

Sermon for October 27, 2019

“The Third Letter to Westwood: Stories in Community”

Texts: Galatians 6:2, 7-10; Isaiah 40:25-31; Luke 1-15a, 18-19

Once again, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, in my first letter, we spoke of faithfulness as the foundation for our lives, and that of the church, as we move into God’s future. In my second letter, we spoke of the importance of stories. Remembering our own stories. Listening to the stories of others. Connecting them with God’s stories in the pages of Scripture, as told through the lives of the heroes/heroines of the faith, as the models and templates for faithfulness. As we once again take up these tasks, here it Westwood First, we must remember that every life is a unique, invaluable story. One only needs to read the gospel narratives to see how our Lord Jesus valued every person’s story.

It is important to remember that God speaks to us in our stories and that connecting our story with God’s, is the work of the Holy Spirit, as we remember and delve deep into our memory. It is important that we look back and review our lives, as a way of understanding our “lived realities.”

But it is more than simply reminiscing. It is more than a sentimental journey. It is helping one another identify meaning in their lives. It is helping one another reflect on what particular joyful and sorrowful events meant in our lives and made us who we are. It is helping one another to chronicle our encounters with God, perhaps for the first time. It is utilizing reminiscence in mutual ministry to help one another become more aware of the continuity and meaning of our lives.

When we take our stories serious enough to explore them and share them, they can become places of divine revelation. Places where we – with Spirit’s help – are able to perceive ways in which God has shared in our personal history and been present with us in our lives. Memory reveals God’s presence in our lives. Faith is the recounting of God’s love and presence on our journey through time; a retrieval of the events from our memories that mediate God’s graciousness. Herein lies the beginning of a process by which we can allow ourselves to be forgiven and healed. This, in turn, leads to deeper spiritual formation, bringing us one step closer to the resilient kind of faith that will serve us to the end and beyond.

While it may be hard to fathom, even the more difficult parts are useful and even the most painful memories can be healed in the re-telling; rough stories, by reviewing the stories of our lives. This is easier than we probably realize. Sometimes all it takes is talking about something or just saying its name out loud, for us to find that it no longer has any power over us; especially if it is something that we have been carrying for a long time: old guilts and failures, regrets and remorse that have festered over time and that we would dearly love – deep down – to relinquish.

And we will undoubtedly find, as did our brother Paul, that God’s grace is sufficient for us; that power is made perfect in weakness. That when we are weak, then we are strong. Beloved, bear in mind also, that remembering and sharing our stories creates community. Know too that while there are details and events that makes our individual stories unique, there are

moments when we recognize our stories in the stories of others. There are moments when some experience, celebratory event, or difficult moment in another's story sounds familiar, even resonates with ours and we begin to recognize oneness. Here, truly is where we are bound together in unique ways. Indeed – these are the ties that bind. They are the very essence of “church,” or, in the ancient Greek – koinonia, meaning “fellowship,” or “community.” But we will never know those moments, never experience these ties, if we are not willing to engage others.

Faith stories are the legacy we leave to future generations, our children and grandchildren and are central to the idea of koinonia. They can help us see beyond age and gender and realize that we are all children of God made in God's image. In stories we discover our common faith journey. Above all, beloved, know that stories create meaning at any age. If we are to face life with integrity and purpose, we must know that our lives indeed mean something; that we matter to someone and that whatever the story we have lived might be, it has brought us to this point.

Remembering our story helps us journey into God's shalom. Shalom, a word with which we are no doubt aware, is often translated simply as peace. But it is much more than that. It is a wholeness in body, mind, and spirit. It brings with it the kind of peace that the world cannot give; the kind of peace that passes all understanding. There we discover that we can re-imagine and re-frame our stories in light of God's story and that even the most difficult chapters can be understood as moments of God's grace. The wholeness and peace of Christ Jesus is found as we touch His stories and connect them with ours.

In this, we achieve a sense of personal integrity, accepting life as it has been lived. This describes someone who has adapted to life and who has, with God's grace and the Spirit's help, become reconciled with themselves and with God. all of this is crucial in helping us confront the challenges and transitions of growing older. As we review our lives, our ups and downs, we gain a greater sense of our own self-worth and God's gracious providence. We may take one step forward and two steps back, but we move ever onward. We never arrive, so much as we are always on the way to becoming.

This new image means that life always has its challenges. It helps us realize that life is never living upward or downward, but always forward as long as we live.

The challenges we face as we grow older, retirement, the loss of the ability to drive, or relying on some sort of device – a cane or a walker – to help us get from place to place; the issues of memory; the transitions, moving from cherished homes into unfamiliar places; the inevitable crises, medical diagnoses, even death – our own or those close to us – all of these are turning points that offer critical **possibilities**. They present themselves in stages and follow a similar cycle.

Nevertheless, faith demands that we face them – the endings, the in-between time, the emergence of something new – with courage and hope. We must not rush them, nor should we try to fill the inevitable voids with busyness. We must be patient, learning to endure, living by discerning God's presence, trusting in God always. The strange reality is that God is at work, often in meaningful, yet mysterious ways. We hear the word synchronicity, defined as a meaningful coincidence, which occur at points of important transitions in our life. Indeed,

coincidences may well be God's way of remaining anonymous. One humorous definition, with more than a hint of truth to it, is that a coincidence is simply a miracle for which God does not take credit.

There is a sense of urgency, as one grows older, about preserving one's faith story. It is sad, almost tragic, when one waits too long. And so, dear ones, examine the sacred text of your daily experience, reconstruct the events and relationships, that went into the creation of your being, re-collect memories and form them into narratives that make your life a once-told-tale. Because as we tell our stories; as we re-frame them within the Scriptural narrative, especially where it speaks about aging, and as we connect them with the stories of others, we find ourselves at the place where the work of the church can truly begin to flourish. Here is where faithfulness begins to take on its shape and outward appearance. Here we begin to see what faithful living looks like in our own lives. Here we begin to live out the rest of our story. Here we begin, as has been said, to live in such a way that your pastor will not have to lie about us at our funeral.

I have often said that for us to grow we must be the kind of church to which people want to belong. This is where we start. It is not a question of our having the kind of broad range of programs that appeals to the greatest number of people. Nor is it about having a particular type of music during worship. Rather, it is about authenticity in the things that we do.

In poll after poll, people have said that what they want most from church is to feel welcome. They want to feel as if they are a part of a community where they are genuinely cared for no matter who they are. They want to be able to tell their stories and for people to truly listen and not be judged. They want a church where it is safe for them to do so. This is part of bearing one another's burdens, thus fulfilling the law of Christ. It is – here in our context – being the church that God is calling us to be.

It is not an easy task. Starting new programs, changing worship styles are – by comparison – a lot easier. But then, taking up one's cross and following Christ has never been and never will be easy. Our Lord commanded us to love one another as He has loved us. We must empty ourselves as Christ Jesus did. He has shown us a better way of being with and for one another. We must become servants to each other. Christ has shown us how. We must become servants whose daily lives reflect and represent Christ in the world. A servant looks for and fills in the gaps where he or she is, and in this way will always be unconsciously involved in the world's need. Servanthood is focused on attitude, as well as action. It is about our nature, rather than our lifestyle. Most importantly, a servant measures success in faithfulness to God's calling, wherever, whenever, it may come in their life. This is a point worth pondering in this "outcome- and performance-based" society, where we measure success in our churches by things like attendance and giving levels.

Therefore, as Jesus washed His disciples' feet, so we must wash the feet of others. As disciples, we must learn to live for others, not for ourselves, while encouraging others to be disciples as well. As disciples we must be life-long learners, realizing that there is always more we can learn at the feet of the Master.

I firmly believe, brothers and sisters, with every fiber of my being, that it is to **this** type of a community, that others will be drawn. When servant discipleship becomes a reality, we will experience growth in many ways. But not necessarily in the ways we expect.

When we say we want to grow, what we really often mean, is that we want to increase our membership. We mean, as I alluded to, that we want more people to join so that we have more attending worship, more givers who can help us grow our budget. For too many churches bringing in new people is not so much about welcoming them into a community of faith, as it is about ensuring their survival. That is not faith. That is desperation.

People need to hear the good news of the gospel. They need to know Christ and not be just a face in the crowd, or desired for more than what they are able to contribute. They want to be challenged. They want to ask questions. They want to know that it is safe for them to do so. They want to belong. They want to know that they are part of a community. That they are not alone, especially in their suffering. They need to know that God is there with them, embodied in their faith community. Congregational support is important because the pastor cannot – indeed should not – minister alone. The community should be sharing in the visitation; praying and being present with those who are going through tough times, the challenges of life transitions and the ordeal of loneliness.

God loves and cares for each of us. God calls us to break our hearts for what breaks his; he calls us to be examples of that love and care to each other. As an explicit response to our Lord's command: "Love one another." It is important to know, especially as we grow older, that we are not forgotten. It is important for the community to provide support in whatever ways are needed and acceptable to those needing care. Our commitment as the Body of Christ is to be in community and to help those in need of the risen Christ for healing and for meaning. Our actions can be transformative and can be used in a positive way, by simply being a healing presence.

It is important that visitation be seen once more as an important part of our church's ministry. Now more than ever. You see, God is with us when we visit. It is an embodiment of God's actions toward God's people. It requires no special degree or training. Because we know, beloved, as our Lord told us that **where two or three are gathered in His name, He is there in their midst.**

We are called, to paraphrase St. Francis, to preach the good news of the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words. More often than one might think, words are not necessary when visiting. I have learned over the years that half the task of ministry is simply showing up and being willing to be present. The fact is that we do not need to know what to say. We do not need to have any answers. This is because we are, in a sense, the answer already. We represent the One who brings about the ultimate transformation from this life to life everlasting. We represent God's free gifts of love, forgiveness, reconciliation and acceptance.

We are commanded to bear one another's burdens; to love one another. But to love another, we need to be **present** for one another. Make no mistake: being present means taking time seriously. Memory and presence form the basis of the profound act of being **with** another, without doing anything **for** another. By being present, even beside someone's deathbed, we are reminding those present that God too is present. That even in death God does not desert

us. Our presence reminds them that their faith is not in vain. As I said, this can be transformative and not just for others, but for ourselves – if we allow it to be. This is how we mature spiritually as we help others on their faith journeys; seeking the face of Christ in others, especially the least of these, as we grow in our faith and begin to experience the kind of resilient faith that will help us on our own journey. It comes from a gradual awareness of our immortal nature, while still living as mortals.

I will share my final thoughts in my next letter, beloved, which I will endeavor to send to you a week hence. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus, make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you!

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.