

Pentecost 14, Proper 17
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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Integrity

In my line of work people tell me stories. I really love it. Stories are what make our worlds go around, and the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, God and the world are very revealing. They tell us how we see ourselves, where we might find hope, and what frightens us. It is on the basis of their stories that I can help orient them to a sure foundation in life. Stories are sequences of symbols, energies and assumptions that express deep meaning. Our ministry of small groups is about telling stories.

From time to time I get the feeling that the story I am hearing is more fiction than reality. You know what I mean. The little details just don't seem to match up very well; non-verbals contradict their words, etc. And when they pick up on the fact that I detect a grain of salt added, sometimes I get this line, "I'm not the kind of person to come telling you lies."

I always smile inside when I get that one. After all, are they really going to tell me anything else? Occasionally I get the chance to gently call them on it. Depending on what they want from me, sometimes they back down and tell me the truth. Sometimes they get more entrenched, but sometimes they look at me, and the wells of emotion begin to show in their eyes, and they admit that they really are confused, and don't know which way to turn. Their stories have led them into dead-end paths, and they see no way forward, no hope, and everything frightens.

Today's Scripture lessons are about stories and what they mean. In Deuteronomy, that great summary of the previous three books, Moses tells the people, "Remember the story. Remember the deliverance of God from the bondage of Egypt. Remember the great heart of God that you saw, and the values you learned. Remember the laws that God gave you, that give substance to those values, and be sure to make them more than just a cute bedtime story. Make them your story, so that others around you whose story is different will see and know that the God you worship is wise and compassionate, because you are a wise and compassionate people."

The Psalm is a psalm of ascent to the Holy Hill of Zion. The psalmist declares that the one who may approach is the one with pure hands—in other words, the one whose story reflects and expresses God's story. God's story is the true story; there is no grain of salt needed here. Therefore, the one whose story is God's story has a sure foundation in life.

The Epistle lesson is from James. Martin Luther, the one recognized as the launcher of the Reformation, hated James. His big insight was that salvation is had by faith alone, and not by works. We cannot work our way into heaven, no matter how hard we try. We must accept salvation as a free gift received by faith in Jesus. To Luther, James did not belong in the Bible, because it focuses too much on works. Faith without works, says the author of James, is dead. You show me your faith without works, and I'll show you my faith by my works. Yet James remained in the Protestant Bible because it talks about how to live your story. Talk is one thing, but like all our stories, unless our words find expression in our living they do not tell our stories. They are fabrications based on an imaginary person, and not the one telling the story. They are untrue stories posing as true stories, and as such they violate their very purpose—to put ourselves in touch with God's story.

In the Gospel lesson the Pharisees and scribes take Jesus to task because his disciples aren't going through the ceremonial washing that keeps their food and their worship kosher. Jesus comes back with guns blazing! “You've got your story all screwed up! You remember the law, yes, but you don't remember the story behind the law. You know the rules, but you don't remember the why for the rules.” There's always a “why.” God is not arbitrary, making up rules just to have rules. The rules are meant to be human expressions of God's divine heart—and when they cease to express God's heart they need to be set aside in favor of actions that do.

There is something about story telling that must be made clear. One cannot be one's own referent. In other words, one cannot testify to the truth of one's own story without outside proof. The problem with “I'm not the kind of person who would lie to you,” is that it is self-referent. There's no outside proof that this is really the case. In fact, because it does claim self-reference it's kinda sketchy to begin with! Yes, you are the one who knows your own inner truth the best, but even then, none of us is fallible, and all of us need one another to correct and direct our stories.

So what is your story, your real story—I mean your story as God would tell it? Your story starts in the heart of God, and it starts at the beginning of the Bible. God took dirt and made a human, and breathed life into the human, and God saw that the work of God's hands was very good. We are body of the earth and spirit of God, and our creation is very, very good, and it continues in the life of the world. Then God said, “Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you do you will die.” And God was right. Eating of the tree symbolizes a bid for divine power. Does not the serpent tempt the woman with, “You will become like God”? In eating of it she makes up her own little world and decides to live in it, but it is based not on the creation, but her own concocted story. She has become her own referent, and it is a false story. Spiritually, she dies as

long as she lives in this lie.

Eve's story is our story, is it not? Every one of us has opted to create our own little world. Every one of us has chosen the lonely path of pride, and our egos, grabbing hold of the opportunity, have taught us to push God aside and try to create our own little worlds. We have tried to fabricate our own stories. We have tried to be our own referent, and that never tells a true story. The church is not immune, either. We try to press people into our own little understandings of God. We make up rules and we castigate people for not following them. But rules are always meant to point beyond themselves—otherwise they are their own referents, and that makes for empty, irrelevant and meaningless rules at best, and rules that contradict the very heart of God at worst. Rules only work when they are true to the heart of God as we best understand God at this time and in this place as a people of God.

This is the story of all humanity, in fact, all of creation. Alienated from the ground of our own being, we are being called to a journey home.

The journey is not one we can travel alone. There is a delightful movie that came out in 1998 called *Waking Ned Devine*. It is the story of a little fishing village on the coast of Ireland. One of the fishermen wins the lotto, a pot of 7 million Irish pounds, but the poor man dies of the shock. The rest of the story is about how the town decides to try to con the Irish government into giving up the cash by having one of the living pose as the dead man, then they would split the cash among everyone in the whole village and get them out of the grip of poverty in which they live. Among the many challenges, the greatest is from the town curmudgeon. She figures out that if she turns them all in she can get 10% for herself, which is more than her share. The village can only pull off the scheme unless everyone is in.

The good story of God can only really be lived in community. Telling our stories to one another and listening to one another's stories gives us a sense of the Whole Story, of which our lives are a chapter. Then we will see how to live from the goodness within, and not all the stuff that Jesus describes. It is in this context that we understand our integrity, the agreement of word and deed. Wisdom and Compassion are only truly lived in community. God's story is always a story told by many voices.

So show up humbly,
Listen up carefully,
And speak up honestly!