

**“We Are What We Tell”**  
**Jeremiah 2:4-13, Luke 14:1, 7-14**  
**August 28, 2016**  
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

What was your family like when you were growing up? What comes to mind? What do you think of when I ask that? I think of many things: the four kids my parents raised, the houses we lived in, the camping trips we took in the Colorado mountains, the vacations to visit our grandparents in Michigan or Saskatchewan, the dogs we had with us, the trouble the kids got into, the Christmases we shared.

What was your family like? When I ask that, do you think of the things you owned? Do you think of the furniture that was in the living room or the silver that was locked away in the cabinet? Do you think of the cars you had and whether they were better than the neighbors? Do you think of the toys you had or the fun you had playing? Are we what we possess? Or are we what we tell? When you think of your family, what stories do you tell? It may be that one of the great myths of Western culture is that we are defined by what we possess. Is that who we are?

In a way, that's the problem that Jeremiah confronts with his people. Who are they? What defines them as a people? Jeremiah wants them to remember that they are the people that God delivered out of slavery in Egypt, that he led them through the wilderness to God's mountain in the Sinai and there he made a covenant with them, that he would be their God and they would be his people. And somewhere along the way, they forgot that. They stopped telling that story to their children, their priests stopped teaching that story in the Temple, they no longer tell those stories in worship. But we are not what we own, we are what we tell. It is our stories that define us. And Jeremiah laments that the people no longer remember the stories that made them into the people of Israel, that made them God's people. They instead are concerned with what they own, with being powerful, with being safe, being mightier than the nations around them, and as Luke's parable teaches, it is those who exalt themselves who will be humbled and the humble will be exalted.

What about us? What stories do we tell? What stories do we tell in church? Like the people of Israel,

aren't we defined by the gracious, mighty acts of God? Every time we baptize someone, everytime we say the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving before Communion, we retell the story, we talk about how God has delivered us from darkness to light, from slavery to freedom, from death to life. But are we listening? Do we enact that story in how we live out our lives in this church? When someone asks us about our church, what do we say?

“We're the oldest church in Kalamazoo County, founded in 1831.”

“We have a wonderful old building, built in 1861 and you can still sit in the original pews.”

What stories do we tell about our church? Like the people of Israel, haven't we been blessed by God? How do we tell people about that? That we are more than what we possess. Is our story one of what we have? Or one about God's grace? What story would you tell about our church?

A few weeks ago near the end of the service, during the offering I think, a young man whom I assume was homeless came in through the narthex doors and sat in the last pew. He sat there through the rest of the service, confused look on his face, not really following along, but sitting there quietly. As worship ended, as is usual, I walked down the aisle to the narthex, passing him on my left. As Larry played the postlude I noticed several members getting up and going over to him to speak to him, to shake his hand, to welcome him to church. Eventually he stood up and came back to where I was standing, so I went up to him and extended my hand and said, “Hello, welcome, my name is Mark.” And he didn't say anything but put out his hand. So I said, “We're glad you've come, how are you?” In a quiet voice, he said, “Fine.” Again I said, “My name is Mark, what's yours?” And he said, “Fa'ad.” “Thanks for coming, Fa'ad. Is there anything we can do for you.” I was expecting him to ask for money or for food, but he surprised me when he said, “Do you have a Bible I could have?” What can you say to that, right? I said, “Of course,” and just grabbed one of the Bible out of the nearest pew and gave it to him. “Here, we're happy for you to have this one.” And he said “Thank you,” and walked away. I asked him to come again and the door closed behind him. And that was it. Maybe five minutes. But Andy Alspach was watching all this happen and with a sly grin he came up to me and

said, “You're serious when you say that we welcome anyone, aren't you?” I smiled and said, “you bet.” But that wasn't quite the end of it, because Andy must have gone home and said something about it to his family. Because Jack, who's nine years old, said, “That's one of the big reasons this is our church. Because we don't just say anyone is welcome—we mean it.” I hope we do. I hope there are a lot more of those kind of stories. I'm sure there are plenty of times in which we have failed to be welcoming or open or gracious. But I hope the stories we tell can be ones like this. Because we are what we tell, we are the stories we tell our children, these stories make us who we are. Because we have been blessed by God in so many ways, we are called to be a blessing to others, to Fa'ad, to all those visitors who came to Bible School and didn't expect to get fed each night they were here, to those youth who couldn't afford to go on a mission trip but because of you they got to go anyway. We've been blessed, blessed to be a blessing.

I hope those are the stories we tell because when we look around us at the Lord's table, we realize that we are here only because of God's grace to each one of us. That's the story that Jesus tells about the banquet.

In his book "[Union with Christ](#)," J. Todd Billings writes about the "Eucharistic gospel" and "Eucharistic table manners." He details the history of communion policies in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRC). The policy for many years was, "for the Lord's Supper to be administered 'without distinction of colour.'" However, due to the request of a group of white members, in 1857 an exception was made in order to accommodate "the weakness of some." The weaker ones being the white members requesting separate communion between whites and blacks. This "pastoral exception" became common practice. Then, according to Billings, the common practice "eventually developed into an elaborate theology that sought to ground the separation of the races in creation." This elaborate theology led to the DRC supporting apartheid. This is a scary trajectory that grew from who was and who wasn't at the table.

Jesus notices who is at the banquet and who is missing. Do we?

Billings continues the story of Eucharistic table manners in South Africa through the story of the "koinonia" ministry started by a South African DRC pastor, Nico Smith. People of different races from different parts of the city gathered together in one another's homes and shared a meal. Nico Smith noticed who wasn't in the room and he invited everyone to come to the table together. Billings describes the impact, "In a quite profound way, this sharing of bread and of lives became a force in anti-apartheid movement, helping to break down the cultural stereotypes and barriers that divided."<sup>1</sup>

There are profound and powerful implications to watching closely, noticing who is in the room, around the table, who is served and who is serving, who is eating and who is hungry, who is missing and who has the power to control the guest list. What we notice, or not, impacts our witness to the One who always sees those most in need of compassion.

Remembering that we are only here because of God's grace, when we tell our story, at least let it be a story that says everyone's welcome, each person is valued.

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<sup>1</sup> Billings, J. Todd. *Union with Christ*.