

STUMBLING TOWARDS LOVE
A SERMON BY MARC MULLINAX FOR THE CIRCLE OF MERCY
October 26, 2014
Genesis 32:22-28; Galatians 5 (selections)

Well, here we are. A momentous & storied afternoon. Capstone to a long conversation; a red-letter day in our history. And now I'm supposed to say something, something that makes sense. And I've got this over-prepared sermon here; don't know if it's up to the task at hand. Forgive me, Work with me.

The things we bear witness to today are our compass pointer as to what's out in front of us. And what we do from here on out, and trust with our innards, and become vulnerable to – will shape our stories, and therefore our lives, and thus most everything that *we* do. And it is the COM stories I wish to speak to for the next few minutes. I speak as one who has taken up the COM stories as part of his life since 2001. You might say they are part of my spiritual DNA... *So may the words of my mouth find similar words in your thoughts, and may these all be acceptable, O God, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

I begin as I often begin my classes each semester, with the question of “How does something become true for us?” It is not so much a religious question, though it has spiritual implications. It's more a sociology or psychology question, with a science demonstration. Here is a magnet and a nail. **Question:** How does this nail become magnetized? **Answer:** by frequent and consistent contact with the magnet. Just one pass of the magnet over the nail does not magnetize it very much, but 30 passes, or 100 passes, and this nail becomes a kind of magnetized copy of the magnet. The magnet's DNA (if you will) is transferred to the nail: From its North/South orientations, to how strong it can become, this nail “child” will become like its parent magnet. Like parent, like child.

This is how something becomes true for us: consistent, [*magnet/nail*] constant rubbing up against a story, a way of life. That way of life could be Christian or not, democratic or not, enslaving or freeing... It could be a very happy set of stories, or a very negative one. *Train up a child in the way it should go, says the Proverb, and when older they will not depart from it.*

I imagine that each of us has stories – at the metaphoric DNA level – that tell us who we are, what we are to be about, how to get found when lost, whom to trust, and where our help lies. That we are here, must mean that – somehow – the magnetic [*magnet/nail*] story of Mercy has captured us in its field. Our lives would not make as much sense without this story of Mercy that captured Joyce, Nancy and Ken around the turn of the millennium, and then us in turn. We follow the narrative thread of our stories because they have (*magnet/nail*) become our truth, from which we are loathe to depart. The world just doesn't make sense without them. At least, not to me.

They are, in Bob Marley's words, our Songs of Freedom. *Won't you help to sing These songs of freedom? - 'Cause all I ever have: Redemption songs; Redemption songs. That's all we ever have.*

Those stories of redemption can be compared to a life-line rope that folks in the upper Midwest might tie around their waists as they hurl themselves into a blizzard, in order to follow it back home, our stories are our life-line thread that we hold on to very tightly, and, we find, they hold on to us.

A poem by William Stafford, entitled *The Way It Is*, works this idea:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

God's freeing-up story of mercy that resides in our spiritual DNA is everywhere we look tonight. It is latent in the ways we inter-twine worship, education, meetings, mission, pastoral care and budget. It is blatant in the ways we may "get in the way" of power, or proclaim a radical peace, and put our bodies on the line for a cause, and suffer financial or social costs for that cause. Each example is an expression of our core stories.

What is that core DNA, you ask? Look at the front of the bulletin: *Seeking Justice, Pursuing Peace, Following Jesus*. This is our story, this is our song. It is our non-negotiable, all the day long. Everyone who has walked in our doors more than once, or signed a membership card some December, has shared this DNA, this story, this thread. I have been magnetized to this, and I know, deep down, in the inner innards, that if there was not a Circle of Mercy, I would either have to start one, or have my Sundays free of faith communities. Circle of Mercy was my last stop. It is the magnetic field that captured and still liberates my imagination, aids and abets the divine passions that still enthrall me. This field of stories inspires confidence in me that AS I go into the college classroom minefields, or AS you go into your own daily appointments of service. We do not go it alone, but with a great accompaniment of witnesses.

Highest praise to Ken, for putting traction on this vision. All manner of praises to Nancy, graced interpreter. Hallelujahs and High-Fives to Joyce, our storied story-proclaimer. We have been the beneficiaries of them holding tight the threads of faith-stories that keep them sanely and magnetically oriented towards the Realm of God. These stories have made them appropriately *insane* towards the normal ways of the world, with its power grabs, empire seductions, preparations for wars, and policies that separate people from the Peaceable Realm of God on earth. They hold for us a holy compass, ever-pointing us toward the Realm of God as we seek to understand power from the underside. On earth, as it is in Heaven, their compasses have been unfailingly pointed – for all to see – to Holy Sacred ground. In my encounters with their storehouse of the stories of God, I am changed. It's for FREEDOM that we have been all set free.

I shout out Missy, who shares the tending of this holy compass, and this holy narrative thread that binds us. She, and Nancy, already find new and creative ways to help us hold the thread, and hold on to each other. Vote me in. My skin's in *this* game. They will continue to help me stay creatively maladjusted, unbalanced enough to glance the oblique, sidelong arrival of the Realm of God, tip-toeing in among the least of all things, carried by the most surprising of all people.

And now to us. The laity. We come from many traditions, speak several faith languages, and involve ourselves at different levels. While we share some of the DNA/thread/story of the Circle, many of us have an autobiographical story of leaving a faith home, risking much, and setting up house-keeping here. Many of our stories are of getting burned and wounded, many of us limp like Isaac will all his life.

But what is it that *something* that keeps us, in this room, returning, electing in our Decembers to choose this story (magnet and nail)? Is it not the story of healing, mercy and love, not for just-us, but also for justice? You see, as we heal, **we minister from our scars, not our wounds**. The story that may have crippled us matters, because it's why we came in the first place, many of us. But it is the story of mercy, of healing that makes sense of a chaotic world, that keeps us coming. Through the lens of our healed wounds, we see better this limping world, in need of a balm of mercy. And we pay attention. And we go into our Mondays ready again to listen to those in need of mercy. I think the COM is all about equipping us to be ministers in a chaotic, unjust world.

We congregants have been labeled as heavy thinkers, a bit on the dark side, and deep feelers. We like extremes. We contemplatives like our faith REALLY contemplative. Think labyrinth, on your knees. We activists like our faith very active, as in jail-time. We heavy thinkers and deep feelers are ever-ready to go, at the drop of a hat, down, deep, deep deeper down, to study, to pray, to love, to act. Why are you here? Week after week, year after year? Is it not because there's something about this *Seeking Justice, Pursuing Peace, Following Jesus* matter that is a pleasure, a joy, a thread in our story narratives makes the rest of my life make a kind of sense? For this sense of freedom, we are set free. This thread secures me in my blizzards.

It may be just me, but week-in and week-out, I feel that you all know that unquestioned answers are more dangerous than unanswered questions. We "get" that prophetic questioning *and* pastoral response are two sides of the same faith coin. We're the ones who *know* how, in Toyohiko Kagawa's words,

God dwells among the lowliest of people. God sits on the dust heap among the prison convicts. With the juvenile delinquents. God stands at the door, begging bread. God throngs with the beggars at the place of alms. God is among the sick. God stands in line with the unemployed in front of the employment bureaus.

Therefore, the one who would meet God must visit the prison cell before going to the temple, Before one goes to church go to the hospital. Before one reads one's Bible let him help the beggar standing at his door.

This is our genius, the Circle of Mercy's never-concluded story, of how God is still speaking, in accents foreign, domestic and often guttural, in bodies of all orientations and colors, in the darkest and most hope-bereft places. And we know that if God cannot be heard in these places, then perhaps there is not a god worthy of the name at all. I am too convinced that no place is

without a divine witness. I am convinced that mercy and not hate has the last word. It's Life and not death. It's love and not apathy. It's freedom and not bondage. Mercy, life, love and freedom: these are our fertile stories.

We know the atheists beckon us at times. But we could never quite pull off atheism, at least, I could not. For me the story of Exodus outpaces the atheist story. We see the resurrection story still at play, in the release from prisons, the blind recovering their sight, on the streets of Ferguson, in Hebron ... the story of the year of the Lord's favor is still unreeling. We are love-wrestlers and freedom-fanatics to the last. We stumble, we falter, but we do not *loosen* the thread. And it does not lose us!

I've re-upped my membership every year, and there is something compelling about clearing the rolls every December, and for a few minutes, having nobody at home at the Circle. Why do I keep faith with such a faith community? A strong proponent of free choice, and folks being in charge of all that they can. I like rubbing shoulders with people who elect to be here. In your constellation of gifts, personalities, ... I find my orienting North Star, through your magnetic field, through your collection of true stories about how God is ever incarnated amongst us.

Here are three quick reasons why I re-up. They center around Questions, Sacrament and Power.

Questions: We are a questioning people, a people not content with easy answers to difficult questions. We embrace living out the difficult questions that may have no answers, such as how to live faithfully in an Empire. Ken so wisely said, *The empire makes it seem natural that there are no answers or solutions outside the ones it provides*. I need to be in a group that asks those outside-the-empire questions. The Empire's unquestioned answers are more dangerous than its unanswered questions. There is nothing more dangerous than an answer, when it is the only one.

Sacrament: I am a product of the 1960s and 70s, and I am counter-cultural in some senses of the word. A conscientious resister of Cultural Normalcy. When you come under the influence of the Circle's sacramental stories in worship, around this table, it's harder to step back into the same world unchanged. A sacrament is a tangible evidence of an unseen reality and energy that transforms culture. Here the sacraments are served, and I know now taste of courage, the smell of hope, and how mercy actually feels. I "get" resurrection. Wow!

Power: Parker Palmer relates this story in his book, *The Courage to Teach*: We cannot know the great things of the universe until we know ourselves to be great things.... I once heard this Hasidic tale, he continues: "We need a coat with two pockets. In one pocket there is dust, and in the other pocket there is gold. We need a coat with two pockets to remind us who we are." It is that story's magnetism that I take with me into the power fields of my every-day life. I am dust. But I am also in touch with the gold. In the tension between the two, [*One finger*] I find that it is easy to re-create places of mercy (magnet and nail) in my day-to-day. Power lures us. Empire seduces us. The pressure to be #1, whether in sports or international politics, has ruined many a good soul. Remember that you are dust, but also gold, my fellow mustard seeds. What else do you need to know?

The genius of the Circle? It's the story. That magnetic, attractive, beautiful DNA story of mercy, that healing freedom is here and now, and we can minister as scarred people. It's a story of inconvenient freedom, that in any given situation, we can choose freedom because for freedom we have been set free. We come in with our own stories, time and again, rub up against (*magnet/nail*) this story of mercy, and we combine our DNA with the Circle's DNA. If my 9th grade biology serves me still, when two DNA strands combine, there is new life. Protein results from this recombinant DNA. Proteins are essential parts of organisms and participate in virtually every process within cells, and cell groups. They are the building blocks of a body, and a body of faith. Your DNA combined with C.O.M.'s DNA = thousands of protein-filled courage stories for our time, for times like this, for people like us. THAT's what I'm here for.

This is worth the wrestling. This is worth the risk of going lame. This is the freedom for which we have been made. Every time you have proclaimed love, it's been the risk worth taking. Wrestling with God is to risk again that we re-present & declare freeing, unrelenting love for this earth. This is where you'll find God incarnated once again, freeing up the frozen. This is my story. This is our song. All the day long. Amen.

Benediction: Love still rules! Mercy's banner still flies! We're on this journey, from false certainties to true uncertainties, from easy support systems to risky surrender, from irresolution to courage, from self-sufficiency to vulnerability. From wounds to scars, and from incarceration to incarnation, we are a COM, *Seeking Justice, Pursuing Peace, Following Jesus. Go into this good world and practice resurrection.*