

## **THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT**

### *Holding Things Together*

A sermon preached on November 25, 2007, by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

**Luke 1:68-79** *"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. 69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, 70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, 71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. 72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, 73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. 76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 78 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

**Colossians 1:11-20** *May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers -- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

The Moravian Church traces its beginnings from the witness of Jan Huss, a 14<sup>th</sup> century reformer who was excommunicated because he dared criticize church corruption. Thus, Moravian origins predate the Presbyterians and Lutherans who were Protestant-come-latelies in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In *Moravian Daily Texts*, an annual book of prayers that denomination has published for over 270 years, there is a prayer containing this line: "Help us to be faithful storytellers, griots, narrators and teachers, O Lord."

*Griot* was a new one on me! It was the *American Heritage Dictionary* to the rescue: "*Griot: a storyteller in West Africa who perpetuates the oral tradition and history of a village or family.*" The Moravians pray to become a congregation of griots because that's what the gospel is: the tradition and

history of a family – God’s family. Someone once boiled down what the church does in this way: gather the people, tell the story, break the bread.

I was reminded of the importance of this a few weeks ago when LAPY (Lansing Area Presbyterian Youth) held an overnight here at our church. They couldn’t find anyone young and dynamic who could relate well to them, so I was asked to speak. One of the points I wanted to make with these high schoolers was how important it was to take the passing of time seriously; that their lifetime, their intelligence and skills and their individuality were all gifts that were to be used; that life was short, and by the time they graduate from high school, fully a fifth of an average person’s life is over. And I read them Jesus’ parable of the talents to ground what I was saying in the story of our faith.

As shocking as it was to those young people that some old guy was telling them that someday their lives would be over, it was equally as shocking to me to learn that most of them had never heard the parable before. Maybe they had heard it, but stories don’t necessarily stick unless they are told again and again, and then reinforced by a teacher, a parent, a mentor connecting what they as adults do – their thoughts, their decisions, and their actions – with the story’s meaning. Given the reticence so many of us feel about self-consciously and outwardly connecting our behavior with our faith, maybe I shouldn’t be shocked at all.

I’m not blaming these young people; I’m blaming myself, my generation, and the generation that follows – and I’m blaming the times, too, though “the times” obviously couldn’t care less. Do you know what the word *secular* means? It’s not necessarily the opposite of *religious*, as is often implied. It is from the Latin root meaning *of the age* – in other words, *temporary*, as opposed to *eternal*.

There is no escape from the secular. We all occupy a slice of time. We are bound to the earthly, temporal concerns of each day. We must eat, breathe, work, rest, and dream of things all conditioned and limited by our physical existence. And so much of how we do these things is a characteristic of the age in which we live.

The irony, which is recognized by wise secularists and all religions, is what C. S. Lewis stated: “Aim at heaven and you get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither.” Lewis’ point was that the more fascinated we are with our own time, the more likely we will become swamped by its petty – and often demonic – concerns. Focus on God’s story, and you bring everything under the aspect of eternity which expands meaning and importance to the broad dimensions of soul, the vast landscape of hope, and the limitless possibilities of love. Make the day the sole object of concern, there is no grounding for an ethic that can possibly rise above brute selfishness. Make God’s story of eternal grace our fascination, and our lives and our times can be viewed in a different light. Even tragedy, when viewed from the vantage point of the cross, takes on new meaning and importance.

Most of us gathered around well-laden tables with family and friends this past Thursday, and we shared stories – stories about family, and heritage, hopes, and dreams. The telling of stories around the family table reinforces values and defines roles. We learn about belonging (or not) as

these stories are told. A *New Yorker* cartoon shows a pair of Indians making their departures from a dinner table where some Pilgrims remained, and one says to the other, "That was nice, but I wouldn't want to make it a regular thing." But Thanksgiving Day is a regular thing not just because a president declared it a national holiday, but because we have memories about celebrating it and stories which convey those memories which have grown large with who we are over the years.

At its essence, the gospel is the recitation of hope conveyed from generation to the next by faithful griots. It is not stone cold text on a page. Scripture is story and story is what shapes our hearts and minds. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, begins the Gospel of Luke with a recitation of God's story. He recalls the plot that sets up the coming of Jesus, which he roots in God's deep story of forgiveness, love, and hope.

His is a subversive story. Zechariah's story, which focuses on God's eternity and not on contemporary grief, contradicts the empire's imperial story which Rome's occupation troops try to impose. The imperial story was all about military power, the glory of the emperor, and pacification by the sword. The imperial story is all about social stratification, about brute power, about making the lowly even lower and the privileged even more so, about glittery pomp and bloodthirsty armies and military booty and enslavement.

Luke, the subversive griot, tells the story of Jesus and how in him the last would be first, the blind would see, the lame would walk, and the poor would have good news preached to them. Luke, the subversive griot, tells of mute old men suddenly bursting into song, God's messengers giving news of great joy to all the people, and a peasant baby growing up to be the lord. This was a story the humble, the poor, the weak, and the outcast – all those who are left out of the imperial story – would be able to hear.

The period between Thanksgiving Day and Christmas is arguably the time most dense with our storytelling. We laugh at one another's foibles, celebrate one another's strengths, cherish heritages of character in deceased parents and grandparents, and rejoice at new births. The stories vary in quality and elaborateness. Facts matter little; meaning is everything, and the family knows how to separate the two. All of them become part of us, and we become part of the family.

The great American novelist Flannery O'Connor once described her stories as being all about "the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil." That's the Christian story, too, and ours, as well. So, connect these dots. What are our stories worth if they do not convey to others, and especially our children, our experience of the grace of Christ intersecting our lives? What use are our stories of family if we are shy about them? It is our relentless task as persons of faith to be clear about our life's congruities and incongruities with God's story of salvation, between the imperial story and Christ's story, between your personal story and Christ's story, between the hope you convey for your loved ones and the hope which can only be found outside the stories of achievement and pride and wealth and power...can only be found within the stories of the last being first, the weak made strong, the flawed forgiven, and the lost being found.

This Lord's Day is the celebration of Christ the King. This last Sunday of the liturgical year concludes a story we have been filling in for 52 weeks. The climax of the story is, "Christ is King." As the Letter to the Colossians puts it, "(God) has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son." As griots of the king, this is the story we are to tell, and to live. This is the supertext within which we are to find our personal stories, and within which our children are to find their story. It is particularly a parental responsibility. Remember the Moravian prayer. It doesn't say, "O Lord, help the preacher and the Church School teachers tell good stories...." It says, "Help us to be faithful storytellers, griots, narrators and teachers, Lord...." Think about the service of Baptism when parents and the congregation make promises to tell the newly baptized the good news. You may not have noticed, but the guy officiating in the service promises nothing!

It's not something to be left to someone else. If we don't tell the stories, who will? And if we don't tell the stories, how will our children know who we were? And if we don't tell the stories, how will God's story make sense to a world which knows only too well the stories of brute power and its resulting misery?

Let us tell the story at least as protest. Untold stories become forgotten legends. Our faith is not antique lore. It is a living story with new chapters appended with each new life's witness. It is alive because we are alive, if it is alive in our retelling, a living story passed on from generation to generation, so that each one remembers whom to thank, and how to pass it on.