

Homily – The Stories We Tell

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A year and a half ago, Jeff and I went on our honeymoon to Kauai. We rented a house on the north shore of Kauai near Hanalei, near the beginning of the Nepali trail. The snorkeling was amazing, and the house was beautiful.

And, I admit that we did a little bit of snooping throughout the house so that we discovered the name of the owner of the house. With a quick internet search we found that the owner of the house was listed as one of the architects of the new World Trade Center tower in downtown Manhattan.

Looking at the house this made sense. It had a style that was not only beautiful but it was also interesting. While it was not the style of Frank Lloyd Wright, it had that connection between the architecture and the built-in-furniture. Like Frank Lloyd Wright's famous house, Falling Water, you could hear the sound of the water, but not actual see it.

And, to be honest there was a little bit of a coolness factor in being in the vacation house of one of the architects of the World Trade Center.

When I lived in Manhattan in the late eighties, I lived in an apartment building that was across the West Side Highway from the old south tower of the World Trade Center. When I lay in bed, all I could see out my window was the expanse of the tower as it went up into the sky. Many nights one could not see the top of the tower since it was in the clouds.

And, my ex-wife and I originally met on a second floor concourse of the north tower of the World Trade Center. We both worked in the World Financial Center one side of the World Trade Center, and we both lived in a neighborhood on the other side of the south tower. For both of us our commute was a walk through the World Trade Center as we went to and from work.

And, in my first five weeks of living in Manhattan, I lived in the hotel at the World Trade Center. The Vista Intercontinental Hotel was located in between the north and south Towers, so the World Trade Center was my home for a while. I have other stories, but these are my three main stories of the World Trade Center

And of course for many of us our World Trade Center story is wrapped up in the emotions of 9-11 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The World Trade Center has wrapped itself into the story we tell. It has been branded into our brains.

Today our Old Testament reading or story is from the Book of Nehemiah. The book is written about four to five hundred years before Christ and focuses on the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the subsequent repopulation of the city. The book appears to be written in a time in which the hostility between Israel and the Persian Empire has waned, but the Hebrew people and the Holy Land were still under the control of the Persian Empire.

Let me give a little bit of history to put this in context. About six hundred years before Christ, the Babylonians conquered Israel and Judea sent many of the people into exile. They also destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem as a way to eliminate the Hebrew religion, culture and society. The conquerors attempted to eliminate the story of the vanquished.

About fifty years later, that would be two to three generations later, the Persians conquered Babylon and the Persian king began sending the Hebrews back to the Holy Land. The Temple was rebuilt and social order was once again being re-established. In another twenty years the emphasis shifted to the rebuilding of the walls around the city. I imagine this was for safety reasons. It is hard to have social order without a feeling of safety.

The walls were built, and about a tenth of the people from the surrounding countryside were moved into the walls. The rules of the Torah were re-established, and the Hebrew society started to come together once again. And, this is when we get to today's reading.

It is only once every three years, that we have a Sunday morning reading from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, and I found the reading to be confusing at first. So, I had to read up on the history and context that I just shared with you. As this newly re-established society and culture started to take hold, the people paused to celebrate the work that had been done and to give thanks to God for their blessings. They pulled out the Torah, that is the first five books of our Old Testament, and they read and interpreted the stories of their people.

Stories can be important in the shaping or reshaping of identity. We still know this today. We tell and retell the stories of our families. We tell and retell the stories of our country. We tell and retell the stories of our church. In December we retold our stories twice with our Lessons and Carols services. Every Sunday morning, we use four different Bible passages to retell our stories.

The telling of stories helps ground us and it give us identity and helps us know who we are. And, that is what the Hebrew people were doing about four to five hundred years before Jesus. With the rebuilding of the walls, and the re-establishment of society, they were retelling their stories.

Now we all know that stories can become embellished. Sometimes, the stories we tell can gloss over or even ignore the bad stuff. Politics of all sorts is rife with stories that have been adjusted to serve a purpose. One of the healthy things about the reading of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, is that while there is probably some smoothing out of the stories, some of the nasty stuff is still left in. Part of the story of the Hebrew people is that they did some pretty nasty stuff, and sometimes they did that nasty stuff in the name of God.

A few chapters after today's reading from Nehemiah, the Hebrew leaders decided that they were going to further purify their society by booting out the foreign wives and their children. Some of the Hebrew men had married non-Hebrew wives and had children with those wives. These men were forced to divorce their foreign wives and disown their children. Most of us would agree that this is some pretty nasty stuff that we still have in the telling and retelling of our Bible stories.

That gets to some of the complexity of the retelling of stories. The stories can mean different things to different people. Some would point to the story of the booting out of foreign wives as an example of something we can do again. It's in the Bible, so for purity we can kick out or keep out the foreigners. Others would point to this same story as an example of nastiness, and that it is something we should remember and never ever do again. It's in the Bible to keep us from ever repeating that mistake. So, one story has two widely different uses.

But, the telling and retelling of stories can also be very, very healthy. Look at the truth and reconciliation work that happened in South Africa after the end of Apartheid. By allowing people to tell the stories of what had happened, the cycle of violence was disrupted in South Africa. The need for vendetta or revenge was disbursed by the simple act of story telling.

But, calling story telling simple is actually wrong, for story telling by itself does not always lead to healing. Here are some of the things that I learned in a class on "Restoring Hope" that was taught by the Rev. Rob Voyle.

"When someone has survived a trauma there are three perspectives from which their story can be told. There is a victim story, a survivor story and a thriver story. The victim story is the story of a negative event and the circumstances that gave rise to the suffering, pain, fear and anger." The opportunity to tell the victim story is

important but it is also a trap, for a person may get stuck in the telling and retelling of the victim story in a way that keeps them in a state of helplessness. “The problem is no longer the trauma which occurred in the past, but the person has lost their resourcefulness in the present moment.”

“The survivor story then becomes important because many people who have experienced trauma do not realize, from a psychological perspective, that they survived. They are trapped or frozen in the trauma and need to discover that they endured. While the person may have been rescued by others, the person needs to focus on what they themselves did during that time to ensure that they survived... Most victim stories have a quality of powerlessness of things being beyond the victim’s control. To counter these feelings, when telling the survivor story, it is important to find the behaviors that the person actually did to assist in their survival. For example, while a person may have been rescued from the roof of their house in the middle of a flood, the person needs to describe how they were able to get up on the roof and how they sustained themselves while they waited to be rescued. It is in their stories of survival that people can see and regain their resourcefulness... They can discover strengths where previously they only saw weakness.” A person needs to be allowed to tell their victim story and then encouraged to move into the survivor story. And, eventually they need to move into the thriver story. “Despite the trauma, there is a life-giving future to be lived.”

“I have heard people who have gone through horrendous ordeals say: ‘While I wouldn’t wish this on anyone, including myself, I know I am a better person for it and my life today is much richer for the experience.’ Somehow through the entire experience the person has come to a place of thriving. They are not feeling victimized, or feeling that they simply survived. Despite their experience, they are fully alive and find life rich and rewarding... Theologically the thriver story is the story of redemption. The Scriptures are full of stories of God being able to bring something good out of bad. The story of the resurrection following humanity’s crucifixion of Christ is the classic Biblical thriver story since life for all comes from the death of one man. Joseph sold by his brothers into slavery and subsequently rescuing his brothers from famine is another story of redemption.”

These three stories, victim, survivor and thriver can be told about any traumatic event, but it is this last one that is the redemptive story of new life. And, redemption is not only important for us as individuals, but it is important for us as a people and as a society. The thriver story is important for us as a community.

And, I think this is what the Hebrew people were doing in today’s Old Testament reading from the Book of Nehemiah. They were retelling their stories as victims and as survivors and as thrivers. They were telling and retelling the stories of the Torah

so that they could resolve the painful memories of their exile and locate these events in their past and not in their future. They were disrupting the cycle of victimhood and violence in a way that still has meaning for us today.

Our stories of 9-11 continue to define us as a people of the twenty-first century. We are very familiar with the victim stories of 9-11, but whether we were directly involved with the violence that day or not, we need to also embrace and tell our stories of survival and then move onto our stories of thriving.

It can be so easy to stay stuck in the horror stories of 9-11 and in the horror stories of the more recent acts of terrorism. We can rehash the stories that make us feel powerless and angry.

I think one of the things that fascinates me about the new World Trade Center tower in Manhattan is that it is a story of resiliency. It is a story that demonstrates that we are not stuck. It is a story about the future in which life is rewarding and rich with beauty. The new World Trade Center tower is a thriver's story. And that is the beauty of the Cross and the empty tomb. In them are the culmination of God's plan to redeem each and every one of us and allow us to be thrivers.

So, as we tell our stories we must remember to allow ourselves to tell all three types of stories. Sometimes life goes crooked. We do things to keep going. And we are very blessed by God.