

Message for May 21, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

Betsy Headrick McCrae

Scripture passage: Acts 17:22-28

Sharing our stories

Last Sunday during Sunday School Jeff Bontrager asked us to think about how we can share the story of our congregation, Glennon Heights Mennonite Church. We do have a story to share. It's the story of who we are as a group of people with a history and a personality. It's the marvelous over-arching story of the God we worship, the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. These big stories intertwine with and inform our own personal stories – stories of faith and of doubt, of struggle and of triumph, of despair and of hope. How do we go about sharing all these stories? How do we invite folks into relationship or respond to their invitations to us? How do we listen well to the stories others have to share?

Our scripture passage from Acts 17 shows how the Apostle Paul went about this. Paul has a story he's bursting to tell. But he doesn't just blurt it out. He starts first with looking and listening. He arrives in Athens, the center of Greek culture. He spends time walking the streets. "I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship," he says. He notices what's important. He takes time to learn what is valued and how folks tend to express themselves. There are the Stoics, whose belief in humanity's solidarity is based on a God who is the source of all life. There are the Epicureans, whose functional atheism is based on a belief that if there is a God, this God would surely need nothing from anyone. These philosophical ways of thinking permeate Greek society.

When Paul is ready to speak, he goes to the Areopagus, a prominent rock

outcropping located near the Acropolis, the highest and most important spot in the city. This is a place where people come to hear cases argued. They know what to expect. Paul is doing things the Athenian way. First he acknowledges their story. “I see how extremely religious you are in every way,” he says. This is a good thing. I want to help you take it to another level. Then he picks up a part of their story – the altar “to an unknown God” – and says, listen, I can tell you who this God whom you already worship is. This is the God who made the world and everything in it. Uh-huh, say the Stoics, nodding their heads. That makes sense to us. Paul continues, “God does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is God served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.” Uh-huh, says the Epicureans, nodding their heads. We might be able to get on board with that. Folks are drawn in; they continue to listen to what Paul has to say. He goes on to tell them more, further connecting his story with their stories by quoting their own revered poets, “In him we live and move and have our being.” “For we too are his offspring.” By doing this he lets them know that his story, God’s story, is their story, too.

There’s a lot we can learn from this. First, always be aware and ready to acknowledge that there are other starting points, other stories. There’s a popular TED talk featuring Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It’s entitled, “The danger of a single story.” If you haven’t listened to it already, take the time to do so. I highly recommend it. Ms. Adichie tells of how growing up in Nigeria she only had access to children’s books written by folks in Europe and the U.S. These books featured only white people, and often in situations – like playing in the snow – which were not part of her reality. She loved these books but they had an effect on her, she says. She was a

brown-skinned child living in Africa. Obviously her reality wasn't important. It wasn't even acknowledged. Or if it was, it was caricatured. She and her world didn't really count.

That's the danger of a single story, Ms. Adichie says. When there is only one story, possibilities are excluded, people who don't fit into it are robbed of their character. Secondary characters become stereotypes. Stereotypes make one story become the only story. But that is not what is true, it is not what is real, it is not an accurate reflection of the world that God created. God's world is full of diversity and abundance and surprise. When we reject the single story, Ms. Adichie says, we regain a kind of paradise. Like going from black and white to color. We open ourselves and others to the richness of God's story, which features every kind of person speaking all languages and coming from a staggering variety of experience.

There is a trick to this, however. If we truly want to understand another's story, we have to be willing – even when it seems a stretch, even when we don't see where we could possibly fit – to trust the process and place ourselves within their story. Otherwise we won't benefit, we won't gain new understanding. Let me tell you a story to illustrate what I mean.

A couple of years ago I participated in Pastor's Week at the Mennonite seminary in Elkhart, IN. During this week we focused on the story of Jesus and the Syrophenecian woman from the gospel of Mark. This is the story where Jesus says to this woman, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." It's a challenging story. We looked at it from many different angles,

including a lot of creative reflection on who this woman was and what her situation might have been.

During our last session together the presenter asked for responses from the group. A man spoke. “I am husband to a wife and father to daughters,” he said. I know this was important for them. But as a man, I had difficulty finding myself in this story and these interpretations. It wasn’t all that meaningful to me.” What? I was flabbergasted and I’m assuming that other women in room had a similar response. All my life as a Bible-reading Christian I have had to find myself and meaning in stories that do not include women. I was told over and over growing up, relax, the word “man” includes women, though it surely didn’t sound like it. I had to trust God, whom I knew to be real, and choose to believe that, yes, I could place myself in the Biblical stories, too. The fact that there are few women acknowledged in these stories and writings, doesn’t mean that God doesn’t acknowledge women or draw us in. I do belong here, as a woman. This is my story, our story, too. Folks who are marginalized, who are not obviously part of the predominate story – the single story – have to constantly do this in order not to accept as definitive that which excludes or stereotypes them.

Amy Ray, who is part of the music duo, Indigo Girls, expressed this well in a 2015 “On Being” interview with Krista Tippett. Amy, who is proudly lesbian, grew up in a conservative Christian family and, in her words, fell in love with the church. It’s so much the fabric of my life, she says. I’ve always known that “Jesus loves me, too.” When Krista asked how she deals with language that is hateful and exclusionary for her as a gay person, Amy said, “Oh, I have a built-in translator. Inside I’m always changing the language. I’ve needed to do that to feel OK about myself in these settings. That is a

gift, you know. Translate it as it comes in. Receive the blessing. Make it for you.”

Sisters and brothers, not only do we need to be aware of and acknowledge that everyone has a story and that these stories might be very different from our own, we also have to be willing to enter into stories which don't seem to reflect our reality, to accept the truth that is in them; in effect, to hear them from the inside. We must learn to recognize stereotypes for what they are and subvert them rather than acquiesce to them. We have to turn them on their heads. Sometimes this requires translation. Sometimes it requires hearing the story from a completely different angle. Always it requires humility and a desire to see the Holy Spirit at work.

“Stories can repair dignity,” Ms. Adichie says. Stories invite relationship. They open up possibilities. They create understanding. They expand the horizon. God's story encompasses all human stories, which is something we need to remember. No one is excluded. Each story is a gift and in it is a blessing. In each story we hear a hint of God at work, for God is never far from us. In God all of us live and move and have our being.

This is our story, Glennon Heights Mennonite Church. Let us share it with each other and the world. Amen.