

April 9, 2018
The Sunday After
Rev. Dr. John Ross

Emily, Hanna Rose, Jane, Maureen, others that travelled, thank you for going on our behalf and doing that important work. I want to pick up where Emily left off for just a couple more minutes and talk about how this passage in particular will help all of us change the world, and I want to widen the context about this consideration a little bit by starting by tell you two stories of two different reporters that were writing stories at the same time in relatively the same place, but these were two very different stories.

The year was 1958, and the month was April – so, 60 years ago, pretty much right now. Again, two reporters, two stories out of the same time and place. The first reporter was a man named Herbert Warren Wind. Herbert was reporting out of Augusta, Georgia. There were some exciting things happening on a little golf course there, in particular on the twelfth hole where Arnold Palmer played such a fantastic hole that he earned his first major victory as a professional golfer. Now, it was a little bit controversial because of what happened there on the twelfth hole. The eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth are particularly challenging holes as you may know if you know much about golf, but it was on that twelfth hole that something controversial happened. Nevertheless, Palmer won the day and the tournament and his first ever major.

Now, Herbert, the reporter, was searching for a name. He was looking for a way to make that time and that place memorable for people, and he remembered an old jazz song out of New York City out of a place – in fact it was a corner – where there was a factory for Bibles. It was a Bible factory just outside of which preachers were known to gather and hold forth with their Bibles, and, so, it was called “Amen Corner.” So, he took that name and applied it to the twelfth hole of Augusta National Golf Club, and to this day, we still call that corner – the approach to 11, all of 12 and the tee of 13 – “Amen Corner.” Now, when you get home, you may want to open your Bible and look inside. It might just say, “Made in Amen Corner, New York City.

The second story – same time, same place, just about 60 miles or so due west of Augusta, Georgia, Moses Newson was working on a story in Little Rock, Arkansas. He had been witness to a very different event than a golf tournament. He had been witness to the brutal abuse and treatment of Elizabeth Eckford and eight of her friends who were set to be the first black students at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Moses was writing his story about Elizabeth Eckford because she had been separated from the other eight students and was then subjected to unimaginable violence and hatred. Like Herbert Wind, Moses Newson was searching for a name, a way to help people remember this particular time, and this particular place and these particular people. It was a time when Martin Luther King, Jr., was really coming into prominence and importance, and in speaking with him, it was decided that they would refer to them as the “Little Rock Nine.” I’m willing to guess that a whole bunch of you remember the Little Rock Nine. I’d be willing to guess that a whole bunch of you have heard of Amen Corner. Same time – 1958. Relatively the same place – just a few hours apart. Two very different stories, one that reflects power and privilege, and one that reflects prejudice and hate.

Now, before we're all too quick to judge 1958, a time of stark differences in the same world, let's realize that in 2018, fully 60 years later, the world is still filled with stark differences and different stories. To be sure, this afternoon most of the world will at least be aware of what is happening in Augusta, Georgia, where Patrick Reed and Rory McIlroy and others will battle for a championship while at the same time and in the same place racial injustice persists.

Now, let me try to localize this a little for us. We had a whole bunch of students, family members and adults go far away to a place in Mexico where they were working, and serving and giving up their time and their money in that place. They woke up this morning in their very comfortable beds, probably went out into a garage that was probably bigger than eleven by twenty-two and made their way to church here - a very far different reality from the families that they had just served, the students and the parents down there, living in a far different reality.

Two stories at the same time.

As people who land in the privileged and powerful column on the page of life, what do we do with this? How do we wrestle with these kinds of stories that are so at odds with one another? I think Paul's words that Emily read she experienced this week in Mexico are helpful to us. These words, Philippians 2:3, are some of the first words I ever memorized in all of Scripture: Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourself. Paul goes on to say: Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interest of others. This faithful echo of Jesus' great command can help us in finding our way in this world and in these different realities.

As we look to the future, I would say three things very briefly. First of all that it's not about guilt; it's about humility. It's not about feeling bad; it's about doing good. Look, let's face it, we won the lottery when we were either born or raised or presently live where we live. Let's just come clean with that - right? We have won a lottery by being where we are and having the lives that we have. The question then is what are we going to do with that? Guilt doesn't serve the world, but there are plenty of other things that do, and you have been given a great gift with the mere privilege and power that we all know. It's not an arguable issue. It's just where we are, and the question is what are we going to do with that?

One of the most successful fund raisers ever in the Twin Cities was a diminutive little priest named Michael O'Connell - Father Mike. A whole bunch of you knew him. He served the Basilica of St. Mary's downtown Minneapolis for about a quarter century. He did some great work down there. He started that block party. He started that Jeremiah Project that served single moms. Remarkable guy and probably over his time of service raised more money than anybody else in the Twin Cities, at least in the religious realm. By the way, Mike is retired now. He left the priesthood and married a lovely woman. I asked Michael one time how was he so successful in getting people to give so many gifts to the things they were trying to do in the City down there, and I'll never forget his answer. He said very simply, he said, "JR, all I have to do is remind them that everything they have is a gift from God in the first place." A gift from God. That then begs the question, "What are we going to do with that gift, with that remarkable privilege and the power that we have been given?" I can tell you it's not about guilt. It's going to have something to do with humility as Paul said: Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourself.

The second thing is that it is not about pity. It's about empathy. It's not about feeling sorry for anybody. It's about understanding who they are and what they want and what they need. All of the poor people with whom I've worked and have been blessed to know, all want the same things that I want – meaningful work, the ability to care for their families, the chance for a future of meaning. I asked Gabe Flynn to give me just a one-liner when they came back from the trip. Gabe's our high school ministry director, and he's led several of these trips. I said, "Just give me one quick line," because my son had been on the trip, and I wasn't going to get much out of him. So, I asked Gabe, and he said, "I think the most important part of this trip were the families that we built for. I think the perception in this part of the world is that people from Mexico are all drug dealers or trying to get to the US illegally, but in fact we are all the same. We love and care for our families. We live hard. We try to live a faithful life." Gabe said, "We are all the same," and he was so right in saying that. They aren't interested in our pity, but we can offer them our empathy and better understand them, the same things that Elizabeth Eckford was looking for 60 years ago in trying to enroll in a high school.

The last thing is this: If it's not about guilt but humility, and it's not about pity but empathy, it's not about trying to change someone else. It's about being remade from within ourselves. It's not about changing them or doing something for them. It's about the renewal and the transformation that's possible within our own hearts and lives when we can live with humility and look to the needs of others first. Romans 12 is where we find that passage that says, "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds." I say it at the end of every service with different words from J.B. Phillips, "Be remade from within."

This Mexico trip and other trips that we take help us in this regard. They help us act our way into new ways of thinking, rather than trying to think ourselves into new ways of acting. Do you see the difference? Sometimes it takes a trip, not to try to change someone else but to open ourselves for the change that God has within us. We act out ways into new ways of thinking. The very next line in that Philippians passage helps us also. After Paul says, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility regard others as better than yourself. Look each of you not to your own interests but to the interests of others," he then says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." That's our call. It's not about changing someone else but allowing ourselves to be remade from within."

We all have a trip to take to help us in this regard. It might be the trip from Augusta to Little Rock. It might be the trip from Wayzata to Tecate, but more likely than not, it will be the trip – and most likely the longest trip of all – from our own heads to our hearts. So, I would say to you this afternoon as you hear about the events unfolding down at Augusta, Georgia, celebrate that. Enjoy that beautiful game that we call golf. Enjoy it to its full, but at the same time think about Elizabeth Eckford and all that was sacrificed to move us to a new place, and remember the words of Paul, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility regard others as more important than" ourselves.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, help us to take this journey. Help us to take these stories intentions. Help us to find ourselves in this story and respond to you call as you would call us. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.