

Pentecost 17C
Peace, Seattle
September 1, 2013
Jeremiah 2:4-13

REMEMBERING OUR STORY

You can feel the pathos behind God's question in Jeremiah, can you not? Can see God, like a parent, exasperated & perplexed, shaking his head at how this relationship between him and his people has dwindled to nothing.

WHAT WRONG DID YOUR ANCESTORS FIND IN ME THAT THEY WENT FAR FROM ME, AND WENT AFTER WORTHLESS THINGS AND BECAME WORTHLESS THEMSELVES?
God asks.

God's people have forgotten their stories; lost touch with the narrative that gave them birth. And because they have forgotten, they've lost touch both with God and with themselves. And into that vacuum, other stories have rushed to take their place.

MY PEOPLE HAVE COMMITTED TWO EVILS, says the LORD.
THEY HAVE FORSAKEN ME, THE FOUNTAIN OF LIVING WATER, AND DUG OUT CISTERNS FOR THEMSELVES, CRACKED CISTERNS THAT CAN HOLD NO WATER. (2:13)

There was a time when Israel and Judah knew who they were; knew they were a covenant people chosen by God to be a conduit of blessing to the world. There was a time when they knew the One to whom they owed their allegiance—indeed, their very existence. But generations came and went, and the memories grew thinner and thinner, until there was no substance left. **How did it happen?**

The stories we remember and tell matter. When stories are no longer told, we forget. Jeremiah says even the guardians of the stories—those charged with responsibility to tell them and pass them on publicly, ritually—have forgotten them.

And when the story of a people is no longer told, the people forget who they are.¹

Sisters and brothers, what was true then is true now. Our lives—individually and corporately, are composed of stories. And the stories we tell matter.

Some of the stories we tell are cautionary tales...

- The uncle whose life was consumed by alcohol,
- The cousin who landed in prison,
- The classmate whose life was forever altered by a single, impulsive act.

Some stories grow in their telling until they cross the threshold into legend or myth: George Washington chopping down a cherry tree, or throwing a silver dollar across the Potomac.²

Some stories capture pivotal moments in the history of a people or nation: Plymouth Rock; Valley Forge; Gettysburg; Wounded Knee; Kitty Hawk; Pearl Harbor; Watergate; My Lai.

And some stories—though they're never repeated because they are too shocking or embarrassing or painful to tell—nonetheless exert their power over us, leaving us with

¹ Sally A. Brown, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*... pp. 3-7. Brown's insights significantly shaped what I have to say in this sermon.

² The cherry tree story was invented by Parson Mason Weems who wrote a biography of George Washington shortly after Washington's death. Weems invented several anecdotes about Washington's early life to illustrate the origins of the heroic qualities. Follow the link for more facts and falsehoods about G.W.

<http://www.mountvernon.org/content/facts-falsehoods-about-george-washington-0>

physical or psychological scars that eat away at us like ulcers or hold us in a constant state of post traumatic stress.

Jesus was known for the stories he told. And the ones which left the deepest impression, which witnesses felt compelled to preserve and pass on—are the teaching stories—the parables.

Though these parables are not historical accounts of actual events, they nonetheless proclaim the truth about God and humanity with such strength, surprise, and moral clarity that two millennia later they still shape what it means to be a follower of Jesus and to live as he would have us live.

The people Jeremiah addressed had lost touch with the sacred stories that had formed them as a people. The cistern had run dry; and in that vacuum, other lesser stories had rushed in to take their place.

The central message of Jeremiah rings true still today:

We need to hear the stories of faith—of who and whose we are, of how we got here, where we're heading and why—and not only hear them, but PRACTICE and TELL THEM—lest we find ourselves unmoored and adrift, digging cracked cisterns for the lesser stories that infuse our culture and are eager to sell us on what's most important, where we ought to be going, and how they can get us there.

When we lose touch with the Water, Word, and Meal that are central to who we are as the Body of Christ; when we no longer hear or tell or share the stories that mark us as children of God, then these false stories that permeate our culture will rush in to take their place.

One example...

At a recent appearance in Seattle, Peggy Orenstein, author of the book Cinderella Ate My Daughter,³ (a must read for any of us raising or grand-parenting girls) spoke about the journey she's been on to understand the forces and pressures behind the rise of the "princess" culture of our present time.

Orenstein cites mounting evidence of the pressure girls experience at a younger and younger age to define themselves through their appearance; to believe that how they look, very narrowly defined, is who they are.⁴

- She cites an 8-year study of 2000 elementary school kids from the years 2000-2007 that documents the rising number of elementary aged girls who express intense concern about their weight and appearance.
- And how, during the same period, at the other end of the spectrum, the presence and participation of college aged women in leadership positions dropped precipitously.
- When these young women were asked why they weren't putting themselves forward for positions of leadership they told researchers "they not only had to do everything, and do everything well, they also had to 'look hot' while doing it."

Corporate empires like the Disney Company are leading the way in defining "princess culture" and what it means to be a girl in the 21st century, and they're doing it through a proliferation of merchandise. In the year 2000 the quantity of "princess" affiliated images in the marketplace could be numbered, perhaps in the hundreds. Today, there are 26,000+ individual princess products bearing the Disney

³ Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

⁴ From Orenstein's Seattle Town Hall forum presentation in February 2012, available here: <http://kuow.org/post/cinderella-ate-my-daughter-peggy-orenstein>

trademark alone. Princess culture has become a 4 billion dollar industry, supporting the fantasy that it's all about you and nobody else.

What effect are these stories having on our daughters? The sexualization of girls is being pushed down earlier and earlier, and its making them more vulnerable to distorted body images, eating disorders, depression, and a sense of themselves as innately inadequate.

Stories matter. What happens when you've been marinating in this kind of princess culture for a good chunk of your life?

Research by Children's Digital Media Center at UCLA has put its finger on a profoundly alarming development.

- They found that college students are beginning to talk about identity not as something that is cultivated from within, from the self, but as something that one develops as a kind of brand that is marketed, and one's friends become the equivalent of fans or consumers or, in the case of Facebook, subscribers.⁵

What we're about here at Peace, what we're seeking to do in Sunday School classes and pre-baptismal education and confirmation and youth group, in partnership with parents and young people, is to tell and show how our core identity as human beings and children of God **IS NOT a malleable, marketable commodity, **NOR** is it something that can be judged by outward appearance...**

It is a incredibly gracious gift of the one who created us, unearnable, wholly given:

YOU ARE MY BELOVED DAUGHTER, BELOVED SON, WITH WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED!

WHEN YOU LEAVE THIS PLACE—young people, I'm talking to you now...

When you go away for college, or work, or to see the world, REMEMBER THE STORY!

Find a place where you can hear the word, where you will be reminded of your baptism and the One who named and claimed you here, a place where you can take meet Jesus at the Table, experience community, and find yourself reclaimed, renewed, and repurposed.

The stories the world tells are told to sell you something. Don't fall for cisterns that can't hold water. Remember the fountain of living water. Remember Jesus and his love.

And know that, though we can't go with you, we'll be keeping you right here. (Heart)

For you are part of us, and we part of you, and our gracious Lord holds us all.

Amen.

⁵ Cited by Orenstein.