

Journeys of Love: Good News
Psalm 107:1-3 and 17-22 and Ephesians 2:1-10
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
March 11, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

There is power in the story. Great power.

There is power in the story of which we are a part. There is power in the story we sing and repeat and write down.

You and I are only two blocks away from Washington Boulevard, US 301. If you walk a few steps out our front door, turn right on Washington Boulevard and drive 594 miles north, you will be very close to Carmichael Crossroads in Dillon County, South Carolina. My grandfather, Mitchell Rembert Proctor, grew up there.

Carmichael Crossroads is not far from Dillon and Marion and Mullins and Nichols, all of them quite small. My grandfather married when he was twenty-four or twenty-five years old. He and his wife, my grandmother, Mary Susan Hamilton Proctor, lived right there in Dillon County, then a few miles away in Marion County.

They married. Then during the next seventeen years, they had twelve children. Louise, Martha and Woodrow. Beulah, RC and Mary. Lonnie, Steve and Gene. David, Mitchell and Susie. Mary died as an infant. She lived only three months. Gene didn't live long either. He died on Christmas Day. But from what I have heard, the house was full of lots of love and tenderness.

My mother, Susie, was born last. Her two oldest sisters, Louise and Martha, were already seventeen and fifteen when my mother was born. My grandmother, Mary Susan Hamilton Proctor, died that day, giving birth to my mother. She died that day, the day my mother was born.

I will never forget my Aunt Martha telling me her memory of that terrible day, of my newborn mother wrapped carefully in the middle of that big bed, all alone, the house now strangely quiet after they had taken away her mother, my grandmother.

There is power in the story. Great power. There is power in our story, the story we sing and repeat and write down.

If you leave Carmichael Crossroads in Dillon County, South Carolina and make a right turn on US 301 and drive another 185 miles north, you will land less than five miles from where I was raised in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina.

Roanoke Rapids is a small mill town, with only about 15,000 residents. When my older brother, Jim, and I were in high school there, Roanoke Rapids had six textile mills and a paper mill. Now there is only the paper mill.

One of my older brother's friends and classmates is the mayor now, Emory Doughtie. His younger sister, Ann, and I are about the same age. I remember taking her to a dance. I had no idea that I would marry another girl named Anne Doughty many years later.

All of the time my brother and I were in high school, our father was sick. He had a host of problems over the years – heart disease, hypertension, cancer - but the worst of it was his bipolar disorder. He would be down or up or down, but very rarely even.

It was a tough way to grow up. My brother and I helped our mother a great deal with the family business. We skipped a lot of normal adolescent opportunities and adventures in order to keep the family business afloat.

There is power in the stories we tell ourselves. Great power.

There is power in the story of which we are a part. There is power in the story we sing and repeat and write down.

At one point, after I had gone off to college, my dad became so ill that he had to be hospitalized. His depression was so deep that he was hospitalized for six months. Six months.

He was in the Veterans Administration Hospital only about ten miles away from Chapel Hill, where I was in school. I would go over and visit him frequently.

I remember on one occasion I was concerned because he was a mess - disheveled, unshaven -and my mother was coming to visit him the next day. Roanoke Rapids was two hours away, so she was not able to see him nearly as often as she would like. I was determined to get him cleaned up that next day before my mother arrived. But I got there a little too late, only a few moments before my mother walked in.

So there he was, in his rumpled hospital gown, needing a haircut, not very presentable, when she walked into the room. Her face lit up like a candle. She was so glad to see him. It didn't matter how he looked or how he was dressed or how he was feeling. She loved him fiercely, and that love was transformative. It radiated from her face all the way across the room.

Love is stronger than death. Love is stronger than despair.

The story we sing and remember and repeat makes all the difference.

There is a golden cord connecting my grandparents and my parents and me. It's not tragedy, although that was a common refrain through infant mortality, death in childbirth, and the illnesses of my father.

No, it is our faith. The story of faith you and I sing and remember and repeat each week, every day.

"The Lord is good, and God's steadfast love endures forever." The psalmist proclaims that God has gathered us in when we were lost and lone, God has saved us from trouble, God has delivered us from distress and destruction. Sometimes the deliverance doesn't come in a way or a time that we desire, but it always comes.

"God is rich in mercy, and by grace has saved us." Even through the darkness, even in our faults and failings, our desires and passions, our mistakes and sins, God never turns away. God always seeks ways to bring us back home, to bring us back to ourselves.

There is nothing more important than singing this song, sharing this great Good News, being a part of something so much bigger than ourselves, so much bigger than our depression or despair, our tragedies or losses. I want to be a herald of the good news. I want to be a story teller. I want to point to what is most important.

What is most important is not the brokenness of our political system, not the threat of a nuclear exchange with North Korea, not our inability to protect our children from the gun violence of our society. No, that's not it - even though any of the three is enough to keep us up at night.

What is most important is love. It is this love that frees us and drives us to keep searching, keep serving, and keep hoping. We do that in a thousand different ways as we sing our song together.

This love is radical and real and beautiful and empowering. Eugene Peterson gets it just right when he describes it in his introduction to Luke's Gospel. "With God there are no outsiders. All of us - who have found ourselves on the outside looking in, with no hope of gaining entrance - now find the doors wide open, found and welcomed by God in Jesus."

Three days ago, Juliet Macur, a sports writer for a national newspaper, filed a story about her time in Madison, Indiana, at the southern end of the Hoosier State. She described the bucolic, riverside setting of the small town, with its art and music and food festivals. But she also peeled back the cover from the tragedies that threaten to sink the town: suicide, depression, drug addiction.

Madison is in the center of the opioid crisis. The suicide rate is over three times the national average, including "the high school administrator who killed himself just weeks after submitting a grant proposal to increase suicide counseling."

In the article she focuses on the new high school football coach. "Winning football games is not his top goal," she writes. Instead, she points to what he shared with all the members of the team just before the beginning of the season. "I have this younger brother," he said. "He's very athletic and very smart. But the police caught him with heroin, and he now has been sentenced to nine years in prison."

“There’s a whole correlation between him and me getting this job,” he told his players. “Because of him,” he said, “I’ve gained sixty, seventy younger brothers. I want to keep you from doing the things he did.”

For him and for us, it all comes down to this. It all comes down to the pressing questions that Dr. Jonathan Walton posed at the NEXT Church National Gathering a week ago in Baltimore: “Who do you want to become? How do you want to be remembered?”

I want to sing and remember and repeat. I want to be a part of the story. I want to be one of the women and men who reflect the power of the story, the story of God’s goodness and love, God’s endurance and steadfast care, God’s mercy upon mercy, God’s saving grace.

I want to be one of you, good church, one of you who sings and shouts that with God there are no outsiders, that all of us, all of us, are welcomed home here in this place.

I want to be a part of the church of Jesus Christ, that loves fervently, risks mightily, and claims all our neighbors, all the world as God’s field for redemption and rescue.

I want to point not, first and last, to infant deaths or death in childbirth or heart disease or cancer or bipolar disorder, but I want to point through them, to the light that shines in the darkness, the light that overcomes despair and death, the light that was there at the beginning and will be the only thing left in the end.

Love is stronger than death. Love is stronger than despair.

The story we sing and remember and repeat makes all the difference.

One of my friends tells the story, years ago, of “the Catholic lay community in northern California that took as its mission caring for babies with AIDS. A reporter was visiting the community and interviewed a woman who was holding a desperately ill child in her arms. The woman told the reporter, ‘Her mother was a heroin addict and a prostitute. This little baby was born with AIDS. She’ll probably die soon.’

“The reporter asked, ‘Then why do you do this? I mean, why did you bring her up here if she is going to die?’

“The woman replied, ‘So she will know life in its fullness.’

“The reporter asked incredulously, and with a note of cynicism in her voice, ‘How can this pitiful baby know life in its fullness?’

“The woman replied, ‘She will know that there are people in this world who love her.’”