

"WHAT'S THE STORY?"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

We all hear a number of four-letter words in our daily rounds - some good, some not so good. This morning I'd like to attempt a few improvisations around a familiar five-letter word that's heavily used and sometimes misunderstood. The word is the word - FAITH.

And, at the risk of being either heretical or simplistic - or both - I want to "de-theologize" this word...take some of the starch out of it and describe faith to you as "an act of commitment by which one inserts himself or herself into a new story".

For as I see it, every life needs a "story line". Our years are sequential. Yesterday touches today; today spills over into tomorrow. Some organizing theme must tie our days together. We cannot live as if life were a patternless mass of unconnected fragments. What's the story-line of your life?

SELF

For some, the story is the self. The perpendicular pronoun becomes the Maypole around which the steps of life are danced. These potent egos trade in society's Market Place under the firm name of "Me, Myself and I, Inc." Ethical decisions are apt to be made on the basis of self-interest: what's good for me is right and what's bad for me is wrong. For such people, the "world turns" on the narrow axis of the self. But move on... consider other stories.

FAMILY

For some, the story is the family. Here the needed meaning is found in family history. For some, it's enough to be a Jones, a Johnson, a Jenkins. Pride of blood is a centering force for many in our society. These mail order houses do a pretty good business tracing family trees and selling coats of arms. Some clown comes along and says the best thing to do with a family tree is "spray it".

But these people will not be put off by such whimsical advice. After all, there are three and a half billion of us running around the globe. I think we can be forgiven for seeking enclosure in the family.

But hold on...can any family supply all the required meaning that's needed in life? "All In the Family" may be fun to watch on TV, but "All In the Family" is not an adequate base for life and - depending on the family - really isn't that much fun to watch (even though the Huings of Dallas claim my Friday nights). But witness the forces at work in our culture pushing in the direction of the "extended family".

Daniel Day Williams has spoken to the point with clarity and force:

"Family love does not exempt us from the claims of the Kingdom of God. No person is ever fulfilled in the family alone and no reomanticism about love should obscure that fact. The person is fulfilled in the world where God's work is being done. We have to find a union of love in its obligation to those with whom our lives are immediately bound...and love which calls upon each to become a creative member of the full society".

NATION

For some, the story is the nation. Above all else, some know themselves as Germans, Puerto Ricans, Irish, Americans. Surely it is

not wrong for one to love his country, but it is dangerous when one begins to love his country uncritically. At times I fear we're "overly-stocked" in this country with Americans who happen to be Christians rather than with Christians who happen to be Americans. An interesting question: do you need a national identity to know who you are?

JOB / WORK For some, the story is the job. They define their lives by their livelihood. Who are you? I'm a singer, a dancer, a policeman, an attorney, a teacher. Several years ago walking through Westminster Abbey I came across this inscription on the floor of that historic church, "Here lies the body of Philip Clarke, Plumber To This Collegiate Church. Born 1695. Died 1747". I've known people in the academic world whose joy was boundless when they discovered themselves quoted in a footnote of some noted publication in their field.

It's not discounting the worth of the work performed to suggest that there is something questionable about allowing ourselves to be defined by function alone. We have an unwritten rule up at the Health Club of the 92nd Street Jewish YMCA...that you leave your work and your title back at the office. What we do and who we are should not be completely interchangeable.

A ministerial friend was trying to get next to a doctor who had a problem in his family that he would not admit to. Finally, one day they played some golf together and long about the 7th hole their drives fell next to each other and they walked on the fairway side by side. My friend took a deep breath and decided to make one last effort. "Tell me, John, what are you when you're not a doctor?" The man bristled a bit, raised his voice and said, "By God, I'm always an MD". There's both a judgement and warning in that well-known epitaph, "Born a man, he died a grocer".

Every life needs a story line. What's the story for you? What's it all about? Is it self? Family? Nation? Job? Or, are these in fact sub-plots that stand in constant danger of being falsely magnified? What's the "story-line" of your life?

ANOTHER STORY TO WHICH ANY MAY BELONG

which began,

The Good News of the Bible is of another story to which any may belong, and

"Once upon a time...God created the heavens and the earth... and God said, 'Let us make man in our own image!' "And the eyes of them both were open and they knew that they were naked."

This story, of course, goes on and touches down in places like Babylon and Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Assyria, Judea and Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth - yes, including even New York City. It runs through names like Abraham and Moses, Saul and David, Isaiah and Amos, Jesus of Nazareth and Saul of Tarsus, Augustine of Hippo, Calvin of Geneva, Francis of Assisi, Wesley of England, Schweitzer of Germany, King of Atlanta, Chavez of Delano and many, many more.

The beat goes on and the story continues. Of those who have preceded us in this still developing drama, it was said in Hebrews 11: 39 and 40 (NEB):

"These also, one and all, are commemorated for their faith; and yet they did not enter upon the promised inheritance,

because, with us in mind, God had made a better plan, that only in company with us should they reach their perfection."

FAITH / SOMETHING MORE

Faith is something more. It's something other than mental assent to fixed propositions about a static God!

God is not a problem to be solved! He is not a term to be defined! He is a worker to be joined! Said Jesus "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God" (John 7: 17) God is at work in our world. This is what the story is all about. God is at work in the world not simply to "evacuate" souls out of it, but to redeem and reconstitute His vast creation. "God so loved the world" - not the Church..."that He gave His only Son..."

There's a tendency in some churches today toward a damaging "hovercraft" theology. In days to come we'll see more hovercraft in the harbors of our cities. As you know, these contraptions skim over land and sea without touching either. "Hovercraft theology" promotes a God that rides in majesty above the uneven surfaces of life immune to all we experience. Too many - even in the Church - regard God as "a timeless essence floating dispassionately above the mix of pain and please that we call life".

I believe the truth is quite other than this. God is at work within our history, just as He was back there in Biblical times. God didn't stop writing after His bestseller was written and published. By loving lures and beckonings He keeps pulling us forward, tugging at us, working and willing the restoration of the world. Abraham is prototype - going out, not knowing where, breaking with the familiar to venture into the unknown.

Nikos Kazantzakis has caught the forward motion of our years as well as any one I know. Open your weary heart to his testimony of hope. He writes:

"Blowing through heaven and earth, and in our hearts and the heart of every living thing, is a gigantic breath - a great CRY - which we call God. Plant life wished to continue its motionless sleep next to stagnant waters, but the CRY leaped up within it and violently shook its roots: 'Away, let go of the earth, walk!' Had the tree been able to think and judge, it would have cried, 'I don't want to. What are you urging me to do! You are demanding the impossible!' But the CRY, without pity, kept shaking its roots and shouting, 'Away, let go of the earth. Walk! It shouted in this way for thousands of eons; and Lo! as a result of desire and struggle, life escaped the motionless tree and was liberated."

"Animals appeared - worms - making themselves at home in water and mud. 'We're just fine here.' they said. 'We have peace and security; we're not budging!' But the terrible CRY hammered itself pitilessly into their loins. 'Leave the mud, stand up, give birth to your better!' 'We don't want to. We can't!' 'You can't, but I can. Stand up!' And lo! after thousands of eons, man emerged, trembling on his still unsolid legs."

"The human being is a centaur; his equine hoofs are planted in the ground, but his body from breast to head is worked on and tormented by the merciless CRY. He has been fighting, again

for thousands of eons, to draw himself, like a sword, out of his animalistic scabbard. He is also fighting - this is his new struggle - to draw himself out of his human scabbard. Man calls in despair, 'Where can I go? I have reached the pinnacle, beyond is the abyss.' And the CRY answers, 'I am beyond. Stand up!'

AN ATTITUDE TOWARD ALL LIFE

That's the story! Faith then does not deal with a small fragment of life marked off and labeled "sacred". To me, it has to do with our attitude toward all of life.

So often when we're asked, "Do you have faith?" we're apt to interpret the question to mean, "Do you believe in going to Church...or do you believe in the miracles of Christ...or in the after-life...or in the Bible and what it says... or in the power of prayer". In other words, our faith has become specialized. For some it may be that their God is too small, or that they need more belief and fewer beliefs. For in, with and under all those events that comprise your life and mine - personal and corporate - the Eternal God is at work, hopefully at work through us.

What I am insisting on today is that faith is not the specialized quality that we may have made it, that it's not something limited to just our time together in Church. For me, faith deals with all of the reality that rides in upon us. The aim of faith is to refine life where it is coarse, and to soften it where it is hard, to reconcile it where it is lost, to value it where it is debased, to celebrate it where it is doubted, to free it where it is hung up, and to illumine it where it is in darkness.

CLOSING SECTION

What then of self or family? What then of nation or job? None of these is denied. Each can be fulfilled in the kind of universe that we're thinking about. At best they are vital sub-plots of the main story line. Viewed thus they are freed from the strain of trying as parts to function as the whole.

"Faith is an act of commitment by which one inserts himself or herself into a new story". Jesus came inviting us into a new and a greater dimension of life. As the Scripture puts it, "The time is fulfilled...the Kingdom is at hand... repent and believe in the Gospel". In Jesus of Nazareth the scope and the substance of that powerful story is written out for us, line by line. He is its embodiment and the very source of our empowerment. There we see it all: life's deepest meaning and its highest hope.

Years ago, Josiah Royce, described man's life as "a search for loyalty to an adequate cause". What so many people today need is deliverance from those various sub-plots into which they have thrown themselves unconditionally so that they might connect up with the really big story that is pregnant with meaning and excitingly open to the future that God is seeking to bring to us.

It has been said that the two most important days in a person's life are the day on which he is born and the day on which he discovers why he was born. The first is a physical birth. The second can be called a spiritual birth. Pray God that each of us may have it...experience it...and know the joy that comes from being part of God's story.

"The time is fulfilled....the Kingdom is at hand...
repent and believe....in the Gospel"

PRAYER Gracious God, forgive what we have been.
 Correct what we are. And order what we shall be. For thy sake and
ours, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen