

“Shared Narratives” – 1Cor 15:1-11 – 5th Sunday After Epiphany

What a mouthful we have in our reading from Paul’s letter to the congregation at Corinth, don’t we? I mean, if you ever wanted a summary of Christianity in about 250 words, this would seem to be it. There’s a great temptation to claim that once this has been read or heard, there is little more to say about the matter – but that would cheat us out of some very rich interpretations and understandings about and in our faith. It would be too easy – and a mistake – to sit back comfortably here almost two thousand years after this was written and take it as polished, complete, a “done deal”, and the final word. Doing that would also horrify Paul, I’m sure.

Again, it is so important to gain a sense and feeling for the context in which these words were written. If you’ve been here for the past three Sundays – and better yet, actually listening to the sermons – you may recall that Paul has just completed a long instruction to the faithful in Corinth on the matter of spiritual gifts and how those gifts are to be used, and why. He will next turn to answer another subject that was troubling the people, namely the difficult subject of resurrection and the questions they were raising – questions such as what did the Lord’s body look like; and what will resurrection mean for us?

Imagine along with me, if you will, Paul sitting at a desk somewhere – I like to think it’s in a room awash in bright Mediterranean sunshine as compared to the dark, brooding pictures painted in dark brooding Europe in the dark and brooding Middle Ages – sitting at a desk in a bright room, chewing on the end of his ball-point pen, contemplating how to bridge the gap between these two subjects, spirituality and resurrection. Apart from the direct questions put to him in the letters from Corinth there seems to be an undercurrent of another question, namely who does he think he is to be telling us how to think, and act, and believe? And so in a dash of inspiration he puts pen to papyrus and begins to write one of the most profound statements of our faith that will in turn inspire millions of faithful across thousands of years. “Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand ...”

And with this declaration Paul indeed does remind them of the story, the narrative of faith attested to by those who were participants in the events. Note that Paul does not first claim authority because of a special encounter with Christ, although having had such an encounter he could do so. Paul does not claim some special authority granted by God to him, but instead identifies his authority as being a relayer of the good news already proclaimed by God in Christ, and told and retold by others. Paul is careful to be explicit about what’s most important – “for I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received...” Indeed we echo that statement of first importance every time we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, as we will again soon this morning: “Christ has died; Christ has risen; Christ will come again.” For Paul the most important thing of all is the narrative, the faith story told and retold, of the death and resurrection of Christ – especially the sequence of appearances to Peter (Cephas), the twelve, a group of five hundred, to James, to all the apostles, and finally almost as an afterthought, to Paul himself.

Along with the story of “what” the narrative includes something even more important – the “why” – that “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.” Moreover that “he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.” With this affirmation Paul points out that this is not a new story – the story of the death and resurrection of Christ is part of the ongoing narrative of the grace of God at work in the world. The narrative of the Christian story is shared with the narrative of the people of Yahweh, a saga as old as time, an ongoing tale of the involvement of God in the lives of people.

Through this narrative Paul links himself with others who have been called to be apostles – those who have been sent out – to proclaim the good news of God’s grace. Through the linking and

sharing of the narratives the community has been broadened to include all those who have proclaimed the story of redemption in Christ. Paul is even explicit about his role being less important than the proclamation, as he concludes, “whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.” It doesn’t matter, he concludes, whether you heard it from me, or from James or Peter or any of the other apostles or from those who were part of the big group. More importantly, it doesn’t matter if you heard the narrative, the story of God’s reconciliation in Christ from someone who heard from someone else who heard from the third cousin of the wife of someone who heard it first-hand – what is ultimately important is that the narrative has been shared, and you have come to believe.

That’s an important lesson for us to recall as we gather not only to worship but to celebrate Communion this morning. As a normal, indeed even required, part of our approach to participating in Holy Communion we profess our faith, we declare what we have come to believe. That profession is made in a standardized way, as we affirm our faith in the words of the Apostle’s Creed, avowing belief in God, Christ and Holy Spirit. Much of what is in that creed echoes Paul’s declarations here in his letter, in particular our understanding of the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection. An important, even if often misunderstood, part of our declaration of faith includes a belief in “the holy catholic Church” – a recognition of the importance of the “shared narratives” in our faith. In this statement of faith we claim that we believe God’s grace is not for us alone in our specific and peculiar branch of the universal (i.e. “catholic”) church, but for all who will share with us the story which was to Paul “of first importance”, namely the death of Christ for our sins and his being raised again as part of the ongoing narrative of salvation from God.

Which raises an interesting side-bar in this piece of Paul’s writing. Not a side-bar for him, because it was an integral part of what he proclaimed, but an interesting note for us. Paul claims that his readers “are being saved” through the good news which they received and in which they stand. We should note carefully the tense he uses ... it is not a past and completed action, i.e. “saved” but a present and ongoing and continuing process of “being saved.” That presents a whole new lens through which to view more fundamentalist perspectives on salvation, doesn’t it?

But what is most important of all to derive from this text is the understanding that the story, the narratives, while echoed by the faithful before us, and by us in turn, and by those yet to come, does not belong to us but has been given by God and is for sharing. This magnificent saga of good news, of the reconciliation with God through the grace of God in Christ, has been shared and is to be shared. We can take our place in the narrative, we can even – and indeed we must – add to the narrative with our own experiences of being greeted by and uplifted by the risen Christ, but the story is not ours to own. It is a shared narrative, shared with us and to be shared by us. Just as with Paul, by the grace of God we are what we are, and it is the grace of God that is within us that will help us to proclaim the story with our words and with our actions and with our lives. It will be by the grace of God that we can include ourselves in Paul’s concluding statement, “whether then it was I or they [or us], so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.”

Let us then as we gather at our Lord’s Table hear the narrative of faith, proclaim the narrative of faith, live the narrative of faith, and share the narrative of faith, through the grace of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.