

The Stories We Tell

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; John 21: 24-5

Today's sermon is about the stories we tell, our faith stories, our church stories. When I was growing up, to tell a story was to tell a fib. But our best stories tell the deepest truth we know. We are story-formed creatures. Call us *homo-narratus*.

The stories we tell, the ones we tell ourselves about ourselves, or about our church or community, or nation can help us or do us damage. They can heal us or hurt us. Some of us talk about ourselves in harmful ways we'd never talk about others.

I have for a long time talked and written about the power of narrative for the good. Today the word "narrative" has taken a turn. A narrative is seen as a big spin containing smaller spins. As in on the news: "He wanted to get his narrative out there first." It's like all narratives have become false narratives. Today I want to talk about the power of the stories we tell for *good*.

I

What are the most helpful and healing stories about Grace? They must be truthful stories, or they cannot heal or help. There's a battle in our nation over

writing our nation's story that is at the same time truthful, healing and hopeful. Paul's criteria for how we speak to one another also applies to the stories we tell. One, do they build up, edify, or break down? Two, do they impart grace? And three, are they fitting and timely?

Our memories are slippery things. Scientists say that every time we bring something up for remembrance the memory is slightly changed. As we remember we can magnify the positive or magnify the negative. Mark Twain once quipped: "I have received many slights in my life. Most of them didn't happen".

What about our collective memory of our church? This summer we have been re-collecting and refining our memories of our life together. They help us give thanks for the past and give hope for the future.

II

Our two texts for today are all about the stories we tell, the stories of our faith.

The first is one of the most important passages in the Hebrew scripture. It is remembered over and over again in scripture and worship. It began with the words that are sung in every Shabbat service. The *Shema*, the "Hear O Israel". Three phrases:

Hear O Israel

The Lord Is Our God

The Lord Is One.

What follows is the first of the two great commandments Jesus talked about:

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

We try to do this everyday as we relate to God and our neighbor.

The passage now moves to how the commandments of God should shape how we live—and how they are passed on. “They shall be upon your heart”, the writer says. Down deep. And as we carry God’s words in our hearts, we teach them diligently to our children. In an age of Biblical illiteracy, in society and church, we are to be diligent about the biblical teaching of our children.

And as we carry the words of God in our hearts, we speak of them in our homes and in the streets. (I think we should have a Grace T-Shirt that says: Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly! the words we sing at communions together.)

The passage next describes the Jewish custom, especially in Orthodox Judaism, of binding the scripture in little boxes attached to their bodies. And these final words: “You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

You may have gone to a Jewish home and seen a small ornamental box affixed to the front door post. They are called *Mezuzahs*. And inside them is a small piece of paper rolled up like a scroll on which is written in tiny Hebrew the words of Deuteronomy 10:4-9, our text for today. Sometimes they touch the Mezuzah as they enter the house, as some Christians touch their foreheads with water from the baptismal font as they enter or leave worship.

The passage says, We will not stop telling the story of our faith!

III

The other text contains the last words of the Gospel of John. The writer says that he has written all the words and stories in the gospel as faithfully and truly as possible. The he adds these astonishing words:

But there are also many other things which Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

All the thousands of libraries in the world could not contain them.

John was not only talking about all the other gospels being written in his time, but peering into the future, he saw all the books that would ever be written about Jesus, who he was and all the stories about Jesus' presence and work in the lives of people for over 2,000 years. The stories will go on and on and never end.

There was a blind woman in the 19th century who in mid-life began to write gospel songs. She wrote hundreds, many treasured to this day. Her name was Fanny Crosby. Some of us grew up singing a number of them. You may know some almost by heart. Here is one:

Tell me the story of Jesus,
write on my heart every word;
tell me the story most precious
sweetest that ever was heard.

By God's grace we here today carry the words on our heart and on our lips.

Amen