

Sermon – Care-full Story making

<Slowly>

CS Lewis once said: “It is not an abstraction called humanity that is to be saved. It is YOU, your soul, and, in some sense yet to be understood, even your body, that was made for the high and holy place. All that you are... every fold and crease of your individuality was devised from all eternity to fit God as a glove fits a hand. All that intimate particularity which you can hardly grasp yourself, much less communicate to your fellow creatures, is no mystery to him. He made those ins and outs that HE might fill them. Then he gave your soul so curious a life because it is the key designed to unlock that door, of all the myriad doors in him.” <End>

It is God’s will to save every person, to bring each individual man and woman into his Church. It is his desire to graft your individual histories onto the tree of life in him. So many people read the word of God and understand all the words, context and historical significance of what it is saying and yet never see who they are in the kingdom of God.

The revelation at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19-20 gave Israel the direction and necessary structure for redemption. The Sinai experience teaches us two basic realities about ourselves:

- 1) Everything God does involves me personally
- 2) Everything I do is therefore significant

Because I have been chosen by God, I have significance. I may have been unworthy; but, I am not worthless. You see, God’s actions give significance to our lives. This means that our lives have meaning.

How?

We, ourselves are a consequence of what God has done and is doing. In addition because we are people who matter, it matters whether or not we kill people, commit adultery, backbite each other etc. In Short, because we have consequence it matters how we act as it reflects on God.

Is there a covenant between us and God?

Yes, we all know of the covenant in Christ’ blood, but let me take this in a parallel direction this morning. God has loved us and we respond to that love in gratitude. Because the almighty God has taken notice of us, given us hope and worth, we as human beings created in Gods image have a moral sense, we recognize an imperative obligation to reciprocate his love. Our almighty God has given us the choice to serve him or to reject him. As we study his Word, we find that all our problems come from the will of mankind not being in line with the will of God.

So What?

Since everything we do now takes on significance because of who we are, we need to recognize that whatever we do or have done whether through faith or unbelief, righteousness or sin, obedience or rebellion has had significance.

How many of you have read a novel?

Whatever has been done is capable of being narrated into a story. In fact, if you will bear with me, I would suggest that for the moment at least we think of our own lives as a story. I use this technique in counselling all the time. Each of us has a personal history, a story that details the events of our lives. If you think about it for a minute you will soon discover that your story is an account in which what you have done has had consequences, either positive or negative. Your story shows a structured purpose. If I were to read your story today, I would see how what you have done and the results that were achieved showed the intents of what you were trying, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, to accomplish. In your story, nothing is irrelevant to you.

When we think of God, we often abstract away into streets of gold, no sorrow, no pain, unending Joy and happiness, no struggle, no strife and so on. This morning, I ask us to consider the book of Ruth. This book in the bible is the story of a woman named Naomi and her two daughters-in-Law who experienced hardship, had a couple of daughters in law, asked them to leave for their own good, Orpah did, Ruth didn't. It is a great story and tells us many things. We even know that Ruth was the grandmother of king David and an ancestor to Jesus himself. But here is my point... on the surface it is not a grand tale of the mighty or rich, it is a tale that brings us into contact with a real person in the everyday struggle of life. It does not take place at a royal temple or in a kingly court, but rather in a humble village in the land of Judah.

When we say that everyone matters or that we love all people. We are declaring what this church is all about. For a person who ministers to others in the body. A.K.A Christians... we have a model for how to take each person seriously.

How many want to see those who have drifted away from the church here restored?

Well... take note here because people who have felt obscure and unnoticed, or who have been hurt and have become bitter, or have experienced perceived rejection have come to the church and have heard the story of the Gospel of Christ but, an here is the kicker, have failed to find their place in it. They have not discovered where they fit in. It is our job as a church to seek and save the lost. In this case I ask us to consider that they are people who feel left out of salvation history.

Now to be fair the person who doesn't feel at home in the church has very often done something wrong. They are many times experiencing conviction that they don't like within themselves and the enemy is often whispering condemnation into their ears.

Our churches have failed to deal with this because as pastors there is a tendency to bypass all the complexities that we find in the lives of our flock or if you will their stories and simply proscribe a series of moralistic pronouncements to a problem that only "band-aids" the situation or in many cases makes the situation worse. To be effective in caring for each other we cannot simply throw around these band-aids like Jobs comforters. If as Christians and ministers of the Gospel if we only carry around a bunch of moral pronouncements in our pockets we do more harm than good. We need to learn to tell the Gospel story.

We need to actively listen to the complex stories that those around us tell us; which can take some commitment and some time.

I would suggest that we need to learn how to be effective story tellers. Consider this...

The moralizing Christian is like a clerk in a pharmacy who has a whole bunch of off the counter, one size fits all solutions to the symptoms that ail the person who they are serving. Let's say a man with a headache comes into the pharmacy with a headache. The clerk may sell the man some Tylenol that may help, but probably does do much for the undiagnosed underlying brain tumor.

The storytelling Christian is like a doctor who listens attentively, the doctor takes a history on the patient and probes the issues before prescribing a prescription or some remedial action.

So why are there so many clerks and so few physicians?

Because relationship, Active listening and probing the details is often uncomfortable, time consuming and emotionally exhausting. It is far easier when someone comes to you and says, I don't understand God, why does he hate me to simply say something like: "read your bible and pray more." It is a generic off the shelf solution that may help, but the person has not attached their story to the Gospel of Jesus. Are prayer and reading the solution to a lot of problems? ... Absolutely, but we say that we love all people. Does that love come out as a series of platitudes and moral pronouncements or does it come out in relationship and loving care?

Why do I use a storytelling model?

We are all very busy and can become bored with people who are trying to overcome what is obvious to us, irritated with troublesome or difficult people. When we get this way often times condescension comes out, the person needing care gets hurt and falls away. But if we approach each other with the interest of a person who loves the story, who listens and then picks up the story and relates it to the good news of the Gospel, then we can truly make a difference. Remember where I started everything we do is significant, God has made us all consequential and so what we do has consequences.

I do not want to relegate a person to:

- 1) X-has menopause
- 2) Y-Is a cheater
- 3) Z-is a divorce waiting to happen

Stories create an expectation, we embrace the protagonist; we involve ourselves in the character. In this way the stories enhance, elaborate and develop as each detail is absorbed. The listener begins to truly understand how the individual got where they are and why they think what they do. They begin to identify with the other. Listening is the first step on the journey to helping another discover Christ

When as a pastor I listen with patient intensity, my action has significance in that simply by actively listening it gives weight to what is being said. It steps out of the realm of gossip into the narrative of

who the person is. Many times the sufferer doesn't know who they are in Christ, sometimes even who they are. They may define themselves by their Job or their social status. You see when we listen to each other attentively the very act gives significance. If we don't take an interest in the mixed up and miscellaneous material of everyday life, evaluate it carefully, apply some skill in discernment, and read between the lines and determine what it all means then we cannot show the person needing our help how the providence of God is impacting their lives. We need to show where God's redemptive plan is operating in their lives despite the surface appearance to the contrary. When we do listen a pattern or plot begins to emerge.

It is a secular quote but I am reminded of the nineteenth-century clinician Laennec, you know the one who invented the stethoscope... who told his students: "Listen, listen to your patient, he is giving you the diagnosis"

Not every Christian is a pastor or a counsellor or a deacon etc. But every Christian is charged with caring for each other and knowing how to do it properly can certainly help. Amen?

Consider Naomi in the book of Ruth, note that she got into the story by complaining. She experienced significant loss and was very bitter and complained against God.

She said in Ruth 1:20 "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 21 I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

Not only is the complaint tolerated by God, but it may be the proper position for a person to take if they take God seriously. God does not need us to defend him, his grace is sufficient for us. We love a just and merciful God, wrestling with what is happening is not a sin. We need to communicate with him to understand. Think about Job, Naomi, Jonah, and Jeremiah. They all complained.

To be effective we need to listen, understand, and then place the person's story into the context of God's redemptive plan.

I am reminded of a historical Jewish Rabbi who had this right. His name was Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev... of him it was said: "The destitute, the ignorant, the misfits sought him out. His presence made them feel important; he gave them what they needed most; dignity"

This is what we mean when we say that we love all people. Once they know they are of value and who they are in Christ, then we must lead them back to the Joy and wider mission of what God has in mind for all of us in our community.

One of the things that is a huge priority for me moving forward is.... Visitation. Why?

Why visitation, because, I am a new person who wants to get to know you. I am a voracious reader and love to hear the stories of the people I care for. I love visitation because it recognizes each person as important. The other benefit is that unlike a pastoral meeting or a counselling session the intent is different and when visited in their homes, people can regulate the level of the conversation to suit

themselves; it allows the person to bear their hearts if they want in a private and secure environment or if they want they can keep the conversation light and anecdotal. But what I love about it is that it sets out to create a collaborative effort to get to know each other and see how our personal stories relate.

If you haven't figured it out by now, I think relationship and understanding are important.

I cannot write the story alone. I can only collaborate in the writing with you. It takes the ego and any notion of superiority out of the mix. We are all members of the body and we all matter.

Now to be clear, I do not want a ton of people running around counselling each other, but what I do think is that we need is the ability to build relationship with each other in a healthy structure. If you come on a problem that you would like to talk about, guess what? You're in luck, that's what I am here for... I will walk with you on the journey and together we can take the problem to the one who can solve it. Jesus! Is this biblical... - Yes 2 Cor. 1:24 "Not that we lord it over your faith; we work WITH YOU for your joy"

One of my professors once said this:

"Many will choose not to participate in such work; neither counselling nor visitation... All pastors can do in counselling and visitation is to courteously invite persons to make and tell stories, and offer themselves and skilled collaborators in the work. If the person does not want to engage in the work, there is nothing the pastor can do about that"

My Job is to be here for you... More than that it is what I am called to do... If I can pass on some of these Godly skills to you, then I have done my Job.

Prayer.