

Nameless' Story

Hebrews 11:1-13

In his book “The Homilectical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form,” Dr. Eugene Lowry makes the case that while the conventional rules of writing and delivering a speech are well and good for an intro to public speaking class they’re not so good for a sermon. In fact, as his book title suggests, a good sermon has more in common with a story, a narrative, than a simple speech. So today I have a story for you. Just to be fair I will warn you that this story is essentially Creative NonFiction. It uses creative aspects, even some poetics, but it is one person’s truth. Like every story it has its share of conflicts or as Dr. Lowry calls it the “itch” that needs to be scratched. It is the story of a man who, for the purposes of today’s sermon, shall be known only as Nameless. So this really is Nameless’ Story.

I won’t tell you that Nameless had been a Boy Scout (Life Rank, just a step below Eagle). I won’t tell you that there was abuse from a member of the extended family. I won’t tell you he played in marching and concert band and sang in the school choir. I won’t tell you that he twice attempted suicide because his sexual orientation isn’t heterosexual. I won’t tell you that Nameless had been a county 4-H All-Star. I won’t tell you that he was sent away by his father for his own safety. I won’t tell you that he played piano for his church. I won’t tell you that he did okay in school, could have worked harder. I won’t tell you that you can’t walk through those kinds of darkness and not have tatters of shadows cling to you.

So Nameless was, well... scum. I know, that’s not a very nice thing to say, but it’s true. He was scum, riffraff, bad news, a waste of perfectly good oxygen. What else would we call a homeless, drug addicted, drug dealing, prostitute (yes, you heard correctly), who lived in a shelter sleeping on a dirty, thin, blue pad each night? Naturally, there are details, but they are not fit to publicly decry, particularly in a church.

So we'll just say this was not a good man. He was just another nameless dirt bag. What do you do with Nameless? Toss him out with the weekly trash? Have faith and trust that faith can be rewarded?

In today's scripture that _____ read we are given a definition of faith right there in verse one: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The epistle to the Hebrews was, according to most scholars, written for Christians of Jewish origin. To me, as I read through this book, this passage calls out to these Christians to hold tight to faith in Jesus Christ and not to surrender that faith. Were they losing faith? Being tempted to conform to the kingdoms of the world? I don't know. I'm not a biblical scholar so I don't have that answer for you.

What I can tell you, and it is a cliché, is that faith can be a hard thing. Think about our ministry to the Jesus Center, Torres Shelter, 6th Street Center for Youth, or the Chico Community food locker. We don't have any cost-benefit analyses, or sociological pre- and post-tests measuring delta rates of positive changes in the lives of these people we serve. We don't do long term studies to determine what happens to the people we serve over 5-, 10-, 20-years. I imagine sometimes we don't even know the names of the people we serve... Our scripture passage today ends with "All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them."

We're given the example of Noah. Noah, on a probably sunny day like today, calls his household together and tells them "okay folks, God just warned me he's gonna destroy the world in a flood. Time to build an ark." You can probably imagine the disbelief of this household. You can almost see one of his kids lean towards another and say "pay up, I told you he was going crazy." Yet, they had faith in Noah, and Noah had faith in what God had called him to do. Noah didn't need meteorological forecasts or satellite imaging to get him moving. That faith, that conviction in things not seen, was sufficient. His household might have

had doubts, maybe even thought he was crazy, but imagine the relief they would have felt when the flood came. Faith rewarded.

So when we started today I gave this imperfect character of ours the name Nameless. Now I am well aware that many of you asked yourselves the question “Why Nameless?” The answer is simple: he had no name. Just another face in a line to get food, just another pretty face for rent, just a case number in a file somewhere for grant reporting, just a medical chart and an interesting case of dual diagnosis, that is having a mental illness and being an addict, just another person deemed worthy of the world of being swept under a rug. Nameless, stripped of this basic bit of humanity. The saddest thing of all was that he began to believe it too – a mere shadow of a person.

Now Nameless was staying at a shelter. It operated as both a day and night shelter, and offered three, well, somethings a day. The general philosophy was “don’t cause any trouble and you are welcome here” without regard to substances, mental or physical illness. Though, as you can imagine the police had been there several times. Picking up, dropping off, sometimes a couple of squad cars were in the alley with someone being drug out and someone going in. In short it was an alright place to be comfortably homeless – even if the hope was that the thin, blue pad you got for the night wasn’t too dirty. But it was a start.

But there was another space that helped change Nameless too; they are now called Lifegate Church. They pick up folks from the shelter, take them to the church, and “provide them with a hot breakfast, warm shower, clean clothes, and an opportunity to hear about the love of Jesus.” Nameless was one of those people. Besides waffles, sausage, eggs, bacon, and toast sounds a lot better than the shelter’s Sunday morning offering of lukewarm oatmeal served with raisins better suited to be slingshot ammunition than for human consumption. Lifegate Church never knew what happened to Nameless. But they helped keep him alive and showed him that life doesn’t always have to be a desperate

struggle for survival or the next... whatever. The road may be long and hard, but this other road was a far better path than the one he was on. Mind you this was no “Paul on the road to Damascus,” no blinding light of revelation from heaven, but rather an incremental change. Was their faith rewarded?

Then we have Abraham and Sarah. Here is a couple that has been promised that, if they remain faithful, a great nation will be founded by their lineage... even though they didn't even have a son... yet. We know that story. Sarah eventually conceives and gives birth to Isaac. But Abraham and Sarah are also told that they will go into a strange land and live in tents – kind of a “sorry, I know you love your house but God's promise or...” Now, some of you are, or have been, partnered or married, so you can probably imagine how *that* conversation went down. Honey, don't bother to pack the good china. WHAT?! Do you know how much we paid for that? Sweetheart, there's only so much room on the camels, we need to leave, insert valued object here, then add that stony silence. Yet, with the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction in this great unseen promise, they did just that. They died in faith having never received the promise. They never got to see the nation of Israel rise. Never to know the names of kings such as Solomon and David. Never to know that from David's line would come, not just a king of Israel, but the King of the World. Faith rewarded.

Now, according to Dr. Lowry we have one final itch to scratch, and you all know it. [What happened to Nameless?] What happened. In this case I am fortunate enough to have that information. I've been given 20 minutes and we're rapidly running out of time, but, if you want to know, it comes with a price. One, the understanding that the “resolution” of this story is not as quick and easy as presented today. Two, that this has been the story of one nameless person, so remember there are thousands nameless across our country, across our world. Can we agree

to that? [Yes] Good. Then as the late Paul Harvey would say, here's the rest of the story.

It was through another act of faith, this time by the Catholic Ladies Relief Society, that a bus ticket was purchased. It was before dawn, when the sky is that gun metal grey that stands between darkness and light, that that bus pulled out of El Paso, TX. As it merged west onto I-15 the morning sun broke the eastern horizon casting the shadow of that bus in front of it. In his heart Nameless prayed, prayed to the God of his childhood, to any God that cared to listen, a prayer that he couldn't put into words: "please, please, please let the shadows before me never be as dark as the ones I leave behind."

And so he ran. Ran all the way back to a loving family and a ranch in rural northern California. Eventually those wings healed so he tried this thing called life again. Moved to a nearby city, you may have heard of it, it's called Chico. Even went back to school. But he had a name again, one that would never be lost or surrendered again. And wait... I think... yeah, it's the same on that's on this name badge. Faith rewarded?