople and Rome. Today, Christianity is a shadow of what it was in Northern Africa.

Anyone who has visited the churches in France or England will tell you that they are pitifully empty on Sunday. People do not know the story. People have forgotten the story. Or, what they do remember has lost its importance for their lives.

When I told my nephew about the history of the carved head of Jesus, parts of his own history came to light. Jeff learned that my Dad, the barber, was also a very skilled craftsman. Jeff learned that, for people he loved, my Dad could turn a piece of wood into the face of Christ or into a small duck. Until you know the story, you miss the importance.

Unless you know the story, you may think that all that is happening today for you is that after an hour of sitting on a hard bench the people in silly clothes up front give you a cracker and a sip of wine. You may think that all that happened at the font to Lillian was that she got her hair wet. Without the story, you do not know or you may have forgotten the Love of God that is behind the bread and wine and water. That the water of

Baptism is the sign of new life – Life that began when the Spirit of God hovered over the water of chaos at Creation; - life that was saved when the Israelites passed through the waters of the Red Sea; - life that was sacrificed when blood and water came from our Lord’s side after a spear thrust. The Water has stories to tell.

As do the Bread and Wine: the memory of what happened in the upper room; the holy food of new and unending life in Jesus; the foretaste of the heavenly banquet in the joy of his eternal kingdom. When you know the story – when you are reminded of the story – the Love behind the story, the Love that God wanted for you all along, becomes truly yours.

I brought the carved face of Jesus home with me after Barbara’s funeral. And when I was called as priest for Christ Church, I brought it to Martinsville. It hangs on the wall in the Rector’s office, as you enter through the outer office doors. Now, when you see it, you will see more than those who do not know the story. In a few moments, I will raise a piece of bread and lift a chalice of wine for you to see. When you gaze upon them, open your heart to the story of the God that loves you so much, he died for you and after three days, he rose from the dead. Think upon Love so great – then tell someone else the story.

Never cease to proclaim the Good News once delivered, and of First Importance:

Alleluia, Christ is Risen.

The Lord is Risen indeed, Alleluia.

Amen.