

**“What’s Your Story?”** - Text(s): John 17:20-26  
- Pastor Mike Pancoast

True story from one of my seminary professors, Dr. Rollie Martinson, Carrie Olson Baalson Professor of Children, Youth, and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary. Dr. Martinson had taken his seat on an airplane and had decided—as is Rollie’s style—to introduce himself to the man seated next to him. After exchanging names and pleasantries, the man was kind of curious about Rollie’s vocation as a pastor and seminary professor, and further conversation eventually led to Dr. Martinson asking his new acquaintance, “So do you go to church?” “Funny you should mention that,” the man replied, “My family and I were just talking about that yesterday.” The man went on to explain that after a year of extreme busy-ness, one in which everyone was feeling like they had had enough, the whole family had come to agree: they were over-extended. Between work, school, social commitments, and all the other activities in which they were involved, they were exhausted by Christmas and were determined that this next year would be different. So during a family council over a special meal, everyone reviewed all of their commitments in light of how each commitment helped them be the kind of individuals and family they wanted to be. (*That’s what we would want caring conversation to be, right?*) Well, after an hour and a half of conversation, they had made their decisions, and church was one of the things they had decided to stop doing. Girl Scouts stayed—but church was out. “*It’s just not that meaningful to us,*” the man explained. “*We go each week and finally realized we’re not getting anything out of it. It doesn’t connect with the rest of our daily lives, let alone help us lead those lives.*”

Now there are lots of details left out of this story that as a pastor I would want to know—*What kinds of ministries are being offered by the congregation? What exactly did this man mean, “It doesn’t help us lead our lives?”* are just a couple that come to mind. But even as it is, there are also a couple of conclusions I draw from the story are *on the one hand, here is a family operating from the standpoint of some particular values and judgments that probably could be expressed by a story; on the other hand, here is a congregation—also with a story—that had been unable to connect its story to the life of this family.*

Everyone has a story--not just a story *about* their lives but also a story or stories that help describe life, that help give meaning, that help describe who I am and who I want to be. Some of us can name and claim those stories as easily as we can recite the facts of our date and place of birth. For some of us, those stories have worked on us in such a subconscious sort of way that we aren’t even aware that we’ve made a choice—it just seems to be who we are...what we like and dislike...what we want and what we value. Once upon a time (and still perhaps to some degree), those stories might actually have been written stories of literature—a novel, a short story, or such. But in all likelihood, our stories (and especially those shared by large numbers of people) are as apt to come to us from television or movies that appeal to us and invite us either voluntarily or subconsciously to see the world through a different set of eyes, to believe a set of premises about the world as proposed by the film makers. “*I want to suggest to you that this is what the world looks like. I want you to see what I see.*” Or at the very least, “*WHAT IF the world looked like this...?*” Even the most crass sitcom, the bloodiest slasher film, the most up-lifting drama, the most informative home-improvement or food-related show...even commercials themselves...invite us to believe a certain narrative or mini-narrative about life. The great British novelist and literary critic C.S. Lewis once said about such things: “*Literature irrigates the deserts our lives have already become.*” C.S. Lewis knew that engaging stories DO SOMETHING to us—and his novels are some of the best at doing this.

I would suggest that this is the dilemma expressed in the story of the conversation between my seminary professor and the man on the airplane—and it is the dilemma of our age for congregations, for people who call themselves Christians, indeed, for all people. What’s your story? And do those stories irrigate your lives like a thirsty desert by putting you in touch with the eternal? Or do those stories merely mire us in the passing things of this world, filling time and temporarily, our appetites, but continually leaving us hungering for more? And where does God’s story, the story of the Bible stand in the midst of all these countless proposals about reality with which we are bombarded on a daily basis? I have more than a sneaky suspicion, for example, that many of us—even those of us who lay claim to the title “Christian”—stand at a great distance from the Bible and that, for all intents and purposes, it is an unfamiliar book. Sure, we may recognize a few of the better-known stories—Noah’s ark, and such. But let me ask you this, if you were to describe a challenge or an opportunity at work, at home, at school, what biblical stories come to mind that help you frame that challenge, to make sense of that opportunity, to help you think through your situation and to respond to it? It has been suggested by more than one theologian and teacher of the church that

many of us are simply not conversant with the Bible in any meaningful sort of way, that it doesn't feed our imagination, that it doesn't help us think through our daily lives. But it has also been suggested that if asked what stories *do* help, we shouldn't be surprised to hear about an episode of *Lost* or a recent blockbuster movie or the story of a sports icon, either of inspirational heroism or of a disastrous fall from grace. There are simply so many other stories competing for our attention and loyalty that the Bible has come to be reduced to simply one story among many and all too often feels like it's a million miles from our stories and concerns.

As pastors and as congregational leaders we are and should be concerned about this, and much of our early planning for next fall and beyond has already begun to ask, "*What do we do?*" For indeed, all of the fancy programs and engaging worship styles and inspiring building projects will not sustain themselves if they don't also inspire with and connect people to the presence of the living God revealed to us in the Bible.

And to that end, it seems to me that even just one line spoken by Jesus—one simple sentence—seeks to weave our stories and God's story into a beautiful tapestry in which the complexities and challenges of our daily stories and situations and the grace and power of God are made one. One single sentence.

Just to create the setting for what we hear in John's Gospel today, this is part of John's description of the last supper. But rather than emphasizing the meal, John focuses on Jesus' words over dinner—sort of Jesus' last will and testament, the last shot he has with his disciples, the final preparation for what they are about to see and participate in over the next couple of days, the last few days of Jesus' life. And beginning in John 13 and continuing fully for the next 4 chapters, Jesus washes their feet and instructs them as to how this humbling act reveals the essence of those who gather in Jesus' name; he tells them he is going away and that they can't follow him. He has assured them that they will not be left abandoned or orphaned, that he will send his Spirit that will guide them.

But then he prays. No more instructions. No more Q&A time. No more assurances or predictions. Jesus simply prays, asking his heavenly Father to draw the disciples into the relationship the Father and Son already enjoy, that they—Father, Son, and disciples—may all be interconnected as one.

But then here's the kicker from today's text—Jesus extends his prayer. He breaks it wide open beyond that upper room...beyond Jerusalem...beyond the First Century A.D....beyond the time and space that this little vignette occupies. Verse 20—"*I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message.*" Did you hear that? Two-thousand years ago, on that night when we would expect Jesus' needs to be paramount, Jesus is thinking and praying for YOU and for ME...and in fact, for anyone whose heart, mind, and life's story might somehow get tangled up in the story of God and his Shepherd Son. THAT'S the story to which we are invited. And right there, in a heartbeat, in a breathed sentence of prayer, the distance collapses between the stories the Bible tells and our own stories. Suddenly, what's going on in the biblical story isn't just "*way back then;*" it's "*right here, right now,*" as Jesus prays for us and for those yet to hear—for our ups and our downs, for our hopes and our disappointments, for our aspirations and commitments, for our yearning for meaning and our need for purpose. Right there. Right then. Right now—that God, Jesus, and us may all be interconnected one.

Growing up going to MLB games in the Houston Astrodome, there was one particular souvenir hawker I'll never forget, mainly 'cause I saw and heard him EVERY SINGLE TIME I went to the dome. He used a line that wasn't particularly original but is apropos nonetheless: "*Programs!*" he'd call out, "*Can't know the players if you don't have a program!*" Brothers and sisters in Christ, the Bible is our program, and we can't know the players if we're not in the program.