

I come to you in the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The gospels, at their heart, are a collection of stories. Now, this is not a sermon about how the gospels are simply stories that teach us things, but aren't real, and shouldn't be regarded as such, mainly because I don't believe that. Sure, the gospels are stories, written decades after Jesus' ministry, but I don't think that's reason enough to dismiss their authenticity. The writers of the gospels took the stories of Jesus' ministry, the sayings of Christ that were passed on directly from disciples to followers, and collected them into one place. Sometimes, those stories were edited a little to speak directly to an audience, but that does not mean that Christ didn't say most of what we find in the gospels. Take our gospel lesson today for example. There is much historical-critical debate about this lesson, particularly because there appears to be perhaps two different lessons combined to make one larger lesson. First, we have the wedding feast, prepared but dismissed. Second, we have the guest, who in attending is ignoring the customs of the day. Much better scholars than myself have dissected and argued about this particular passage, so I will not, but I want to speak to what is important about this lesson, and what is important about our general understanding of the gospels, that it is a story. That Jesus Christ was a storyteller. That it was through story that Jesus sought to teach, through story the gospel writers sought to record and pass on this teaching, through story that our faith and tradition has continued to this day.

Jesus was a storyteller. Every parable is a story used to teach a lesson, to call out an attitude, to remind those listening of what faith is meant to be. Every sermon then is a reflection of those stories that are collected. Some preachers embrace this in a very literal

manner, filling their teaching and preaching with stories of their experiences of how the gospels have played out in this world. Some of the most powerful sermons I personally have experienced have been simple stories.

I see myself as a conduit for connecting the gospel story to our modern times, of how we are to respond in very real and practical ways to the stories that we hear, including the stories we hear from other preachers who move and inspire us. My stories are often centered on what our world could look like if we lived into our faith just a little bit more, rather than drawing out those experiences of the world we already share. But, not always. And, not always are my stories shared here in this context. Stories are a part of who we are, they are a part of how we interact with each other, they are a part of our shared experienced in this world, both within and outside these walls.

I like to tell stories. I have good stories to share. My favorite story to share right now are photos of my daughter Charlee. Anytime I make new friends, anytime I reach out to family close or far away, I share the story of my daughter through pictures, through baby milestones as she grows and learns how to be in this world (or at least what that looks like for a baby). I share the stories of what it means to me to be her dad, to be a dad. We all have stories to share that fill us with feelings of love, that put a smile on our face.

I also have stories that break my heart. And, I know that there are stories in this world that break your heart, that break our collective hearts. My heart breaks a little bit for friends who have been directly impacted by the hurricanes in Texas and Florida. My heart breaks further for the stories of friends who face shattered dreams, the end of the road, an end of hope, for sometimes there is no room for hope (at least the specific hope we wish

for) when reality presents its stark self. My heart further breaks for the stories that are in our world today. The reality that we may never know why a man shot and killed over 50 people, injured a further 500 more. The reality that equal treatment of people, of fellow blessed children of God, is a political stance that has sides, because that equal treatment is not part of our current reality. The reality that caring for our neighbor, providing for our neighbor, healing our neighbor, must fit within a political ideology, with the spreadsheet bottom lines of corporations that must make money off of the simple transaction that all of the stories of Jesus implore us to do, without thought for ourselves. These stories, personal stories, shared stories, societal stories, break my heart little by little, break our hearts little by little, until we're left wondering if there is anything left to break.

It is our shared experience of story telling that leaves me wondering what is the story that our president is hearing? What is the story of those who continue to support our president? What is at the heart of why we are so divided on issues that should be bringing us together? There is no way that money is the only concern here. There is no way that the size of our government is the only concern here. And if we remove these two throw away defenses (for they do not answer, at least in any convincing, reasonable way, why we would strip away our support for those who are less fortunate, for those who are hurting, for those who are sick and suffering, for the very very least of these) what is at the heart of the story that drives our president, that drives those who support our president? I honestly want to know. I want to hear their story. I want to know the story as to why the President of the NRA believes the solution to the epidemic of gun violence in America is more guns with less restrictions. So, if you count yourself among those who support our president and

are willing to have a respectful and honest conversation about why, I want to sit down with you and hear that story. I do not think this story is being shared accurately in the media. I do not think this story is being shared accurately on social media, on Facebook posts and comment battles. I do not think this story has a simple answer, or maybe it does, but that avenue to tell the story has not been presented. I hope to be enlightened by your story, and if we are able to share our stories together, perhaps you may be open to being enlightened as well.

I think it is important to share our stories with one another. Not simply to tell those stories, but to share them, with intentionality, with respect, with an understanding that our stories are not the same, and yet are shared. By virtue of us knowing one another, of worshiping together, of breaking bread and sharing this holy meal together, we have a shared story that is deeply personal and intimate. By virtue of being members of the larger Spokane community we have a shared story with our neighbors, whether they be next door, in West Central, or sleeping under a bridge, in a door way, on our front steps. By virtue of living in this country we have a shared story with all of those who are impacted by the actions of the leadership of our country, for those decisions impact all of us, whether we directly feel it or not. And, it is in the sharing of our stories with one another, that we can be transformed by one another.

Now, it's really important to me to stress the following point: it is not sharing of our stories when we have no interest in listening to the story of another. It is not sharing of our stories when we have no interest in being influenced, in being touched by the story of another. It is not sharing of our stories when we assume our story, our experience is the

only, the correct, the appropriate understanding of this world. But, if we can truly listen to the story of another, of our neighbor, of a fellow blessed child of God, then we can hopefully begin to understand. If we were willing to share our stories with one another, if we were open to being transformed by one another, of doing the deep, transformational act of actually, truly listening to one another, we would, for example, be able to acknowledge and understand (regardless of whether we “agree” or not, for that is a stance, not a story) why Colin Kapernick initially sat for the national anthem, and then changed his protest to one of taking a knee, a decision made because he and a former Navy Seal listened to each other’s stories and came to understand one another and why something had to be done by Colin, while still wanting to respect each other, to respect the story of why Colin needed to do something, and to respect the story of those whom the flag has (rightly or wrongly) come to stand for in our collective story. The chastisement, the suspension of students, the removal of students from teams, the threats of benching, of firing, would not be part of our story if we were listening to one another, for that is all that is being asked, that is all that is being hoped: listen to us, see us, acknowledge that we too have a story that is important, that needs to be shared, that needs to transform how we treat each other.

For this is what stories hope to accomplish in their purest sense. This is what Jesus used stories to try and accomplish. The parables of Jesus were stories to transform the listeners. The gospel writers collected these stories in an effort to to help the transformation of their communities. We have held onto these gospels as the stories of our faith. These are the stories that are designed to transform us. These are the stories that must transform us. These are the stories that must help us open ourselves to the stories of

others. To hear others. To feel deeply the experience of others. To celebrate in shared joy. To have our hearts broken by grief, for ourselves, for our friends, our family, for our neighbor. If we are open to hearing, the parable of the wedding feast and the ill-prepared wedding guest become for us transformational pieces of our overall experience of faith. We understand that it is important to honor our commitments. We understand that it is important to be prepared and honor our customs. And, most importantly, we understand that is through stories, the gospel stories, the stories we share, and the stories that are shared with us, that we are truly transformed, that we truly understand our reality of faith, that we truly understand our call as Christians, how exciting that is, how daunting that is, how truly wonderful and amazing that is.

Amen.