

May 21, 2017
Sixth Sunday of Easter
I Peter 3:13-22
Choosing the Right Story
Michael Stanfield

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what others fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him. The words from God for the people of God.

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer, amen.

How many of you have seen the film, “Founder”, starring Michael Keaton? “Founder” is the story of Ray Crock, credited with founding the most popular fast food chain in the world, McDonald's. The film has just recently been released on DVD. I watched it on the plane ride a couple of weeks ago when I went to visit my son, Carl in Seattle. Personally, I found the film, surprisingly, to be one of the saddest I have seen in a long time – not sad in and of itself – but sad as a commentary on what has passed for success in this country for the past three generations.

Ray Crock is indeed *credited* with the founding of McDonald's. But, as the film reveals, he really had nothing to do with its real birth. That credit goes to two rather brilliant entrepreneur brothers, Dick and Mac McDonald, the franchise's namesake. Dick and Mac owned a drive-in in southern California in the early 1940's. But they saw their profits being tied up with paying the car hops to deliver food that, they noticed, by the time it got to the window of the customer's car, was often cold. They also recognized that even though they had multiple items on their menu that were expensive to maintain, 85% of their orders were for hamburgers and fries.

So they tore down their drive-in restaurant, designed what they called the “speedee delivery system” kitchen, and built their new building, including the iconic golden arches, from scratch. This system involved an extremely efficient assembly line style of food prep (now known the world over) that dispensed with car window delivery altogether. Instead, they set out picnic tables and park benches and encouraged people to walk up to an outside window to order, upon which they guaranteed a fresh burger, fries and drink in 30 seconds. After getting their food, customers could either walk back to their cars or sit outside. Mac and Dick started this, their first fast food McDonald's in San Bernadino in 1948 and it took off like wild fire.

At the time, Ray Crock was little more than a failing milkshake mixer salesman from the Midwest who, one day received an unheard of order for 8 mixers from the McDonald brothers in San Berndino at a time when mixer sales everywhere else had all but dried up.

So, curious, Kroc drove to San Bernadino, and somehow sold the brothers on partnering with him to franchise the restaurant (even though they had already begun doing just that without him). To make a long story short, eventually Kroc practically stole the franchise out from underneath the brothers, going so far as to rewrite the history of McDonald's as one where he and he alone had come up with the whole idea behind the chain's system and success.

In the film, Kroc is depicted by Keaton as charming, but arrogant, approachable, but duplicitous, but most of all, ruthlessly ambitious. In the end, the opinion I was left with was that Kroc was little more than a successful hawker of himself, in addition to being an unoriginal cut throat of a businessman.

What caused me pause was that, for my whole life, Kroc has been held up as *the* model of business success in this country – a success that has had as its moniker a set of “family” values and “family” “restaurants” that are virtually the same from one end of the globe to the other – restaurants that *we all* bought into as being great for everyone.

But the truth is that Ray Kroc was an unhappy man who eventually died of a stroke brought on by years of alcohol abuse. The Ray and Joan Kroc Foundation that gives away millions a year to various causes (including National Public Radio) was begun, not by Ray, but by his third wife, Joan *after* his stroke. Other than that, what Kroc left behind was the McDonaldization of America – the delicious comfort of speedy sameness at the expense of originality and real nutrition – not to mention stewardship of the planet. Yet when I was growing up, not to like McDonald's would have been tantamount to being un-American.

What I want propose to you this morning is that this “McDonaldization” of America – this rather empty comfort with the enforcement of sameness at the expense of authenticity and originality is now a real threat to civil and communal life.

I'll give you an example of what I mean by this enforced sameness at the expense of originality being a “threat”. A friend of Janet's recently had an interview for a public school teaching position in what was suppose to be a highly rated public school system. However, the description of the interview blew me away. It consisted of five people sitting across from her at a table with pads of paper. Each of them in turn would ask her a question with a total lack of emotional investment and then, while she was giving her answer, not a one of them was looking at her. Instead, they had their heads down taking notes. Then the next person would ask another question with the same behavior, and so on down the line. And that was it for a mere thirty minutes. It is the McDonald's speedee delivery system now being used to hire the teachers who educate our children.

That system and the people in it are not interested in hiring a human person who, God forbid, might be original and creative in her approach to teaching. What they want is an automaton, capable only of knowing and spitting out the “correct” answer as fast as possible, and who will use that same method when it comes to her students.

I am reminded here of a quote from preacher and theologian, Zan Holmes who recently wrote: “We're born originals in this country; but the great tragedy is that most of us die carbon copies.”

Both the film, “Founder” and the experience of this teacher are just two examples of how this dangerous pressure to be the same as everyone else is now built into the very fabric of our culture. Peer pressure to be the same through bullying in this country is not confined to the elementary and teenage years. It is a conflict of will each person, regardless of age is subjected to on a daily basis from ads on TV and the

internet to the policies of our current president. Mighty powers conspire to make us want what we ought to want, but most of all, to have what we *must* have in order for us to conclude that we are happy and fulfilled.

According to this narrative, our worth as human beings is measured by how much we consume and how much we produce for an ever-expanding economy. This narrative also tells us that to be taken seriously as having anything to offer of value, at a minimum we must have a bachelor's degree. The narrative further tells us that only matter, *matters*. Thus, we must have a minimum amount of that matter to *matter* ourselves.

For instance, in order for us to be the least anxious about personal finances, I recently discovered that we must be making \$75,000 a year each; that's right; psychological researchers tell us that the closer we get to that figure, the less anxiety we have and the greater our overall sense of well-being.

Finally this narrative tells us that in order to be a whole, worthy, person, we must have a mortgage (that is, own our own house), we must have a car, we must have a personal computer, and we must have a tablet and/or a smart phone.

Now good reason should tell us that this is all just nonsense – especially if you have spent time in a developing country. How many of you have spent any time in third world countries? Yeah. I have too and I don't know about you but I discovered in that experience that some of the happiest people on the planet are those living on dollars a day.

There is no absolute, universal relationship that exists between how much one has and how fulfilled one can be. In fact, a contrived need for more will insure that one remains un-happy no matter what one has. So it is very much contextual. Our sense of worth and happiness or lack thereof in relation to the things we have or don't have is created by the relentless story that supports the culture in which we live.

It is a story that constantly compares what we have with what most other people around us have. In fact,

It is a story that creates a whole system of haves and have nots.

It is a story predicated on everyone buying into the story.

It is a story that has created an acute crisis for every one of us.

The problem is that instead of questioning the story when we are anxious, or angry, we work harder. We work harder:

- at getting ahead
- at staying ahead
- at worrying about injustices created by the story itself.

We continue to demand that we have and keep those things that our culture tells us make us human. And as good Christians, many of *us* demand justice – that *everyone have* all of those things that our culture tells us makes one valuable as a human being. And if we are unable to get them for ourselves and for others, in spite of our hard work, we become frightened, and even bellicose; we look for *someone* or *something* to blame.

In many ways, it is what got us the president that we now have in the white house. His “Make America Great Again” movement, when you think about it, is really a movement to reinforce the story by imposing the kind of enforced sameness that marked the 1950’s:

- the kind of enforced sameness that created Kroc’s McDonald’s.
- the kind of enforced sameness that views difference as a threat to be dealt with
- the kind of enforced sameness that allowed Jim Crow and lynching to thus flourish in the South.
- the same kind of enforced sameness that forced LGBTQ persons to remain in the closet for fear of their very lives.
- the same kind of enforced sameness that has given rise to a renewed hatred for men and women of color, for immigrants and refugees and once again for LGBTQ folks.

It is finally this forced, bland, sameness that devalues individuality and creativity everywhere, from public school teaching, to the institutional Church.

But there is good news, folks. The Apostle Peter provides us an antidote: establishing an individual inward spiritual standard which is one’s guiding principle.

“Do not fear what others fear,” he warns, “and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.”

The great 18th century Presbyterian minister and theologian, Jonathan Edwards, once remarked, “The problem is that we have learned to fear man instead of God.” Indeed. And I would add that pat answers given by the church *regarding* God are not helpful either.

I continue to keep my hand in doing a bit of psychotherapy on the side even though I have more than enough to do as a pastor to keep me busy. And you want to know why I do it? It is because it puts me in touch with the struggles of non-practicing Christians, people of other faith backgrounds, and even atheists. I am reminded every time I see a non-practicing, “faithless” individual, couple, or family in pain, just how much we good church people live in a bubble. Our bubble is the age old way the Church has always talked about God. Meanwhile, we are surrounded by people of great integrity, suffering from the enforced sameness of our culture, including the Church, in great pain, walking around with gut-wrenching, earthshattering, soul-shaking questions, dying to talk about what really matters to them individually, but feeling like the Church is just one more place of enforced sameness when it comes to approaching God – a place of pat answers for already satisfied souls – and not a place where one is encouraged to search and to doubt and to scour the heavens and the earth for an authentic remedy to their emotional, spiritual and existential angst. I can tell you that we are viewed by these folks, who now make up the majority in our country, as people who don’t have satisfactory answers and are not really interested in struggling with the questions.

We have much to learn from these folks – not least of which is the ability to look deep within our own souls to see what is really there. We need to learn as a church how better to struggle with the reality that is not material, but spiritual in nature. We need to learn how to encourage people to ask and to struggle with how God is uniquely present in the complicated personal circumstances of their world today. And we

need to do it without succumbing to the temptation of simply giving answers in outdated theological language that no longer reaches people where they actually live.

But this is not easy because, among other things, it entails fully accepting the other right where he or she is. Yes, it entails fully accepting the other while holding on to your own deeply held convictions about God. It entails holding on to your own deeply held convictions about God while entertaining something quite different in the other.

Edwin Friedman was a famous rabbi who died in 1996. Among other things, he was a classically trained Freudian analyst who abandoned those teachings in favor of the budding field of marriage and family therapy. He was known to seminarians and therapists alike for his writings in the area. Ed often asked of those to whom he was counseling, “Which do you value more: your relationships or your principles?” (repeat).

In the end it is really a trick question – because it is impossible to have a real relationship if you are willing to abandon your principles in order to be in a relationship. For if I abandon the principles on which my notion of who I am rests, who is it that the other is in a relationship with? It certainly is not me. And if not me, then who or what?

Real relationships are not possible if we lack integrity. And we lack integrity if, in order to be *in* a relationship, we have to abandon our most deeply held principles to feign a kind of forced sameness. So I am not suggesting we abandon our Christian principles for the sake of inclusion. I am suggesting that we hold on to what we have while being willing to value where the other is coming from – to the point where we actually can learn from each other. An example is the way that I preach. I preach the way that I do because I learned from my clients. I learned from them how better to interpret the good news of the gospel to non-churched people. And low and behold, as it turns out, you churched people like it better too. (pause)

So, we lack integrity if we buy into our worth being decided by what the American narrative tells us it is and then treating others the same way. And my non-Christian friends have taught me that we also lack integrity as called sharers of the good news if we simply swallow what the Church narrative tells us without weighing it against our own personal experience – without owning it in such a way that we are able to interpret it authentically to another – in or out of the church. Peter confirms this thought: “Keep your conscience clear,” he says, “so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame.” Peter was referring here as much to established religious leaders at the time as to the civil authorities.

What he is saying is that those who are guided from the inner spiritual principle of Christ’s love never need be intimidated because it makes up the foundation upon which deep, and long-lasting relationships are built. Christ’s spiritual principle of compassion, adopted personally, comes first: it forms the ground of the person, the soil out of which great relationships grow.

Those who follow this inner path of Christ may be misunderstood – even by the institutional church. Certainly, history tells us that such ones have been rarely appreciated by the religious leaders of their day. But those who accept the yoke of Christ are following the path Christ walked – not the outer path, but the inner one.

The outer one is easy – being a loyal churchman or churchwoman. But the inner one is another story – it is hooked up to who we really are down deep. Woven into that is one’s call and one’s way. It is what

makes one unique, different. Therefore, those who accept the path can anticipate opposition even from outwardly professing Christians – especially now in this country, because a move in this direction means accepting a different story – a *living* story as personal truth.

It's the story that we are of infinite value already – not because of what we do or what we produce or what we have. We are valuable and precious and worthy of love because we exist as human beings created in the image of God, and, *and* there is nothing we could ever do to change that. That's it. End of story. To prove it, God sent Jesus – who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself suffering on a cross to demonstrate to us that we are so valuable that God himself is willing to die for us. This is the good news of the gospel.

If you can take that story in – I mean, really take it in and live it, it will change your life. I promise. Because it is a story that once rooted in us, is impossible to keep to ourselves. It is a story that we are compelled to share, not by our words, but by how we are willing to live and yes, even die, for others whether they are the same as us – or not.

Let us pray. Gracious God, we confess that we choose the seductive comfort of sameness over the radical way of grace that marks the way of Jesus and the cross. Help us to take that story in that it may be the founding principle from which we live move and have our being.

And now we ask a blessing on these gifts that we give that they may bring your story of salvation to a hurting world. In Christ's name, we pray, amen.