

“Ongoing Conversion in New Life”

Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Psalms 37:1-11, 39-40

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

Luke 6:27-38

It is true that we drink from our own wells. Yes, with what you fill your life becomes what nourishes you. So, if I read the Bible, pray, engage in life-long learning, attend worship, participate in a connect group, give from my life's wallet and serve others, I am filling my life with things that pertain to God. I'm filling my life with God's story. Thus, when I need a drink of God to sustain me, which I always do, the well is full. Think of the things with which you fill your life. What's in your well? The world's story/ God's story? Some of each?

Brian Christopher Coulter, the pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Fort Worth, Texas, challenges us on this Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, to understand this reality of being a Christian, “Give, get. Forgive, forgiven. Don't judge or condemn so that you don't get judged or condemned.”¹ I like Coulter's thinking here. It can really be summed up, “What you do to others will be done to you.” And it all hinges on which story informs your story the most. The world's, or God's.

Hassan John, a Christian pastor from Jos, Nigeria, is regarded as an “infidel” by Muslim extremist Boko Haram insurgents and has a price on his head of 150,000 Naira (about 800 American dollars). He goes to his church each day not knowing whether someone will murder him in order to claim the price on his head. As an Anglican pastor and as a part-time journalist for CNN, the 52-year-old Hassan has often been surrounded by violence and bloodshed in northeast Nigeria. He's seen friends shot dead or injured in front of his eyes. As a reporter, he has often rushed to the scene immediately after bombings. He has narrowly escaped death himself. Hassan said, “You see it again and again and again. You get to places where a

¹Brian Christopher Coulter in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, digital, “Looking into the lectionary,” February 14, 2022.

bomb [planted by Muslim extremists] has just exploded. There are bodies all over the place. You visit people in the hospital. You go back and meet families, you cry with them, you console them, you do the best you can with them all the time.” But this violence and hatred has not stopped him from reaching out to his Muslim neighbors who need Christ. After he helped a small Muslim girl who could not go to school after her father had been killed in the violence, he started to reach out to other orphan children. Soon he was helping 12 Muslim women, then 120. Young Muslim men in the area are starting to ask if they can find help as well. Hassan’s evangelistic outreach involves eating meals with Muslims. Hassan explained, “Now in Nigeria that is a big thing. You don’t eat with your enemy because you are afraid that you will be poisoned. Now [to in an attempt to share the gospel,] Christians build friendships with Muslims; it is just so marvelous.”²

Hassan John’s well is mostly filled with God’s story.

If your life is filled with mostly the world’s story influencing your story, you become calloused, hardened toward alternative stories than your own. The same is true for me. We become fearful, resistant to understanding the other, and judge others through the narrative of our story, the one, quite honestly, we believe to be the truth. Living your story more influenced by God’s story than the world’s requires us to risk and claim hope.

The decisions we make, within the 24 hours we get each day, matter. Decisions about living God’s story, which is bigger than our story, leads us more into a destined imperishable existence as human than the ongoing perishable existence of our personal story shaped by the world’s story. In 1 Corinthians 15 we learn that what we put in our bodies is either perishable or imperishable. That is, it will sustain us in loving God, loving others, and making disciples or it will be short-lived. Our bodies are the temple of God. What we do with them for the number of days we have on the planet matters. Our lives, preresurrection and postresurrection, are freed from the false narrative of who we

²Matt Woodley, editor, PreachingToday.com; sources: Clement Ejiofor, “Boko Haram Placed a Bounty on Christian Pastor from Jos,” Naij.com (12-3-15); personal interview with Hassan John in Nigeria.

are as an individual and society and are captured by God's story that we are active participants in making all things new, united, and flourishing. Genesis 45, in its focus on Joseph and his family, indicates that the greatest act of God's story is the gift of forgiveness. God forgives us. We accept it. And we are to do the same, practice forgiveness. Not to receive or give forgiveness is living the world's story of resentment, bitterness, and grudges. Psalm 37 is a call to patience when living God's story and not to cave into the default selfish narrative of the world's story ("Do not fret" v.1 . . . "Be still and wait patiently, do not fret" v. 7). Those who have the upper hand, those living their personal story influenced by the world's narrative, not God's, will be brought low. And Luke 6 cuts to the chase that the more love we give away, with no strings, the more love we receive. Jesus' words in Luke 6 cause us to seriously deliberate on the ongoing revelation of Christ into our lives and that of the human experience. Remember, God's story will do far more than we can ask or imagine. That is the spiritual reward of a mercy-based ethic.³

Remember, a story creates a space in which we can live. And God's story creates a most beautiful space, a space inhabited with grace, mercy, forgiveness, unity, and reconciliation. The world's story creates the exact opposite. When we embrace the world's story, we hide our true selves from God and pretend to be without sin or deny the reality of our falling short of our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus teaches us that grace is God's gift to us, God is merciful, and God's love is the final word.

³In preparation of this sermon, I have benefited from the thinking of Brent A. Strawn, Stacey Simpson Duke, John W. Wurster, James C. Miller, Maria Teresa Davila, Wes Avram, and Robert F. Darden in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year C, Volume 1*, 255-257, 257-258, 259-260, 261-263, 263-264, 265-267, and 267-269.

Hassan John leaned into and lived a story, God's story, which was bigger than himself. That's correct, Hassan John loved his Muslim neighbors and orphaned children. Loving others in a story that is bigger than us, is God's story. Robert Darden writes, "The more love we give away, the more love will come back to us, in greater measure, until it cannot be contained."⁴ Living and loving within our own story, influenced by the world's story, is not sustainable. Leaning into God's story, however, will fill you with love overflowing.

People in the real-world desire an experience where they can find their place in a story bigger than themselves and can discover who they are meant to be and what they are meant to do. And that story is authored by God. God's love is the final word. Being motivated by fear and judgment is replaced with trusting God in risk and banking hope on God's faithfulness. What story are you leaning into and living? The World's or God's? Amen.

This sermon was preached on Sunday, 20 February 2022 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California

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⁴Robert F. Darden in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery and Cynthia L. Rigby, editors, *Connections, Year C, Volume 1*, 269.