

10-29-17 – “Remembering Our Story” – Deuteronomy 26:1-11

There is nothing quite so powerful as a story.

Last weekend, Gary Wright and I attended the annual meeting of the Presbytery of Santa Fe, where we gathered with Presbyterians from all over the state to worship together and do some ever-energizing “church business.” But at this meeting, we did something a little different. Three or four times over the course of the meeting, we were given a prompt, broke into small groups and took turns sharing 3-minute stories from our lives and experience.

It was a new experience for me, and you know, I was amazed at how *vulnerable* and *intimate* it felt, both to speak and to listen. Because to share my story – even one little, 3-minute piece of it, is to really share myself.

So often, when we get to know one another, we take turns sharing facts about ourselves. What’s your name? Where are you from? What do you do? I’m Ginna; I’m a Presbyterian pastor; I’m from Virginia, but now I live in Taos. I’m married, no kids (yet!), but one cat. I’m the oldest of three siblings, two brothers, no sisters, etc., etc., etc.

I could go on all day sharing facts about myself, but in the end all you know is a bunch of “stuff” about me; you don’t get to know *me*, personally. But if I tell you one of my stories – if I tell you why my name is Ginna, or what brought me to Taos, or how I became a minister, or even just a simple story of something funny that happened to me last week; well, then you start to get to know *me*. When I tell you my story, you get to know more than who I am on paper; you start to know who I am as a person. Because our stories – no matter how big or how small – tell us who we are. They disclose little pieces of our identities. They reveal what has shaped us and made us into who we are today.

Each one of us has a story – many stories, really. Big stories: What events have happened that have made you who you are? And smaller stories: What is it that brought you here, to this church, today? So I ask you to consider for a moment: What is your story? What narratives have woven in and out of your lives? What stories have shaped who you are today?

Today is Reformation Sunday, which means we gather to remember a piece of our story – our communal story – as Protestant Christians. We bust out the bagpipes, not just because it’s fun, but because reminds us of the generations of Presbyterians who have come before us, our spiritual ancestors, if you will. We remember names like Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Francis Makeime, and Mary Pyle because as Presbyterians in Taos, they are part of our story. And we tell that story – the good parts and the not-so-good parts – because our story reminds us who we are, and our story reminds us who we are called to be.

We’ve been talking about stewardship these last several weeks, and in this morning’s Old Testament reading we get a glimpse of the stewardship practices for another group of our spiritual ancestors, the ancient Hebrews. When their stewardship season came, they gathered for a harvest festival, bringing their first fruits and tithes – 10% of their crops – as an offering of gratitude to God.

And then, the Hebrew people remember their story. “A wandering Aramaean was my father,” they say. And on they go, recounting how their ancestor Jacob moved his family to Egypt to find food, and how the Hebrew people multiplied and were enslaved by the Egyptians. How God heard their cry and delivered them, bringing them up out of the land of Egypt into this new land, the very land that has brought forth the crops they offer to God today. They remember their story, the story of a God who called them and claimed them and made them a people. At its core, they confess that their story is God’s story. They are who they are because God is who God

is. In the words of Martin Luther, they have received, “Salvation by grace alone through faith,” for their story is entirely dependent on God’s grace.

I’ve been saying “they”, but of course, I really should be saying “we.” Because friends, this is our story, too. We, too, have been called and claimed by God, have been saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We, too, have been delivered through the waters – the waters of our baptism – and emerged as a new creation – God’s own precious, beloved, holy people.

This is why we tell our stories. The small ones and the great ones; the good ones and the bad. Our individual stories, and our communal stories as a people of faith. We tell our stories to remember who we are, and *whose* we are. We confess that we are God’s people, and that our eternal comfort in life and in death is that we are not our own, but we belong, body and soul, to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

It is because of God’s faithfulness, because of the magnitude of God’s grace, that we can come together on days like today and tell our *whole* stories. Those parts of our stories that we are proud of, and those parts that are darker, those stories we’d rather not remember. A lot of wonderful things have come from the Protestant Reformation – the translation of the Bible into countless spoken languages; the belief in the equality and “priesthood” of all believers; the fact that I as a woman can stand up here and be your pastor. But there’s a shadow-side, too, to our Reformation story.

A few weeks ago, my Jewish friend showed me a magazine article about Martin Luther’s attitudes and teachings toward the Jews. And friends, it is not pretty. In his treatise, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, written in 1543, Luther advocates that the German government do the following: Burn down Jewish homes and synagogues, confiscate Jewish Prayer books and Scripture, forbid rabbis from teaching, and conscript the Jews for forced manual labor. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that centuries later, even as many Lutherans and Christians from other denominations condemned their actions, Nazis would cite to the legacy of Luther as they committed the atrocities that we now remember as the Holocaust.

No, it is not always easy to tell our stories, especially when those stories contain brokenness, sin, and even evil. And yet, we are called to tell them anyway. God invites us, even in the darkest moments of our lives and our history, to *still* seek out those places where our story fits into God’s story. That’s why we pray the Prayer of Confession every week, why we pause as we gather for worship to acknowledge the way that we – as individuals and as a community – have strayed from God’s path. We tell the truth, for as Jesus promised us, the truth will set us free. We admit that we have done what is wrong – sometimes horribly wrong – and that we are powerless to save ourselves.

And then we proclaim, every week, that God’s grace is far more powerful than Sin. We profess our faith that God in Jesus Christ forgives us again and again – every last one of us – and transforms us into new people: morning by morning new mercies we see. We tell the story, week after week, of how the grace of God has already defeated the powers of Sin and evil. And we confess that our own stories are entirely dependent on the eternal, sustaining grace of God.

For if there is anything that we might remember from Martin Luther and the Reformation 500 years ago, it is this: we are entirely dependent on God’s grace. It is by God’s grace alone that we are saved, that we get up every morning and go to sleep every evening. Every moment of our lives, we belong to God and are fully immersed in the grace of Jesus Christ. We can do nothing to earn it; we can do nothing to lose it. For we have been written into a story that starts with grace and ends with grace, the story of a God who is faithful.

So friends, what is our story? “In the beginning, there was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has *still* not overcome it. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.” And even today, we are *still* convinced that nothing – neither life nor death, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.