

## **What Forms Us? ~ January 31, 2010**

**Jeremiah 1:4-10; I Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30; Psalm 71:1-6**

For as long as I can remember, there has been a debate about what it is that forms us. Is it nurture, or is it nature? Are we simply a product of our genes? Or, do the surroundings and events and people in our lives determine who we will become? Or is it a blend of both?

Everyone seems to have an opinion about this. Genes certainly help determine our eye color, the shape of our noses, eyes, ears, our height and many other physical characteristics we have. My mother and her sister, my Aunt Rose, used to discuss who had brought one specific trait or another into their families. The things that were undesirable, my aunt would say, very seriously, never came from the Oeflein side of the family. My mother, wisely, remained silent. I would laugh. I find myself doing the same thing with Isabelle, my now 6 month old granddaughter. Of course, she gets her happy nature from her mother's side of the family and that little temper from her dad's. And, I still laugh at myself. She is who she is.

Kimberly Powell writes about this puzzling problem on about.comGuide, saying:

“You got your green eyes from your mother and your freckles from your father. But where did you get your thrill-seeking personality and talent for singing? Did you learn these from your parents or was it predetermined by your genes? While it's clear that physical characteristics are hereditary, the genetic waters get a bit more murky when it comes to an individual's behavior, intelligence and personality. Ultimately the old argument of nature vs. nurture has never really been won. We do not yet know how much of what we are is determined by our DNA and how much by our life experiences. But we do know that both play a part.”

She goes on to say: “It has been reported that the use of the terms ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’ as a convenient catch-phrase for the roles of heredity and environment in human development can be traced back to 13<sup>th</sup> century France.”

I suspect, while the phrase “nature vs. nurture” might have appeared in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, eons before, Adam looked at Eve and wondered, “Hmmm, where did that come from?”—and many more times Eve looked at Adam and wondered the same.

We are not going to be able to answer this age-old question of what it is that makes us who we are this morning. But, maybe we can think a bit about how our faith has formed us and how thinking a little about our scriptures and applying them to life forms us, also.

Consider Jeremiah. Steeped in the traditions of Judaism, he knew when it was God who was calling him into service. He was hesitant, as are all prophets at first. But he had the gift and he used it when he felt the call. Was this a genetic predisposition or was it because he had grown up in the traditions of his faith and, possibly heard the stories of other people in other times who spoke for God?

Then there was Jesus, reading from the scroll in the synagogue—retelling prophesy about the one who was to come—the one the nation Israel had been waiting for; then he proclaimed that he was the fulfillment of that prophesy. He knew what happened to prophets and how they had little honor in their own country and yet he had to try, to test those sitting with him, to see if there was an opening, a small space through which he might enter into the service of God right where he had grown up. That was not to be and he went on his way to find others who would be

receptive to his words and who would rise up and follow him. He followed the tradition of prophets of old. For him, there was a blend of nature and nurture that drove him forward, even to his death.

Then we have the beautiful words of Paul—words that many of us have been raised on. Words that might touch something in our very nature that brings out the best in us. Our scriptures nurture us. They often make us better people. They inspire us to rise above parts of our genetic code and give us faith in our fellow humans and in the fact that events in our world will eventually turn out right.

A belief in love can turn our world around. A belief that it can, indeed, endure all things—even angry words and less than kind actions-- enables us to re-establish relationships that have gone awry. A sense that love believes all things without looking for ulterior motives can help us begin to do the same. Knowing that love hopes all things stirs within us a renewal of hope. Love accepts people right where they are in life and who they are. It keeps us from trying to force change on them while helping them find the new doors through which they may change themselves.

When there is abiding love for another it can't be rebuffed---it can't be driven away, it goes on in tenderness and acceptance even when another can't find a response in him or her self because of fear, because of nurture or life experience that has not quite gone right, because of old patterns repeated over and over again; because of a concern that we might be made vulnerable and we might be hurt.

Love over rides these boundaries we humans construct and reaches through the wall of our defenses to touch us and move us and deliver us from our selves and our selfishness.

Paul, in writing those beautiful words in I Corinthians, revealed to us an understanding of what the message of Jesus was all about. Paul had come far in his life and in the way he viewed Jesus and his teachings and he chose to share his understanding with those who would read this letter. He decided what it was that nurtured him the most and he chose the better way.

The message of love that was present in the life and teachings of Jesus was revealed through his brief ministry; so little time and yet such a great impact.

We profess that we are his followers. If we are and we truly want to see our dear old world move in a more positive direction, we need to begin to move it by moving ourselves. While we might like to shirk our responsibility to our faith by saying “Well, what do you expect of me, look at my father or look at my mother and the way I was raised,” we can make great strides by taking responsibility for our own lives, incorporating into them what we can learn from our scriptures and then taking some positive action. We are responsible for the place in which we live and move and have our being. We are responsible for right here and right now. If we accept the call to serve God, as did Jeremiah and Jesus, and Paul, we will begin to see things change and improve, bit-by-bit and inch-by-inch. That is how the best progress has been made in our faith over the centuries—it is a legacy we have accepted and that we need to carry forward. As we work to create a better world for all, we will find what it is that truly forms us.

*-- Amen*