Malcolm Clemens Young 2 Sam 7:1-14a

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y27 Psalm 89:20-37

9 Pentecost (Proper 11B) 8:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. Ephesians 2:11-22

Sunday 22 July 2018 Added Feeding to Gospel 6:35-44 Mark 6:30-44, 53-56

**Our Favorite Fictional Character**

*“[Y]ou who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace…”* (Eph. 2).

1. Each of us is our own favorite fictional character in a story that we tell about ourselves every minute of our lives. We find this drama endlessly interesting. The story we tell inside our hearts may be preventing us from reaching our potential. It could be destroying us, or it might be the only thing keeping us alive. That interior monologue may so fill us with joy that it transforms the lives of all those around us.[[1]](#endnote-1)

This week my wife Heidi gave me an early anniversary gift. She put together a thick binder with 125 letters I wrote during our courtship. They opened a window into the inner stories I told my twenty-three year old self. Back then I worried about whether I was the intellectual equal of my fellow classmates. I doubted that I would ever be able to support my family and most of all I dwelled on my parents’ opinions of me.

We spend an enormous amount of energy trying to prove that the story we tell ourselves is an accurate one. We want others to believe it and frankly we want our story to be right. Still the philosopher Martha Nussbaum says that, “we love made-up people, people we have made up to be the people we can love.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

To be human means to be always in danger of creating an idyll. That is, a private and constructed reality, over and against the common social world that surrounds us. My friend and teacher Margaret Miles described her parent’s Christian fundamentalism as, “a private, carefully sheltered, unrealistic and frayed idyll.” She writes that because of all the commonsense assumptions of our shared social world, it takes incredible strength to sustain an idyll. Idylls tend to collapse not because they are illusory, but because they require an enormous amount of energy to maintain.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Sometimes what seems most real isn’t. Over the past two years many of us have begun to answer the personal question, “how are you?” with a report on what the politicians are doing. Collectively we have been contributing to a shared dys-idyll nightmare which reinforces the sense that the only thing that matters happens in Washington, DC.

Perhaps the simplest definition of a Christian is a person who agrees to have her story corrected through the presence of the living Christ and the church. Prayer extracts us from the grips of our own idyll and brings us back to reality. Prayer gives us the chance to step back from this fictional character who claims all our attention so that we can see other people as children of God.

2. Our Gospel today reports on outer events that give us a picture of what might be happening in the hearts of Jesus’ disciples. You may have noticed that verses have been excerpted out of the reading in order to fit a regular worship service. I will try to fill in what we missed (and encourage you to read them at home).

The narrative begins at a high point. After having been sent out in twos Jesus’ friends have met with remarkable success. We do not have many opportunities to see them at work apart from Jesus. They have been healing and teaching with great success and probably relish telling him their stories.

He recognizes their need for rest so they try to withdraw to a “deserted place by themselves” (Mk. 6). But the crowds follow them wherever they go. They do not even have time to eat. Rather than feeling frustrated Jesus has compassion on them, “because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” The Greek word for feeling compassion, splagxnizomai means the kind of love that grabs in the guts.

Jesus simply loves these sheep and so he asks his disciples to help feed them. Even after their great successes they respond with sarcasm. “Are we… to buy two hundred denarii worth of bread?” After the five thousand have been fed and twelve baskets of leftovers have been collected Jesus leaves everyone to pray on a mountain alone.

He rejoins the terrified disciples on a boat in the midst of a great storm. In the calm that follows the disciples, “were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (Mk. 6). Then Jesus returns to healing the people of Gennesaret.

A story that began with triumph and success collapses into misunderstanding and fear. Rather than working with Jesus for the sake of God’s Realm the disciples step back into passivity and fear as they watch him work alone. He has been teaching, but they seem incapable of learning. Despite the abundance, the healing, and being saved from the storm their interior monologue resists being changed.

3. Karl Barth. Some of you remember that I have been systematically studying the life work of Karl Barth (1886-1968) a twentieth century Swiss Reformed Theologian. Between the end of World War I and his death in the 1960’s Barth wrote an incomplete thirteen volume, 9,000 page systematic approach to theological knowledge.

My primary advisors and teachers were shaped through their opposition to Barth’s ideas. My dream is that by really understanding his perspective, I will be better informed in what I believe and teach. I should mention that I have not yet met a single person who thinks this is a good idea. Finishing the fourth volume (CD II.2) I want to report on my progress.

As a Reformed theologian following in the footsteps of John Calvin, Barth values God’s sovereignty above everything else. God creates, sustains and redeems us. God, “governs and determines everything.”[[4]](#endnote-4) We have no power to compel God. God can never owe us. Furthermore we have not learned to say the word “God” correctly if we speak only in abstractions as if we can stop being totally dependent on God.

For centuries reformed theologians argued that God had chosen and set apart some people from before the beginning of the world, and then they agonized over those left out of the divine plan. Karl Barth seems to have a different idea in mind. He writes that the whole gospel is about election. Jesus does not leave people out so predestination, “is not a mixed message of joy and terror, salvation and damnation,” but rather “a proclamation of joy.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

This “love of God is His grace… It is love which is overflowing, free, unconstrained, unconditioned… It is love which is patient, not consuming the other but giving it place.”[[6]](#endnote-6) For Barth, the world was created not so that we would be God’s slaves but because God desires to be the “companion of [each person]. Against our No [God] places his own Nevertheless… the creature’s opposition to [God’s] love cannot be any obstacle to [God].”[[7]](#endnote-7)

We are not disinterested spectators. God’s love is not abstract, not something that we deduce from the laws of physics, but individual and personal. No believer should ever regard another’s example of unbelief as permanent.[[8]](#endnote-8) Faithful people need to constantly proclaim in personal terms that those in our lives are “not rejected” by God.[[9]](#endnote-9) Jesus is the only one chosen by God, but through him all creation is made free.

Barth goes as far as to say that even Judas, the one who rejected Jesus and conspired with those who arrested him, never stopped being an apostle. We are like the disciples who experience such great things and repeatedly hear Jesus’ teaching, only through fear to fall short in understanding and faith. God’s abundance and grace is for us as it was for them.

4. Study Hall. A while ago a friend of mine named James and I were discussing Julian Barnes novel, *The Sense of an Ending*. We talked about going back to the people we knew in our youth and seeing things through our adult eyes. He told me this story.

In high school study hall James met a boy who mostly kept to himself. But when the two of them started talking about music, books and philosophy it almost felt like time stopped. They became close. One Friday James gave his friend the John Knowles novel *A Separate Peace* and inscribed it inside the front cover.

The next Monday his friend approached him to talk, “My parents said that we can’t be friends.” And that was it. They didn’t speak again, until twenty years later when circumstances brought them together. At that time James first visited his now adult friend’s house. It was as if nothing had changed. In fact the friend’s wife kept repeating how great it was to meet someone who meant so much to her husband and that he frequently talked about his high school friend James.

So what happened back then? James always thought it was because he was African American. I wondered if the parents thought the boys were romantically interested in each other. But it was for neither reason. Last week I talked about how vulnerable children are. The friend’s parents had been in the process of splitting up. They didn’t want anyone to know and so they kept James’ friend isolated during his high school years. Only recently did James realize what his small kindness really meant. Sometimes it takes half our life for our story to be made true.

The Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes, “I circle around God, around the primordial tower. / I’ve been circling for thousands of years / and I still don’t know: am I a falcon, / a storm, or a great song?”[[10]](#endnote-10) We too circle God sometimes drawing closer to the truth in the great song of our prayer. What is your story? What do you tell yourself about the fictional character that is you?

Our story and the story of every unbeliever is not final. The disciples of Jesus hardened their hearts and resisted but ultimately God won them over. They rediscovered their power in the hope of Jesus’ message. Likewise let your story of reconciliation and forgiveness and above all your joy transform everyone you meet.

1. Margaret Ruth Miles, *Augustine and the Fundamentalist’s Daughter* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011) 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Margaret recommended this book to me so many years ago and it continues to influence my understanding of emotions and reason. Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992) 326. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Margaret Ruth Miles, *Augustine and the Fundamentalist’s Daughter* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011) 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.2* *The Doctrine of God* tr. Bromiley, Campbell, Wilson, McNab, Knight, Stewart (NY: T&T Clarke, 1957) 7, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 327. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 322. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Rainer Maria Rilke, “Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen,” *Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* tr. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (NY: Riverhead Books, 1996) 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)