

A Conspiracy of Love

Sunday, May 1, 2022
The Third Sunday of Easter
The Reverend David Prentice-Hyers

Colossians 3: 12-14

John 21: 12-19

Friends, the stories that we tell matter. And it matters also how we tell them. And today as we look at the news, the unending news of the dark fog of war flowing again over Joe Strummer's "safe European home," I'm reminded of a small Huguenot village, in an out of the way place in France, near the Swiss border, and as the clouds of war rolled over them in the midst of Vichy France in WWII.

They were left alone for a while, tending field and flock, worshiping together, worshiping separately, each in their own way. Practicing simple and radical hospitality – Christian, Jew, children of God all. Welcoming strangers into their homes. Feeding those who needed food from the extra that they had in their pantries.

And the Jewish boarding school in the village continued to accept students from near and far. The Jewish families scattered throughout the village lived in much the same way for a time as they had before.

Yet as that sinister shape of that final solution began to take its form, strangers began to arrive in the village – and disappear. Students and teachers would go for a walk in the woods – and not come back. But wait for the rest of the story.

The pastors would stand in church on a Sunday morning and say: "We have two new Hebrew testaments that have arrived at church this day. Who will be taking them home?"

And this little village on the margin of history, in an out-of-the-way place, began to conspire – a conspiracy of love.

See, they were simply taken in, two by two, three by three, the young, the old, French, German, Polish, families, single, it didn't matter. ALL TAKEN IN without pomp, or circumstance, or question.

Some would receive new names and new documents, and there was a cottage industry underneath the church, forging documents, and they would head east, into Switzerland to begin new lives. But others stayed.

And even as the Germans moved in and took over all of France, others stayed. Even after the Pastors were arrested and taken away, others stayed, because many more kept arriving and disappearing into the town, disappearing into grace.

And it formed a pattern of partnership.

There weren't any hero Christians or victimized Jewish families in that sense. It's not a story of triumphant Christianity. No, it's a story of all the children of God conspiring together in love, clothing themselves again and again with compassion, and rejecting fear, and rejecting hate. A conspiracy of love – of people clothed with compassion.

One young man years later returned to the village in his thirties, with questions. He was looking to understand who he was and where he had come from. And he noses around, and he can't quite find the home that he was living in when he was there before, with no name of his own and no identity. Yet on the last day as the sun began to set, he found the family that had housed him through that long darkness. They sat down in front of a simple meal and not so simple stories. And after trading all these tales of half-remembered meals and long sought after hopes, he gets around to the question that's on his lips, and the question that's in his heart:

Why?

Why did you take us in?

Why did you risk all for us?

The stories, friends, that we tell matter. And the way that we tell them matters as well. And so around a holy table that was neither a Seder dinner nor a sacred supper, they share a moment of grace and holiness. They turned to the heart of the matter. This conspiracy in a love filled with hate.

And the mother simply says, "We never thought about it, it is simply what one does." And a neighbor piped in and says "Are we not taught... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul, and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. And if these, she says, were not our neighbors – if you were not our neighbor, then who is?"

Now when France was liberated by the allied forces, it was discovered that in this small, out-of-the-way village on the margins of history, made up of 5000 normal everyday folk, there were 5000 more men, women and children living among them, surviving that long passage through the holocaust. One guest, one friend, one new family member for every person in that village.

That young man ends up making a film about this story and, in his wisdom he says, "Telling this story isn't to deny or lessen the terrible darkness of evil or the complexity of the Holocaust. Rather, he said telling this story is to hold on to the good, to cling to it with every last scrap of effort so as to be able to even gaze, even gaze into such persistent darkness."

Friends, the stories that we tell matter. And how we tell them matters sometimes almost as much.

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So each Sunday for many years, you have gathered here as I have gathered for the last few years in Troon, telling again that old, old story. And when we tell the story at its best, and clothed ourselves with compassion and bring forth that truth inscribed within us, deeper than anything that is wrong, we're brought into that Christ-wrought place, that neither time, nor space, nor any created thing than can touch. This place that says that your identity is not equivalent to your biography or biology or geography. That no matter who you love, or how you worship – you are a child a God. And you bear within you the very DNA of grace.

As the Irish poet wrote, “there is a space and a place within you, where you have never been wounded. There is a still sureness in you where there is a seamlessness, where there is a confidence and tranquility in you.” And as we learn to tell the old, old story, as we learn to tell the story, keeping in mind this image inscribed upon our DNA, we cloth ourselves with a deeper kind of compassion. A more durative love.

Friends, we have a story to tell, and how we tell it matters.

And the question ever before us: is it coming from that God-wrought place? Is it borne out in the truth of our lives, and the truth of God's love? Is ours a story clothed with compassion, holding on to what is good? A story of love that we must cling to with every last scrap of effort, that we will say again and again into the darkness, into the despair, into a culture with weaponized faith and trivialized theology?

See what love God's has for us, that we, all of us, might be called children of God. For that is what we are. We must cling with every last scrap of our effort, because the way ahead will not look like what is behind.

Yet at the same time we know that the days are not yet gone, when we must ask again and again, “If these are not our neighbors, then who is?”

Hallelujah, Amen