



SUNDAY SERMON

The Only Story

I recently picked up a novel by Julian Barnes, probably because of its title. The title is The Only Story - The Only Story. There is this theme that runs through the book - the idea of a central story in one's life, a narrative that colors all else, a story one keeps coming back to, The Only Story.

Barnes introduces this theme on page one, saying: "Most of us have only one story to tell. I don't mean that only one thing happens to us in our lives: there are countless events, which we turn into countless stories. But there's only one that matters, only one finally worth telling. This is mine." And then the novel commences into a haunting, downward spiraling love story - and - this sermon is not about that - sorry!

Instead, let us think about our voyages in faith in this way - as stories of love and discovery and doubt and disillusionment and sometimes of great excitement, stories that are personal to each of us. When it comes to knowing God, knowing Jesus, being a Christian, if you are one, do you have an only story - a theme and variations that course through the many seasons of your life?

I don't have an only story, except in very broad strokes, but I am ready to claim that. I've always believed in God, in something beyond what we can know - even though my ways of defining that have changed. And I've almost always embraced Jesus as central to this faith, but here too, in ways that have changed over time. And I hasten to add, our love stories, our family stories, our work and creative stories are not less important or really even separate from our faith stories, rather they are shaped by them, even if in ways we barely realize.

Today's reading from Revelation reminds me of an earlier stopping place in my story of faith, because it's all about a God who rewards and punishes us according to our works and a Jesus who comes again in a final time of judgment. That kind of God was a stopping place for me on my faith journey - mainly in my teens and twenties. It's the kind of God I thought I heard about in church as a child, a kind of God I didn't think I'd deserve, and a kind of God I didn't want to worship. I could never be as good as Jesus, and if a second coming ever came, I figured I wouldn't measure up. I wouldn't be in that number, when those saints came marching in!

But there have been further stopping places in my faith story, for sure, and one of the things I so treasure here at St. Columba's is the way one of you, every few weeks, offers your own faith story - each with its twists and turns, none of you claiming that your way is the only way or that your story is all neatly wrapped up and tied in a nice bow of settled belief.

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So I'm now in my eighth decade, and my faith story feels more real and more connected with how I actually experience my life. And today, of all things, the gospel passage speaks right to that - it holds out what, for me, has become the only story when it comes to trying to be a Christian. I say "of all things" because this reading is a notorious tongue twister - one we used to laugh about in seminary when we had to take a course called "read and bleed." This was where you had to practice all the elements of reading scripture clearly and effectively and be rigorously critiqued - and this passage is a real challenge. Jesus' words about you in me and I in you and they in me and they in you and all one in him and one in each other and one in God can seem like a jumbled torrent.

But careful scrutiny here pays off - there is an amazing message here that does express this only story - the only one that truly grasps me about following Jesus. It is, as I have often told you before, the message of incarnation. Of God's presence and power and love in our humanity, with Jesus as our herald of this presence. Let's look carefully at the words John gives to Jesus in this discourse.

Jesus says "as you, Father, are in me" - God's presence in Jesus' humanity, and then, he goes on, "I am in you, that they also may be in us." If Jesus, a human being, is "in God," is part of how God reveals Godself in the world, then so too, are we - human beings, part of how God reveals Godself in the world. And in this sense, we are indeed all one - all part of God's incarnation in creation. Jesus talks about the glory given to him by God as the glory he has given his followers. There is glory in our humanness, despite our capacity for sin, despite our imperfections. The 2nd century Bishop Irenaeus echoed this when he said "The glory of God is man fully alive." And of course, today, we would say humanity fully alive - we are all part of the glory of God!

And the final part of the gospel message is about response to this incarnation of God in Jesus and God in us. The response is no surprise; the response is love, love as a verb, not a noun. No surprise, but no easy matter. Jesus teaches this in word and deed throughout the gospels. Jesus is totally aware of God's love being in him, and his message is to all, that that same love is in us - God in Jesus, God in us, connecting us all. And I quickly add, that I do not interpret this to be about God's love being in any way exclusive to Christians or incarnation being anything less than universal. Jesus is just our sacred story about how that is; other traditions have their own powerful ways of expressing how love is of God and is alive in the world. And, as Jesus responded to God's love in him by showing love to all whom he met, so too must be our response to God's love in us.

And, at the end of theology, at the end of our quests for understanding about God, about Jesus, we often turn to stories. I rambled around for several days trying to decide upon a good story to tell about God being incarnate in us, about how God's love gets expressed through us. Some seemed too trivial, others too grandiose. Then I began reading David Brooks' new book, [The Second Mountain](#) and came across this quote from Canadian theologian Jean Vanier who became a radical champion of the poor and the weak. Vanier said, "Weakness carries within it a secret power...The one who is weaker can call forth the power of love in the one who is stronger."

Reading those words, I remembered a phone contact back last fall, when I was on call here for pastoral emergencies. The voice on the phone was hesitant, pleading, and desperate. It was Joni,

who said she once came to St. Columba's years ago but had had to move to a tiny rural town in Pennsylvania a few years back to make ends meet. Her marriage had long since failed, and she was caring for her son Jessie, now 38, but since birth, mentally impaired, with the capacities pretty much of a toddler, still in diapers. Joni is on welfare and gets some disability money for her son, but was calling because she couldn't pay her rent. She said she'd called every church, every organization she could think of in her area, but all had refused help. She was apologetic, kept calling me reverend, and just begged - a person at her wits' end.

Now of course, in my years as a minister, I've received many such requests, often in person from people coming to the church door, or, like all of us, from people on the street. Usually, I say no or refer them somewhere else; usually I am super sensitive to being lied to or taken advantage of, or to getting sucked into a continuing drain on resources. But Joni was different, and it's hard to explain why. Probably because of her son, and my imagining what that must be like for her and my sense that somehow she really had nowhere else to turn. I sent her, or rather her landlord, a check. She was so grateful, so full of "bless you, reverends" - but she was not done. She soon called back to tell me about how she had no money to buy Christmas presents for Jessie, who was so childlike and still believed in Santa and Christmas. I sent her \$50 but also told her that would be the last time, that she shouldn't try to contact me again - this seemed the sensible thing to do, to set an appropriate limit to my generosity. It was indeed my money, not church money, and I couldn't deduct it for charity - it was just a gift I felt like making, or maybe felt like I needed to make.

The story is not over, in fact, Joni actually called again two days ago, after I'd written this sermon. Over the months, there's has been another request for electricity money, then a plan to move in with her sister in Clinton, MD, then a terrible fight with the sister who changed her mind because of an old sordid grievance - all this in a poorly hand-printed letter because Joni said she was embarrassed to call again. And the letter enclosed a crayoned picture from her son. Joni was behind on both rent and utilities because she had actually packed up and prepared to move. Again, I sent the money she needed, and this latest time, I've helped again, always with questions about how she can get back on her feet and reminding her that I can't continue this.

What's going on here? I've asked myself. Is there some kind of grace here, something at work in me leading to an uncharacteristic response? Did Joni's call happen to come to me at a time when I was moved by her story, realized I could help and was willing to trust her? If I believe in God's love being alive in our humanity as it was in Jesus, God in me, and God in Joni and her son, and all of us one in God - then perhaps the story of her need and my ability to help is as good as any in terms of how incarnation is real. God's love made flesh between people, even two women who have never seen each other, connected only by phone, but also by need in a dark time.

If you'd like to read another story about incarnate love, about how acting in love can connect people, check out yesterday's Metro section of the Post for the story of how a barking dog led to an amazing friendship.

I believe we are all part of God's love in the world. This love is our birthright, given to all of us. And this love is also our call, to give back however and wherever we can. For me, in terms of this morning's readings, it's the Only Story. Amen.