

I want to talk to you this morning about the stories
that shape our way of seeing the world,
and how sometimes those stories affect our actions
more than we realize

This week I was having lunch with a friend
who is deeply troubled by the direction of our country,
so troubled that he and his wife went to Canada recently
to make plans for moving there if they see us going
further down what they believe is the wrong path.

To be honest, it was a familiar conversation.
I've had it with over a dozen people the last few years.

In fact, one member of Holy Trinity moved her family to Portugal
a few years ago out of concern for this country's future.

But the truth is, every time I have this conversation,
it always sounds, to me, a little bit like crazy talk.
I mean...move to another country?

The idea never quite makes sense in my gut,
and this week I finally figured out why.

It's because even when I agree with their concerns,
I've been given different stories than they have
about who I am and where I come from.

See, my friend is the child of immigrants.
His grandparents were Polish Catholics
who fled to this country during World War I.
They left behind family and home,
and risked everything to start over. Here, in America.

They overcame prejudice and poverty and built a new life, a good life,
and he is the inheritor of their sacrifice and bravery.

But along with his gratitude to his ancestors and to this country,
he also carries inside him the story that if things get bad,
you need to be ready to leave it behind,
you need to go to a safer place
before angry mobs look for somebody to blame.

The idea of emigrating makes sense to him
because he carries inside him the story of immigration.

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I carry a different story. I am a 9th generation Georgian.
My ancestors came here from England sometime in the 1700s
and never left the North Georgia mountains.
I'm proud that my sons are 10th generation Georgians.

So the story I've inherited is that we live HERE, in good times and bad.
That when things get ugly, you keep your head down. You outlast it.

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I think Emily carries a similar story.
Even though, bless her heart, she's only an 8th generation Georgian
she still has that same sense of rootedness.

In fact, when I was about to graduate from seminary
Emily told me that she didn't know where God was calling ME,
but he wasn't calling HER more than 3 hours from her Mama
in Stone Mountain! (I called that important discernment!)

So my friend carries a story deep inside him that if things get bad enough
you need to be ready to leave and start over,
and I carry in me a story that you hunker down,
you weather the storm.
That's why what makes sense to him doesn't to me.

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The point is that we all have stories that shape us.
The parishioner who moved to Portugal, her husband is Jewish.
They carry in them the story of Germany in the 30s.

I wonder what story lives inside the family
we sponsored for immigration from Syria?
Or the family from Sudan before them? Or the one from Indonesia?

Or what about the people we've worked with for years here at Holy Trinity
who immigrated from Mexico? What story do they carry?

We have a member of the parish who came to America
fleeing violence in Sierra Leone,
and another who was one of the Vietnamese Boat People.
What stories tell them who they are and how to act in the world?

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Then, along with our personal and family stories
we also have collective stories,
stories that embed themselves deep within us as a people
and as a country.

Friday we celebrated Independence Day,
the day we declared that self-determination
was a right given to us by God.
That story lives deep inside a lot of us
and it sits just beneath the surface of our baptismal covenant.

2 weeks ago we observed Juneteenth,
a day for celebration to be sure but also a sobering reminder
that the very people who boldly declared their own freedom
also denied it to the men and women living beside them
for nearly a century.

Because of that history some of us carry
a story of suspicion and wariness when it comes to talk of freedom,
just like many women carry the story of how
their self-determination was put off even longer.

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I know I haven't even scratched the surface
of all the stories we carry that shape
how we see the world and how we respond when we feel threatened.
If I haven't named your story,
take a second and try to bring it to the surface of your mind.

What shapes you?
What personal or family or cultural or national story
has told you who you are and how you should act in the world?

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Now, let me talk about Jesus.

For the last few Sundays we've been working our way through Galatians.

I sat down Friday and read it start to finish.

What struck me this time is how relevant it feels
to what we're going through in this country right now.

Paul founded the Galatian church on the belief
that the crucified and risen Christ has given every one of them
a new reality, a new identity, a new story.

As he famously tells them, they are a new creation!

But sometime after he leaves them they start to forget that.

New teachers show up telling them they have to observe
special practices to be one with Christ.

That their men have to be circumcised like their Jewish brothers are
in order to really be one with Christ.

And the Galatians start to believe those false stories,
start to divide themselves according to the stories
these new teachers tell them.

Not because the Galatians are evil, or stupid,
but because they are afraid.

In their desperation to have a tribal story,
to go back to an "us vs. them" mentality,
they forgot the universality of life in Christ.

Paul is trying to remind the Galatians that
the most important story in their lives is that now they are
one with Christ. But they can't hear that.

“For as many of you as were baptized with Christ
have clothed yourselves with Christ,” he writes.

Not with circumcision, not with special rituals - WITH CHRIST.

“So now there is no longer slave nor free,” Paul says,
“no longer male and female; all of you are one in Christ.”

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I think all of us who try to follow Jesus in this country - all of us -
would be wise to do a close reading of Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

It reads like an allegory of what we are facing today.

In the midst of all the real and important arguments in this nation,
Christians are forgetting that their primary story
is that we are a new creation,
that we are no longer defined by our historical
or political narratives.

“Now there is no longer black or white or brown,” Paul might write today,
no longer male or female or trans,
no longer straight or queer, no longer MAGA or progressive,
no longer conservative or liberal or moderate...”

YOU are a new creation! ALL OF YOU are one in Christ.”

Friends, when you forget that, you forget who you really are.

When you define the people who see the world differently than you
through a story of tribal conflict,
or a story about the evil you just know is in THEIR hearts,
when you view the world as a struggle
between YOUR enemies and YOUR allies...
when you do those things - when I do those things -
we have lost our way as followers of Jesus.

Just like the Galatians did all those centuries ago.

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There is an alternative.

Here in America, in 2025, you can still live with the firm conviction
that the most important story in your life,
the only one that TRULY tells you who you are,
is not a story about the color of your skin or your country of origin
or your family history or your political convictions
or even your gender or sexuality...
but the story that you have died with Christ
and you have been reborn to new life, in Christ.

Living our that story can look a lot of different ways,
but I think right now it should look like being careful
with your thoughts and even more careful with your words.
It means not demonizing and belittling people
even when they are demonizing and belittling you.

And it looks like loving ALL your neighbors as yourself,
whether they love you back or not.
It looks like caring for the vulnerable among us,
whether they are sympathetic or not,
whether they are here legally or not.

Because St. Paul says we are to “bear one another’s burdens,
for in that way you fulfill the law of Christ.

And finally, if all that sounds like more than you can manage,
remember that you aren’t expected to do it alone.
You do it with GOD’s help.

That’s why Paul closes his beautiful letter to the Galatians - and to us -
like this: “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
be with YOUR spirit, my brothers and sisters. Amen.”