

Sermon for Proper 19 (B) Year B

(RCL) Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

God's Story, Our Story

On October 1, 1996 a book called *The Notebook* by Nicholas Sparks made its debut. Almost ten years later, on June 25, 2004, the movie adaptation came out with the story coming to life through actors Rachel McAdams, Ryan Gosling, and James Garner. The story is about an elderly couple that is dealing with the wife's advancing Alzheimer's disease. She lives in an assisted care facility and her husband visits her regularly, always with a notebook in hand. What the story reveals, through a series of flashbacks to when they were young, is that the husband is reading, from his notebook, their love story over and over again, in hopes that his wife will remember some of it one day. It is a sweet, poignant story that those of us who have experienced loved ones with Alzheimer's or dementia can certainly relate to.

The wife in the story does not remember who she is and so the husband reminds her over and over again. He tells her who she is and who they are together. Their story is important, not only to her, but to him. It gives him meaning and purpose in the midst of tragic circumstances.

How often do we need to be reminded of our own stories? As we continue to grow and change as people faced with a variety of circumstances, we can lose sight of our true selves and need to be reminded. This happens in all aspects of our lives, including our faith.

In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples that he must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts of his time. Then he will be killed and after three days, rise from the dead. Jesus knows his own story and he does not make excuses about it. In fact, in the Greco-Roman world, knowledge of one's own death was a sign of wisdom or of someone with great powers. Jesus is matter of fact about his story because he is focused on serving God. He is connected to our experience of human life and clearly sees the lay of the land, but it does not deter him from obedience to God and understanding his belonging in God's story.

Later, he asks his disciples, the crowd, and ultimately us, two very important questions that the *Common English Bible* version puts this way, "Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives?" Another way to understand it is from the Bible version called *The Message*, "What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?" Remarkable questions. Jesus wants to know our stories and the answers to these questions reveal who we truly are and what we believe about our stories.

Those answers also reveal who we believe Jesus is. Do we believe in the story that he tells—the Jesus that Peter says is the Messiah? Do we believe in the Jesus that will be rejected by so many and left to die on a cross, only to be resurrected? Do we believe all of these stories? Do we believe in the ministry of suffering and self-sacrifice? It's a tough one. Either Jesus is crazy, a con man, or what he says is true.

In your own life, when Jesus looks at you and asks, “Who do you say that I am?” How do you respond? When a friend or neighbor or colleague asks, “Are you a Christian?” What story do you tell? When we “get around [our] fickle and unfocused friends,” as Jesus says in a Bible version called *The Message*, are we embarrassed of the way Jesus is leading us in our lives?

The Gospel today has an interesting interpretation in *The Message*. Jesus says, “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how.” This is clearly a different message than what we hear from the world around us and from our human nature that seeks to avoid pain at all costs. God is calling us into living a different way; to be part of a different story than the one the world is telling us.

The idea that suffering and self-sacrifice are incompatible with faith is a danger. There is nothing in the scriptures that says that God will remove all the trials of our lives if we pray hard enough. Instead of asking for the trials to be lifted, perhaps we need to recognize where God is present in them. In these instances it is about prayer being a conduit for opening ourselves to what God wills and not trying to force God to do our will. Even though our desires to turn God into a magic puppet come from a deep place of longing, if we’re honest, when has that ever been successful?

God is asking us to offer our whole selves—our time, our talents, our treasures, and especially those parts of us that are suffering—and to trust that we will be led into a more meaningful life than what we could come up with ourselves. That’s a big commitment, but we can choose to make it on a daily basis, so it isn’t as overwhelming. It is the little things that we do that create the tapestry of life that we look back on. They may not be noticed in the moment, but they are felt over a lifetime.

In the book *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O’Connor*, Flannery O’Connor puts it this way:

Just being who you are
not justifying or apologizing
it sounds so easy
it’s a life work
not to get caught in
producing
performing
proving
keeping accounts of indebtedness
waiting for gratitude, reward
ambition
manipulation
staggering self-pity
but cultivating
the habit of being.

It is cultivating a habit of being that seeks God first for advice and not our friends. That prays first, then responds. That embraces silence, instead of trying to fill it. That opens the heart and notices God's abiding. That tells God's story, hearing it echo in our own.

Like the couple in *The Notebook*, may we remind each other of God's love story when we lose our way and may we have the courage to keep writing it, bit by bit, as we are transformed.
AMEN.

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