

**NOW AND EVER: HEALING THE DIVIDE; LUKE 21:5-19; 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-13; 11.17.2019; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

I had the pleasure of reconnecting with some high school classmates last Friday in Pittsburgh. About twenty-five of us gather each year at a restaurant in the township where we lived and went to high school.

This time, a friend I had not seen in years showed up. He went off to Princeton Seminary, earned a doctorate in biblical studies for which he had to be proficient in three modern and four ancient languages, and he has taught at Gettysburg College for the past thirty years. He is a brilliant scholar and served on the ecumenical team that produced the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

He reminded me we used to debate whose car was better: his 1960 Corvette or my 1958 Porsche. Then he told a story I'd forgotten how he drove to the mall one day, parked his car in the parking lot, and when he came back couldn't find it. He decided he came out the wrong door then searched all the parking lots for his car. Finally, unable to locate his car, he asked the shopping mall security cop if anyone had reported a "missing car." With an incredulous look the officer suggested to my friend his missing car sounded suspiciously like a stolen car. We lived a sheltered suburban life; it didn't occur to my friend that we had thieves in our neighborhood. What was illogical is how anyone but he would know his car was missing. This intelligent person was blinded by his perception of our community.

I share that story to illustrate what is going on in today's Gospel, epistle and in our nation right now. Then to consider what this means for our ministry for which we are now in the midst of two campaigns: annual giving and capital and mission.

Luke is writing his gospel a generation *after* the destruction of the Second Temple during the Maccabee rebellion. Paul is writing to the Thessalonians *even earlier* when many in the church still believed that Jesus would soon return.

Luke and Paul are addressing Christian communities that struggled, like my high school friend when he walked into the parking lot and did not see his car, with how to interpret the signs of the times. Is Jesus coming back like he said he would? Why is it taking him so long? What if he doesn't come back in our lifetime? What are we supposed to do until he does?

Bear with me for just a moment. Because we humans are averse to chaos and need to have order in the world, in *our worlds*, we buy into narratives that account for the events going on around us. In fact, during times of disruption in society, new narratives emerge and compete with old narratives to explain what is happening. The more people buy into a given narrative the more power and influence that narrative will have to shape the direction of a community or even a nation.

When my friend noticed his car was missing, he could not conceive anyone would be so criminal as to steal his car. Thieves and crime were not on our radar in Mt. Lebanon, PA in 1967. Yet, discovering that his car was stolen caused him to exchange his old narrative for the way the world works, for a new narrative.

When Jesus did not return, some in Thessalonica thought his second coming was imminent. They quit their jobs and ceased to carry out daily responsibilities; yet, others said it was time to move on in his absence by redoubling their efforts to live every day the way he taught us to.

You see, Paul helped the church pull out of a tailspin that would have led to its irrelevance and disappearance from history if it withdrew from society; he tells the church in Thessalonica that since all we have is the promise of Jesus' return, and not a date, we must, in the meantime, live and minister in the present, as Jesus' devoted followers.

You can almost hear Paul saying, "We don't have all the details we might wish we had, but we are a Christian community and we have a mandate to contribute to the betterment of society." It may not seem like a big deal 21 centuries later but it was a full-blown identity crisis in the primitive church.

Paul's voice helped the early Christian movement go forward and embrace a ministry of evangelism, social justice and outreach to the poor, that, in turn, enabled the rapid spread of the church throughout the world.

Consider Luke's narrative: his Jesus warns of apocalyptic events that will precede the end of time. Luke is telling the story of Jesus not long after the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. To have his Jesus predicting that the Temple would be destroyed fits the history his congregation has already witnessed.

Luke links Jesus' ministry to the Temple; Jesus challenges its corruption and pretentiousness when the disciples' are mesmerized by its beauty much like we might be, seeing Liberty Tower in NYC for the first time; but Jesus warns them not to be deceived; God's people are called to live righteous and just lives not merely admire pretty temples, practice empty rituals, and follow false teachings.

This narrative resonated with the young church as it broke away from its Jewish moorings. When Luke's Jesus predicts there will be suffering and hardship, these new Christians take comfort in a story or narrative that explains why they are going through such a difficult time.

Fast forward with me. Protestants and Catholics had different narratives to explain the Reformation; the north and south had differing narratives to explain the Civil War; Republicans and Democrats have different stories to explain what is happening today.

Given the events of the past week in Washington DC; the world-wide refugee crisis; climate change; and our own national battles from health care to wealth disparity; to the obstacles people of color face in achieving quality of life, various narratives or world views are competing at present.

David Brooks writes that the old story of one dominant, single American mainstream culture and religion with several minority groups is being replaced by a plurality of minority groups with no one group being dominant. There is no white majority in our kindergartens and soon there will be no white majority in our society; the national ruling class has lost legitimacy. Social trust is strongest at the local level which grows more polarized from one another. Politically, we're in an age of extremes.

It could all blow us to smithereens, Brooks writes. Or, we could adopt a new narrative. He cites the Jews sent into exile and how their prophets advised them to build houses, plant vineyards, and seek the peace and welfare of the new land in which they settled.

Keep your identity without imposing it on everyone else, Brooks says; build a rich moral community; co-exist with other tribes; work for the common good.

200 years ago Alexis de Toqueville said our young democracy was creating a new man, an American; today pluralism is creating a new person, Brooks observes.

The extremes we are witnessing right now make the old narrative of our nation look like an outdated suit of clothes.

We've always been a universal nation, a crossroads nation – give me your huddled masses the Statue of Liberty proclaims – we've been a nation whose very identity is defined by the fact that we are a hub for a dense network of minorities and subgroups, and the distinct way of life they fashion to interact and flourish together. And we are the most diverse nation in the world. Buffalo alone has fifty languages.

Here's the intriguing question David Brooks poses: What if America did not have to find a new unifying national narrative? What if *not having a single national narrative* will become our national narrative?

This past Thursday night at Kleinhans Music Hall some of us witnessed a compelling incarnation of one new person our pluralistic society is creating and her search for a narrative that will address the immigration crisis on our southern border.

Valeria Luiselli, the 36 year-old Mexican born, award winning novelist, essayist, and MacArthur Prize winner lectured to a thousand people about her passion for writing and her vision for bringing a new, just nation and world into being. Her life has been shaped since childhood, and the themes of her writing deal with: displaced people and modern diasporas; with land and who gets to tell and then curate the narrative of the land; and with who gets to live in the land and have names and who remains nameless.

Luiselli did not so much offer a new narrative for the times as she shared human stories from her work translating in court for the children separated from their families living in detention centers and her work teaching creative writing to those children – which is what she does as a professor at Bard College. Luiselli urged us to be aware, to take notes, to communicate the suffering we see in our polarized nation. She said she doesn't know what to do but silence is not an option; so she documents and writes fiction and essays that put a face on those who suffer. She hopes her teaching the children to write will unleash a new generation of storytellers who will speak to the better angels of our national soul.

We have been a crossroads nation for others, as Brooks says, but we now seem to be a crossroads nation for ourselves – all of us are immigrants to a new land, a place we do not fully recognize. Who are we? Where are we going? What are we becoming? These are questions that haunt us with every new breaking news report from the White House and every late-night satire of our present leadership.

Yet, we are aware like never before that whole swaths of the population swoon to a different narrative of America. And that is good David Brooks says, or can be good if both sides or all sides agree to respect one another's stories. Some of us have enjoyed progressive policies of the past sixty years others feel passed by and overlooked by those very same policies. Their story is different.

We need to listen, to understand the stories they tell. Our willingness to listen or not, and to include those whose story is different than ours or not will prepare us to embrace a new national story or stories that will heal us as a nation or not. So, while we may not have all the answers or even any new compelling narrative given the present unfolding drama of our national journey, we must be alert, listen, and respect new narratives.

Two last comments: first, let us not be deceived. Jesus and Paul warned of false teachers and prophets; wolves in sheep's clothing. Just because someone has a different story or narrative does not mean that it is truthful. If it is the story of a false teacher or prophet it is designed to engineer some personal, tribal gain that will protect or lead to domination over others. Yet, these stories will be told in ways that deceive the listeners into thinking that the storyteller is their friend, advocate, even their savior.

That such false teachers and prophets are among us is in little doubt. Perhaps the best antidote to the aims of such persons is to resist any effort to consolidate power into the hands of a few. The democracy that de Toqueville said was making a new nation and new people is equipped to resist the wielding of power by lone individuals or single branches or offices of government.

And the pluralism that holds the promise of a diverse, multifaceted culture and land goes hand in hand with a system of government that locates power among several instead of a few. This system of governance depends on cooperation, inclusion, and trust. It is called "the public trust" and it is not a nebulous, ethereal thing but the very glue that holds this nation, this experiment in pluralistic democracy together.

Second and finally, what is Westminster's role in this volatile, polarized time? What are we doing holding two campaigns one for the annual operation of our mission and ministry and the other for long-term sustainability of our physical campus as well as the long-term sustainability of our reason for being here – mission to all of God's children.

Now & Ever is not just about raising dollars. It is about preserving this community whose purpose is to practice biblical hospitality for all people – especially 'the other' and 'the stranger'. It is about listening to and lifting up the stories of others that have not been heard or respected – like Muslims in Kashmir to whom we gave this space two weeks ago to tell their story and gathered with them to listen and send a clear message that we value them and their presence in Western New York as our neighbors.

Let us not deceive ourselves. To perform the role of convener, listener, healer, bridge-builder with the unique blend of traditional worship and progressive values we enjoy, in this *beautiful* space takes money. To keep our ministries to children and youth, to share this campus with the many groups and nonprofits who meet here, to be a gathering place for all religions, to form partnerships with our East Side neighbors, to offer the best music and learn the new songs God calls us to sing – all of it comes at a significant and rising cost. The question is what would be the cost to our city and region, to us personally, and to a nation currently at the crossroads of not funding or even partially funding these ministries?

Westminster's strength over the years is our trust in the overarching meta-narrative Jesus devoted his life to: the Kingdom of God. It is the sense that holiness, goodness, beauty are as close as breathing and crying out to be born within us and within the world. It is where our best dreams and truest prayers come from. It is a place where no one is a stranger, all are welcome and every struggle for justice and dignity is honored.

It is Isaiah's holy mountain, Abraham's tent of peace and welcome regardless of race, religion or no religion, age, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

That's what we're here to do; that's what we aim to build; that's the work, I am proud to say, it takes two campaigns to sustain. Amen.