



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

Sunday, June 24, 2007

Proper 7C by The Rev. Donna Barr

O God of peace, *who hast* taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of *thy* Spirit lift us, we pray *thee*, to *thy* presence, where we may be still and know that *thou art* God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

I begin my thoughts today with a story told by Elle Wiesel. “When a great Rabbi saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortunate averted. Later, when his disciple had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: “Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer,” and again the miracle would be accomplished. Still later, another disciple of the Rabbi, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: I do not know how to light the fire, I do know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.” It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished. Then it fell to the last disciple to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: “I am unable to light the fire and do not know the prayer, I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.” And it was sufficient. God made man because he loves stories.”

When I first read today’s gospel....I didn’t know how to light the fire, or to say the prayer, or even the place I was to go....I did however, know the story I wanted to tell you. Jesus asked all his disciples, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” And then on a very personal level....one on one, he turns to Peter and says, “ Who do you say that I am?” I am convinced that this is the most important question, we as Christians have to ask. The question of who is God and who are we in his story. Who is God..... who am I? God has a very important story to tell us and Jesus is the messenger. It is sometimes known as, “The Greatest Love Story Ever Told.” In our Gospel, Jesus wanted to know if people had heard him and listened to the message from his father....but most importantly, he wanted to know if his intimate friends really understood the import of his life; his service, and his compassion for the world. Had they witnessed his love and did they realize the sacrifice it would take to change the world? Jesus’ swift movement, from asking who they think he is, to summoning them to follow him even to death, shows clearly enough that we cannot separate thinking from action in the Christian faith. And so his story and ours must be told....over and over again.

Now one might say...who cares about my story? What in the world could be less important than who I am, and who my father and mother were, the mistakes I have made, together with the occasional discoveries, the bad times and the good, the moments of grace. But I talk about my life because if, on the one hand, hardly anything could be less important, on the other hand, hardly anything could be more important. My story is important not because it is mine. But because when I tell it, there is a chance you will recognize that in many ways it is your story, also. As Frederick Buechner says, “The story of one of us is the story of us all.” Maybe nothing is more important than that we keep track of these stories of who we are and where we have come from and the people

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we have met along the way because it is precisely through these stories that God makes himself known to us deeply and personally.

My story is about a family who learned about themselves and God through a small little girl, our daughter, Emily..... a child who suffered tremendous pain throughout her childhood – both physical and emotional. A child who taught her mother and father and two brothers that God’s love and care would see us through the journey.....but our story is not over..... it still continues.....the pain and joys of these events mark all our lives forever. This is my life and story with God and I must continue to share it with others.

As I get to know each of you here at St. John’s I want to tell you more of my story and I invite you to share yours with me. God only calls us to be who we are. By God’s gift of grace, our deepest identity is not really to be or to do anything but love. We are, each of us, the uniquely individual container of God’s love in whatever particular context we live. We live to serve that love, to give it expression. The call to love is the same for everyone and unique for everyone. Our role is to help each other become free enough to entrust ourselves to the One who calls us.

Our former Bishop, Don Wimberly, says that this kind of love requires us to tell two stories. Only these two....first we have to tell God’s story and then we must tell our story of how our lives have connected with His. It is a love story of monumental significance. Thomas Merton said, “At the end of knowing yourself you will see God.” Jesus said, “If you see me you see my father who sent me.” I say, as we begin to share our lives with one another we will see that God is love.

I may not ever be able to light the fire, or say the prayer, or even find the place to go....but I know the story and it is sufficient. Can you hear it ? When we take stock of how richly God has blessed each of us with people, gifts, beautiful moments, and opportunities, yes and even all the pain and brokenness..... we get a sense that all is gift. My life – my talents, my time, my treasure, and my story – must be a gift to others. “I give to you so you can give to others too.” As the Lord said through the prophet Jeremiah: “I have loved you, just as you are, with an everlasting love.”

Amen

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