

Pentecost 2, Proper 6
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Mount Vernon, WA

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This sermon launches a series that I have titled, "Living Inside Out." Over the next weeks and months, when I am preaching, we will look at ways the inner life and the outer life inform and form one another. The great wisdom traditions of the world, including Christianity, all teach that life is lived from the inside out—what is within is expressed by what we do, and what we do influences what is within.

That is true as individual believers, and it is true of groups of people—churches, government, police departments, etc. What I hope is that by the time we reach Advent, we have had plenty of inspiration to consider our groundedness: What is it that roots us? What is it that inspires us? How do we live that inspiration out in light of our grounding?

It seems especially poignant at this point in our society's journey. The pandemic has forced us to look at how we live together, and the death of George Floyd has forced us to look at how we exercise control: community and power, gathering and structure. Our society is being shaken to the roots.

As people of faith and a community of faith, we have an unprecedented opportunity to show the world a wiser, more compassionate way of living than what we have known, one that as Christians we see lived out, and we draw our inspiration from, the story of Jesus.

In the final analysis, it's all about stories; our individual stories, and our community stories, how we tell them, and how we might tell them. When I speak of stories, I'm not talking about what we tell at a family gathering about our crazy uncle or what really happened at the lake last Summer. I'm talking about the inner stories that are lived out but rarely told. I'm talking about the unspoken stories at the Minneapolis police department that allowed for the events that took place on May 25th. I'm talking about the story going on in the head of a woman who came to me, complaining that she could no longer control her teenage son, who had just kicked her in the stomach. When I offered to call the police and report an assault, she almost shouted, "YOU WILL NOT CALL THE POLICE ON MY SON!" This was not fear of racial inequalities on the part of the police, most of whom were of her own race. It was the punchline I have heard a hundred times, of parents more concerned with providing for their children than guiding them, With being friends than being parents.

Perhaps the stories of their own childhood that they tell themselves are stories where boundaries established by adults were arbitrary, painful or oppressive or a moving target. Perhaps their stories are of a total absence of boundaries so that they do not know how to establish them now. Either way, the story inspires and explains the behavior. Change the story and the world shifts. Shift the world and behavior changes. Stories make or break us. Being a Christian involves coming to terms with our own inner stories, both as believers and of the believing community, and bringing those stories into conversation with the stories of our faith, of the story of self-giving love.

The Gospel lesson today is story upon story. There is the story of the Kingdom: Jesus heals lots of people. Healing stories in the Gospels are not just spectacular moments of divine intervention for us to gawk at. They are stories of the kingdom. The Gospel of John calls them "signs." They point to something greater than themselves. They point to what God is doing in the world. They enact what God is doing in the world. When we say that we believe that God is healing and restoring the world, we look to Jesus' healing ministry and we say, "Yeah, that's what we mean."

At the end there is more of the story of the Kingdom. Jesus tells us that we will be dragged before councils and kings, and punished for doing the work of the Kingdom, because there are those for whom healing the brokenness of the world is a threat. And if it's a threat, it's because they are benefitting from another's brokenness.

I watched a video this week of a young African-American woman wearing a "I Can't Breathe" t-shirt. She likens the last 450 years to so many rounds of Monopoly, where the blacks are one team and whites are the other, and the whites control the bank, and whenever the blacks get ahead, the banks takes it back. 450 years of not being able to win. Yes, it's a generality, and there are exceptions—black people who have won the game and non-black people who have not, but that doesn't change the essential message: The rules of our social contract favor certain sectors over others. If you are on the favored side you probably can't see it, but if you are not, it's glaringly obvious.

Healing the world requires healing the broken game we play socially. The story of the Kingdom will involve stories of confrontation and strife. But these stories are made up of other stories, smaller, perhaps, but more fundamental. Notice, that in the middle of the reading, twelve people are named. It's not just a list. These are real people, with stories that make them who they are: Simon, known as Peter, the rock, the leader; and Andrew, the one who brought Peter and a couple of Greeks to Jesus; James, the son of Zebedee the fisherman, and his brother John—nicknamed "Sons of Thunder." (If there isn't a story there, I'll eat my stole!) Philip and Bartholomew, regular guys, part of the team; Thomas, the realist, the skeptic, who gives voice to our doubts; Matthew, the tax collector, the "traitor" by Jewish standards, yet prominent in Jesus' circle; James, but not just any James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean (what? I thought all the Canaanites got wiped out by Joshua! I guess not, and here one is, a follower of Jesus.) And Judas Iscariot (Psst, the one who betrayed him. Sad business, that was.) It's like the writer is looking at a picture and remembering, reflecting on each one, who they were and what they did, and how they played out in the larger story of Jesus.

And of course, it's not a complete list. We know on the day of Pentecost there were 120 of them, and 3000 more were added, and then more and more, all the way down to today's list. You know, Paul, the preacher guy; and Dennis, who always talks about social justice; and Baudelina—you really need to hear her story! There's Joe, with his walking sticks, and Tom with his guitar, along with Francisco, and Irene, the one with an accent—a story there, too... Then there's Donna, and Sara and Sandy and Penny, and Arlene and Don—how could we forget them!? And—well—you, with all your stories of

glory and pain, intertwined with the stories of others. Beyond that there are other stories, of George Floyd and the policeman who killed him, and so many others like them, of the protests, of truth told and lies believed, of people being both incredibly kind and mindlessly abusive.

The backdrop for us Christians is Jesus' story, of a love so selfless it is willing to give away the power of healing to a rag-tag group of shallow, unreliable, egotistical friends to go and heal the world. This is the story of self-giving love.

How, then, do we take a look at our own stories? It's more difficult than you think. Our stories are like water to a fish. You don't really see them until you're out of them. Here's where we need one another. The story of George Floyd did not challenge the Minneapolis police department until others started to tell it. As others told it, they heard it in a different light. Our stories are like windows in our houses. We're so intent on looking through the window that we never notice the glass and the frame. We're too used to seeing what they reveal, we don't even notice what they hide. Just let someone else look through our windows and they will see different things. They may even ask us about the frames and the kind of glass...the story itself—and that's a different story yet.

Stories are powerful when unchallenged, and unchallenged as long as they are not truly heard. As soon as we listen to other's stories, we can see our own stories in a new light. For instance, when protesters, chanting about police brutality, kneel and the police kneel with them, it challenges the story. Not all police buy into the story that led to George Floyd's death. They, too, want to tell a different story, one where black lives matter, and brown lives, and white lives, and Asian lives, and LGBTQ+ lives, etc. And they want to do it WITH protesters rather than against them. Only together can we learn to tell a different kind of story.

When we follow Jesus' story of self-emptying, of giving away our power, when we let down our guard, open and empty ourselves just long enough to hear another's story and see it from their point of view, we begin to become aware of our own stories, and how they have followed or diverged from Jesus' story. Then finally, we have a chance at participating in the healing and restoring of the world.

Meditation Questions

1. How do you think Jesus would tell your story?
2. When did hearing another's story show you something you didn't know about yourself?
3. Think about a time when you really did not want to hear someone else's story, and reflect on why.
4. What stories are you not hearing and need to?