

- Isaiah 9:1-4
- 1 Corinthians 1:10-18
- Matthew 4:12-23
- Psalm 27:1, 5-13

When I was 24, shortly after I got married to my beautiful wife, Claire, her father called me on the phone and he said, “From now on, it’d be great if you would call me Dad.” And I’ll never forget that moment because he was not a naturally warm person. My father-in-law was as small as I am large. He had as little hair as I have much hair. He had these little owlsh glasses. He was incredibly academic. We had very little in common in some ways, personality wise as well, and yet over the course of the years that I knew him, he became truly my father, my dad.

And I’ll never forget the moments and months before he died. We went to see him as he was in the hospital. He was in hospice – and it was six years ago this month – and I knew instinctively what he would want. I ran to the store and I got him some Stilton cheese. I went behind the nurses’ station and I put it in the microwave there and I heated it up a little bit. I got one of those coffee stirrers with a little spoon on the end that McDonald’s used to hand out for years, and I put some Stilton cheese on it.

And he had all of his wits about him as he was dying and I put a little bit of Stilton into his mouth. He closed his mouth and tasted it and he said, “Let’s try that again.” And I fed him before he died. And it was an incredible relationship. I’m profoundly grateful for him.

I was thinking about my father-in-law because I was thinking about these governing narratives in our lives, these images in our lives that psychologists tell us, kind of crystallize who we are and come to shape us as persons. We all have them, and they’re sometimes narratives which are traumatic, and sometimes these narratives are incredibly beautiful and supportive and nurturing.

We call upon these, these narratives all the time. In fact, they, most often, they tend to operate just below the surface of who we are, and they determine our sense of identity. All of us have these governing narratives. And I also believe that communities can have governing narratives. We can have these stories we tell about ourselves or images or titles or names that we tell about ourselves that crystallize us before ourselves. It gives us a sense of who we are.

And one governing narrative that I’ve come to see happen at this church came to a kind of close this past Friday. Three years ago, one of our longstanding faithful parishioners, Shirley Green, was contacted by the Department of Health and Human Services and asked if she would be a foster parent to a little boy and a little girl whose mother had died tragically, and they had no one else.

Bella was two years old and Connor was five years old and Connor was experiencing some developmental delay. And they told Shirley that she would only have the children for one

week. And Shirley asked to pray about it because she didn't know whether she could find the time to do the things that give her joy and that give her meaning in life and still somehow take on these obligations.

Her prayers were answered and she took the children in and she kept them for the past three years. And while Shirley was sacrificing so much of herself to care for these children, this church also became a second home for Connor and Bella. They came to everything that Shirley did. We saw them at Even Song. They came to Bible study. They came to Sunday school. They sang in the Saint Francis choir. They were nurtured by this congregation and they were loved by this congregation. Kate and Albie Bell, in particular, and their whole family, but many others as well, gave of themselves and immediately found it easy to love them. And they were children in need of love. The minute I remembered their names, they reached out and asked for a hug. Both of them, I was included in their world.

So on Friday, it was time for Bella and Connor to go to what Connor called his “forever home,” to a family that was adopting them, who lived in Lansing. And a group of us were circled around the family and giving thanks and saying goodbye to Connor and Bella, included, not only Shirley and her son, but also members of the neighborhood and also members of Christ Church Cranbrook that were there. All of us had had some role and some role to play in Connor and Bella's life.

And I suddenly had this moment where I realized that this was really special and that what we had done as a church by supporting Shirley and supporting and loving and nurturing Bella and Connor, what we did was incredibly special. And I don't think we could have done that a few years ago.

In fact, in December, a person came to me to be reconciled back into the life of our church. She had left the church 40 years ago when someone who was running the Sunday school told her mother that they could no longer accommodate her sister who had developmental difficulties. And they, the whole family walked out of the church 40 years ago and never came back because they felt unwelcomed. And as God would work, and as God has done in God's own wisdom, she was rejoining the church at a time because things had seemed to change. And indeed they had, in part because of the love that we experienced caring for Connor and Bella.

I want to suggest to you that that is a controlling narrative. Whatever else we say about ourselves as a church, whatever else we might lift up as the evidence that God is doing great things in our midst, this - this relationship, this deep relationship with those two children and the incredible development that happened there in their lives because of the nurture they received, that's our story as well. And that's a story that we cannot forget, that has to become a kind of controlling narrative for us because as much as this congregation was a blessing to Connor and Bella, they were a blessing to us, a profound blessing, a blessing that we have to take note of, and a kind of vocation that we have to nurture.

And I don't want to say that there haven't been caring people throughout the history of this magnificent church. We have had people who have done great and wonderful things from the beginning of this church always. But I do think that a shift occurred over the past few years,

and that shift has made us a different kind of congregation, a different place, in part because of stories like the one I just told you.

Now, all of what I've tried to say to you today is a way of somehow unpacking the power behind our reading today from 1 Corinthians. The portion of 1 Corinthians we're reading today does not seem at first to be words of love. In fact, Paul is just furious with the Corinthians and he is writing a letter of admonition, a kind of letter of scolding. If this was a tweet from Twitter, Paul would have put in it #dobetter, because the Corinthians are struggling as a congregation. They're a fairly new congregation. Paul started them. They live in Corinth, which was a city that was known for its wealth, but not its taste and antiquity, and they are struggling with divisions over money, power, and sex. Things that none of us can really relate to, but we can try our best to think about what it might be like to have divisions over money, power, and sex.

And then finally, this is a congregation that is having some discord and disagreement over what will be their controlling narrative. There are some that are really proud of the fact that they were baptized by Paul, and that meant that they had some kind of status within the community. They were the frontier people, the first generation of believers in that church in Corinth. And then there are some who are really proud of the fact that they are baptized by Apollos, who is the newcomer, who has come to take on the leadership of the church.

And so they're having some debate amongst themselves over which baptism was more powerful. And this is where Paul gets frustrated and he tries to say that it doesn't matter who the leader of your congregation is. What matters is the controlling narrative of your congregation and that controlling narrative has to be the Cross of Christ.

This is what he writes in the last part of the passage that we read. "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." And later on in that same chapter, Paul says that he has come to preach nothing but Christ and Him crucified for it is only when Christ is on the cross, that we see Christ the wisdom of God and Christ, the power of God.

And part of the reason why Paul is lifting up that cross of Christ is because when it comes to the cross, all of us need reconciliation and healing. There are no divisions based upon money or power or sex. There are no divisions based upon charismatic leaders. There are no things that we could claim for ourselves. But rather the cross makes us all debtors and reminds us all that we are reconciled only by God's mercy, not on the basis of anything that we have done.

And the cross also makes a point to us, as Paul goes on to say in the same letter, about love. When infinite love is mediated through finite people, it's experienced as suffering and sacrifice. And God and Christ loved us so much that God and Christ were willing to suffer and sacrifice so that we might be members and be in deep relationship with Him, our Savior.

So the cross of Christ has to be the controlling narrative, Paul is saying. And one of the things that made me so proud of this congregation over the past three years is that the care and suffering and sacrifices we made individually through Shirley of course, but also through

this whole congregation, all of that sacrifice and all of that suffering meant that those two children would be profoundly blessed.

And if you ask anybody who gave anything so that they could flourish whether they would do it again, I have no doubt that they would say yes. And as we step back to think about who we are as a church and what God has done for us in the past year, we have many things to be proud of. We have been able to accomplish things that we never thought we could imagine. We have been able to have a successful capital campaign, probably the largest, or definitely the largest in the history of this church.

We've been able to actually formulate and actually implement a strategic plan. I mean, how many places actually implement the strategic plans? We did that a year early. We have grown younger and more vital. We've had more engagement by any measure that you create. We have approached many of the things that we need to do to stay viable as a congregation in this day and age by being better about how we communicate, better about how we welcome and connect people to this church, better about how we sustain and support this church.

And all of those things are good, but none of those things matter as much as the love that we have shown with those children and the love that was somehow generated between us on the basis of their blessing to us and the work that we do together. And the relationship we have now with God and Christ. We have grown spiritually. We are different people. And this congregation is in the midst of profound transformation.

So the task that we have over the next year is twofold. In the first place, I ask you all, and I include myself in this ask to lean into those moments when we are being invited to give of ourselves for each other and to love one another and to be reconciled to one another and to forgive one another.

I believe it's in those tiny moments that you and I will invite some of the deeper transformation that God has worked in us. And the second thing I want to invite you to do on this, the day of our parish meeting is to begin to incorporate the story I've lifted up for you today. As part of our controlling narrative, we need to start to lift up those stories of transformation, to lift up those stories of change, to lift up those stories of welcome, to lift up those stories of inclusion because God is doing great things through us.

A friend of mine we had dinner with a few years ago, she started a school in inner city Detroit and it went for several years and did remarkable things, had incredible results and metrics. She said that she always wanted to write a biography that she never could quite get out, and she wanted to call it *What We Did*. Because she went against every orthodox she was experiencing, and somehow that school thrived and those children thrived. And because it was so unorthodox, it didn't quite ever make its way through the rest of the system.

I invite you to tell a different story, not what we did, what God did, and I invite you to dedicate yourself to making that story work its way through the system here.

Amen.

[End of Recording]