

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Sarah Harrold

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — John 6:25-35

SERMON

I love stories. I love the characters they involve; I love the lessons; I love the imagination. I'm going to tell you two stories right off the bat here tonight. They're stories that you should know, but I'm going to tell them in a slightly different way, so I want you to try to figure out which stories they are, and as I tell them, I also want you to think about your own story. Your story about who you are, where you come from, and where you're going. What is it that defines you and your family?

For both of these stories, I'm going to tell them in first person, as though I'm the main character in the story. So: Humph. You want to know about my family history and my story, huh? Well, what do you want to know? There's not much to tell. It's essentially one hardship and struggle after the next. Why we're still alive and together as a group, I have no idea. Stubbornness, I suppose. A lack of willingness to just let things be and to die out. People tell me that, many, many years ago, one of my crazy ancestors decided that he was just going to go off on his own. So he did. Just started this journey of self-discovery, I guess, dragging his wife with him. Well, like everyone else, they had kids – a son, specifically – and well, they kept populating. But then because they wouldn't just stay put, they eventually ended up in a desolate place and there was a drought. They had to move again and they found themselves working like slaves for a living. But they were too dumb to get out while they could, so they remained like that for a long time. Eventually they got out of that situation. But they couldn't get rid of that stupid itch to wander, so they were homeless for years. They finally chose a spot, and I guess it's a nice place, but really, I don't expect to stay here long. My family just doesn't seem to be content keeping things the way they are. We have a nice life here; don't screw it up, you know? But that seems to be the only thing we know how to do well: screw things up. So where am I going then, you ask? God only knows. I don't really see the point in planning or dreaming. It'll all change anyway, right?

Know which story that is?

Here's the second one: My story? Oh, it's really a great one. My family is one of adventure, strength, and faith. In fact, one of my ancestors a long, long time ago was chosen by God to be the head of a new nation on this earth – kind of servants and kings all at the same time. Pretty fabulous, yes? So what else do you do except take up that challenge? But to do that he had to leave his family and his home and just start journeying. And the whole thing is just a crazy, crazy story that I don't have the time to tell you all of. But they were blessed with children and continued to grow and prosper and have these incredible encounters with new people in new lands and also with our God. We endured famine and slavery, but God didn't leave us, and in miraculous displays of power, brought us out of captivity, wandered with us in our confusion for a while, and now has brought us to this place. Do I know where I'm going?

Mmmmm...depends on the day, I guess. When God is your God, you never know what's around the corner. Will some of it be scary or overwhelming? Probably. But God's brought us this far and I don't suspect that God will leave us now. Why? Where do *you* think God's leading us?

How about that one? Do you know? They're the same story, of course. It's the story of the Israelites – starting with Abraham and going up to a time when they are already in the land of Israel and are leading good lives. But they sound completely different and that is because how you tell your story, matters. And not just because the people who hear your story are going to like one version more than the other, but because it has a profound affect on how you live your life, how able you are to encounter the future, and really, how happy you are. How you tell your story, matters. Did you come up with yours? What kind of story is it?

Our Deuteronomy text tonight gives the Israelites instructions on what they are to do when they bring their offering to the temple. They already know that all that they have is given to them by God and they already know that they are to bring the first and best results of their work back to God – 10% of the outcome, actually. That could make for a somewhat resentful community if they're told that 10% of their harvest, 10% of their money, 10% of their livestock – needs to go to the temple, to God. And on top of that, it's not just 10% - it's the BEST 10% of what you have, it's the first portion of what you make. There could understandably be a bit of hesitation in that. So instead of just saying "do it; it's what God requires of you and your priests wouldn't be able to survive without it, so deal with it", the instructions come by way of a story.

The author says, "Ok, when you wake up and realize that God has kept his promises to you and you find that you actually are living with great abundance and have blessings on top of blessings, then go to the place in your community where God has chosen to dwell. Go to the priest that's there at the time, and give to him the first of your work, and say to him, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us." Or, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that God has kept his promises to me. I have been taken care of, and it is because of the goodness of God." And then he continues by saying that when the priest takes your offering, you're to respond with this story: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring

the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.”

But the author of these instructions doesn't stop there – he says, after you've told this story, set down your offering and bow down – worship – before God. And then after that, “you together with the priests and the foreigners in your land, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.” Fantastic, yes? It's saying that God has given us so MANY abundant blessings, that we need to offer them back to God not so that God feels appreciated, but so that we can celebrate. And it's saying that, as we bring our offering, we tell our story, so that we remind ourselves of how God has been with us over the long haul and has always kept his promises to us – plus, it's just a fun story to tell. I mean seriously, half the fun is in telling it.

So again, what's your story, and how do you tell it? Because how you tell it, matters.

Do you come from a place where you're always treading water and hoping for the next person to come along and throw you a life-preserver? Or are you someone that has been blessed abundantly in this life? I think one of the best benefits of having a good story and remembering that story, is that there's a sense of joy in life. Every day becomes Thanksgiving Day, because when you receive something, you recognize it as a gift and a part of the story and you can't wait to share it. Now, I realize that this is something that's hard to keep up. Not all of life is sunshine and flowers, obviously. There are real struggles. We are surrounded by death, despair, exhaustion, and oppression. We can easily be consumed by these worries. But by telling our story, we remember that we have a God who enters into our slavery, hears our cries, and brings us out of it. We have a God who, works in his own time, but works nonetheless.

Paulo Coelho is a writer from Brazil and has several books out that basically read as journal entries. I looked through his blog for entries on joy and found this story. He says that the story actually comes from a man, Bruno Ferrero, but I find it appropriate and a great example of the joy that comes from knowing the story of who we are and how we're connected with others.

One day, a countryman knocked hard on a monastery door. When the monk tending the gates opened up, he was given a magnificent bunch of grapes. “Brother, these are the finest my vineyard has produced. I've come to bear them as a gift.” “Thank you! I will take them to the Abbot immediately, he'll be delighted with this offering.” “No! I brought them for you.” “For me?” The monk blushed, for he didn't think he deserved such a fine gift of nature. “Yes!” insisted the man, “For whenever I knock on the door, it is you opens it. When I needed help because the crop was destroyed by drought, you gave me a piece of bread and a cup of wine every day. I hope this bunch of grapes will bring you a little of the sun's love, the rain's beauty and the miracle of God, for it is he who made it grow so fine.” The monk held the grapes and spent the entire morning admiring it: it really was beautiful. Because of this, he decided to deliver the gift to the Abbot, who had always encouraged him with words of wisdom. The Abbot was very pleased with the grapes, but he recalled that there was a sick brother in the monastery, and thought: “I'll give him the grapes. Who knows, they may bring some joy to his life.” And that is what he did. But the grapes didn't stay in the sick monk's room for long, for he

reflected: “The cook has looked after me for so long, feeding me only the best meals. I'm sure he will enjoy these.” When the cook appeared at lunch, to bring him his meal, he presented him with the grapes. “They're for you,” said the sick monk, “since you are always coming into contact with that which nature produces, you will know what to do with this work of God.” The cook was amazed at the beauty of the grapes, and showed his assistant how perfect they were. So perfect, he thought to himself, that no one would appreciate them more than the sexton, since he was responsible for the Holy Sacrament, and many at the monastery considered him a holy man; he would be the best qualified to value this marvel of nature. The sexton, in turn, gave the grapes as a gift to the youngest novice, that he might understand that the work of God is in the smallest details of Creation. When the novice received them, his heart was filled with the Glory of the Lord, for he had never seen such beautiful grapes. Just then, he remembered the first time he came to the monastery, and of the person who had opened the gates for him; it was that gesture which allowed him to be among this community of people who knew how to value the wonders of life. And so, just before nightfall, he took the grapes to the monk at the gates. “Eat and enjoy them,” he said, “for you spend most of your time alone here, and these grapes will make you very happy.” The monk understood that the gift had been truly destined for him, and relished each of the grapes, before falling into a pleasant sleep. Thus the circle was closed; the circle of happiness and joy, which always shines brightly around generous people.

These monks derived their identity and their outlook on life from the blessings that their fellow monks had given them. They told their story in such a way that they could be nothing but joyful and generous.

So then my story, you might ask? Well, I suppose it could take a lot of forms. I am connected with these Israelites we've talked about tonight and their story is my story. I also have the story of my grandparents and great-grandparents. I have the story of friends who, like the monks, have made me who I am. But there is a common story among both you and me, and I want to end on that story. Perhaps it's one that you know well, too, and can recite parts of it with me if you know it:

I have a God who is Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. And I have as God and ancestor and savior and brother, Jesus Christ, God's only son our Lord. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. And I have the gift of God the Holy Spirit, who strengthens and enlightens us in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

And so now, therefore, I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me. I will set it down before you and bow down before you. And then I, together with the pastors and the saints and the immigrants among us, will celebrate with all of the bounty that you have given to me and to my house! Amen. © 2010