



“People in Process”

Exodus 19:1-6; Acts 2:41-47; Mark 3:13-18a

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Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Years ago, I was a teaching assistant working for an accomplished professor. He treated me as a protégé offering wise suggestions along the way. One year he was teaching a large introductory course in an amphitheater-style lecture room. He asked me if I noticed a student who always sat by himself as far from the rest of the class as possible. “There’s a reason he sits by himself,” the professor said, “and I’m going to find why. Everyone has a story,” he added, “and we need to know those stories.” It wasn’t long before we knew that man’s sad story.

I love biographies, in part, because good biographers notice the influences and circumstances of their subjects and understand the consequences that flow from a person’s unique story. The shape of every person’s life is formed by unique circumstances of their own story.

Take the famous first minister of this church, Henry Ward Beecher. Beecher was the eighth child of a very famous father, Reverend Lyman Beecher. The children in the family tended to be overachievers like their father. Henry’s older sister, Catherine, was a best-selling author and a pioneer in higher education for women in America. Another sister, Harriet, became the best known novelist in 19th century America. An older brother, Edward, was a noted theologian and college president. Brothers Charles and Thomas were successful and noted clergymen.

According to one biographer, the Beechers’ dinner table was an occasion for lively theological and ethical debate encouraged by their father. Henry, apparently intimidated by his older, prodigious siblings, became the family jester, entertainer and, in family systems theory, the rescuer.

Henry’s mother died when he was three years old. His memory of her remained a major influence in his life. His father remarried, and the stepmother was the opposite of his loving, nurturing biological mother. The family remembers her as aloof, without affection and quite saintly. She died when he was in seminary and his journal makes no mention of her death.

Beecher grew up a strict Puritan family in a severe, Puritan New England town. Life was a very serious matter and obedience to the law of God and the laws of the state was expected. Henry spent his adult life searching for freedom from Puritanism’s strict and severe God.

Henry’s life was also shaped by his education. His father sent him off to prep school when he was fourteen. At that school a teacher unlocked his mind and Beecher became an omnivorous reader and accomplished debater, though always a rather indifferent student.

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At Amherst College, Beecher was a Big Man on Campus. No star in the classroom, he made his mark as a debater and orator, and while an undergraduate became a successful evangelist. The plot of his story is becoming clearer.

His three years in seminary played a critical role in the making of the man. His father was, by now, the President of Lane Seminary in Cincinnati. Life in a southern Ohio river metropolis was quite different than in a Puritan New England village. Cincinnati was a multicultural hub of what was then western frontier. Southerners, northerners, freedmen and slaves, immigrants and natives created a lively mix of cultures. There were no established religious traditions. It was a spiritual marketplace.

The seminary was in the aftermath of a devastating controversy when he arrived in 1835. The abolition movement became the cause of the student body. City officials and the seminary's trustees objected and asked President Lyman Beecher to stop the movement. It seems the students were spending time in the black section of town, and that was troubling folks.

President Beecher, like most institutional officials, urged caution and compromise. The outraged students and several professors left the seminary *en masse* leaving only six students.

Henry took his father's side and urged caution and compromise regarding slavery. But along the way, his mind was being shaped in profound ways by his professor, Calvin Stowe, who would soon marry his sister, Harriet. Under Stowe's tutelage, Henry discovered the Bible was more than a divine codebook. It is story of flesh and blood people and their encounter with God. Jesus became more than a divine savior, he became a real person and Henry's friend.

While the furniture of his mind was being rearranged, the race/slavery issue became a cause of violence in Cincinnati. Abolitionists' homes and businesses were being burned down by rioting pro-slavery mobs. The black section of town was repeatedly invaded by the mobs, who burned a good share of the neighborhood to the ground.

Meanwhile several members of the family had become abolitionists. The seeds were sown, and the riots caused something to click in Henry's mind. He joined a group of Cincinnati citizens who guarded the downtown and fought the rioting mobs.

It took years, events and changing times but an Abolitionist voice was born. The rest, as they say, is history – and most of it was written in this room.

Henry Ward Beecher had a story – a narrative that shaped his soul, his mind and his life. And all that life was filled with people who touched and shaped a boy, a student and a man.

Any life story contains multiple variables. Where we are born, our families, our education, our friends, events, good fortune and bad, all of it shapes our story and determines the course of our journey. I've often wondered what my life would be if I'd been born in Soviet Russia – or colonial and post-colonial Kenya? Life takes the shape of our environment.

But there is one invariable in all our lives: people. No matter who we are, where we come from, or what happens to us, our lives are shaped profoundly by the people who touch our lives.

Few things have shaped the course of my life like my education. I have fond memories of one school with Georgian Colonial brick buildings with white pillars. The buildings surrounded a large grassy quad. I recall long, quiet hallways, classrooms large and small, and, of course, the library where I spent so many hours.

But none of it would mean a thing if it weren't for the people who filled those buildings. Teachers changed my mind and altered my life. My fellow students touched my life in profound ways. Gloria and I belonged to a group of graduate students who met regularly for fun, fellowship and support. Some of the women and men in that group are dear friends still. Just this week, I heard from two of them. One of the email messages made my eyes leak with joyous appreciation for a lifelong friend. After all these years, we still love, encourage, and support each other.

The shape of our lives, the personal, the professional and, yes, the spiritual, is the consequence of circumstances and events, but most of all we are shaped by the people who inhabit our story.

I've spent part of my life listening to people's stories. I am always amazed by the grace that winds its way through the most tangled circumstances of lives, often making something beautiful out of events sorrowful and destructive.

I recall Norma's story well. By the time she was an adult, her life was terribly disfigured by some horrible people, some in her own family. She lived a good share of her adult life on the wrong side the tracks, with the wrong people and with devastating consequences. By her own confession, she was a twisted wreck. She told me her story in excruciating detail.

By an amazing grace she became part of a congregation of people quite unlike her. Those gracious Christians accepted her, loved her, affirmed her, helped her, and in substantial ways, healed her. She became a good woman, a good citizen, and a faithful witness to the grace of God. Norma and her family moved to Alaska for work where she joined a congregation and, from what she told me, the healing continued.

But more work needed to be done. Now I would recognize what I missed then, and what Norma couldn't face: she was married to an abusive man. She woke up, took action, got rid of her husband and, with the support of her church, entered counseling. The last I heard, Norma was involved in a ministry outreach to victims of domestic violence.

Even the grimmest events and circumstances, the most disfigured lives, find the grace of God and substantial healing when touched by people of God. More often than not, our lives take on the shape of the people we trust with our lives.

Our texts for the day speak to the shaping power of life and faith. Our spiritual formation is a journey filled with events, circumstances and people mixed with faith. We are shaped by them all. And it takes a lifetime to make a Christian disciple.

The lesson in Exodus describes the beginning of Israel's journey of faith from bondage to the Promised Land. The forty years of wilderness wandering along the way shaped the people and the nation. At the beginning of the journey, Moses gave the people ethical instructions for the journey. The Law is ethical standards for a community on a journey of faith. The Law at its most basic is simply how to love God and how to love our neighbors.

The long journey through the rigors of the wilderness, informed by a specific way of life defined by the Law, shaped a nation. That shaping required faith: the conviction that God was with them on the journey. It required obedience: a commitment to a particular way of life. It required participation in the life of the community; the journey of faith is a journey together.

The Gospel Lesson is a story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The larger gospel story is a travel narrative, Jesus and his followers on the way to the cross. As the journey began, he gathered his followers and picked twelve who would become the Apostles. He told them he wanted them to "be with him," and to take up his ministry when he was gone. Along the way all of them watched him, listened to him, and participated in his life and ministry.

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The Twelve and the others often got things wrong. More often than not, they misunderstood Jesus. They fought with each other and learned by trial and error. Jesus never gave up on them; he trusted them with his life and his ministry, and the experience shaped the early Christian movement. Circumstances, events and people began to write a story that changed the world.

Take Mary Magdalene, for example. She was a woman with a destructive past. No details are given – just that she was afflicted with multiple demons and Jesus healed her. He saw the potential in her and invited her to join his band of disciples. He treated her with respect, dignity and acceptance. Perhaps she'd never been treated with such love in her life. A woman of means, she and some other women pooled their resources to support Jesus' ministry. Her life was so transformed by the journey, Jesus chose her to be the first witness of his resurrection. Participation in the community of faith changed her life, the lives of the others – and the world.

Acts 2 describes the community life of the early Christian movement. It's a vignette that summarizes the story lying around it. Those early Christians were convinced that God was with them, and the way of life Jesus gave them was the transforming power of God for themselves and the world. They pooled their resources, joined their lives to one another, and entered into a house-to-house spiritual revolution. They ate together, learned together, prayed together, worshipped together and sacrificed together. It was a journey made up of unique events, powerful circumstances and a transforming community. The rest is history.

House-to-house Christianity is being rediscovered in our time. It's called the small group movement. Churches large and small are experiencing a powerful spiritual delivery system. They are organizing themselves into groups of two or more in which people covenant to be together on the journey, to share life with each other, and to commit to each other's spiritual growth.

It works. Let me offer two personal experiences. The first was in Boston. Gloria and I were in a small group of very busy people – like you. Five of the ten people in the group were physicians. Two of the couples were both physicians. The rest of us were equally busy. But we all made a commitment to meet together every Thursday night no matter what. And we did.

The group included a variety of ages and life circumstances. Gloria and I were the oldest couple in the group. One couple had no children. Another had a newborn. Another couple had four pre-adolescent children, and the other had two adolescent children.

Our meetings were conversations about our lives and how faith informed our lives. All of us shared our journeys and offered a listening ear and encouragement. I don't recall lots of details about those meetings but a theme emerged early on. Lessie, a leading physician in the community and married to another leading physician, wrestled with the tension of being the mother of four young daughters, a wife and a member of a demanding profession. Over and over we revisited that tension. We didn't offer advice but we did listen, offer encouragement, and pray for each other.

In January, we were back in Boston for Park Street Church's bicentennial. Over one thousand people gathered in the ballroom of a downtown hotel. We no sooner walked in than we spied two of the couples in the group. Like magnets, we were drawn to each other. We talked, laughed and caught up after more than a decade of absence. It was testimony to the shaping power of people committed to the same journey.

In Minneapolis we belonged to a different kind of group. We were the youngest members of the group, invited into a group that had been together for years. We met monthly and shared our lives and faith. One of the members, Sandy, was beginning to show signs of

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early Alzheimer's disease. We cared for her and her husband who needed our help. We listened, worried and prayed.

Last winter we visited Minneapolis and the group invited us to their monthly meeting. Sandy had deteriorated. In fact, she died just a few months later. It was very sad. It was also obvious the group was providing pastoral care to Sandy and her husband Don. One member of the group was once a business partner of Sandy's. They'd known each other for years – in business and their church. As we ate, Susan helped Sandy eat, answered her confused questions, and made sure the meal went as well as possible.

After Sandy's death, her husband became the focus of the group's care and concern. They've kept us informed as they worry about him, care for him, and pray for him.

I have been profoundly shaped by those two experiences and so many others. The point is that it is probably time for Plymouth to engage in a small group ministry. We are growing in numbers and we need to match that growth spiritually. One effective way is to organize our life of faith in small covenant groups designed to grow our souls and our faith.

A small group of us has been meeting since early summer to plan such a ministry. Today's sermon is an introduction intended to inform you and, perhaps, whet your appetite for another chapter in your spiritual journey. In a few weeks we are going to ask you to indicate your interest in a small group. Depending on your interest, we will organize a ministry.

So, in the meantime – think about it!

Amen

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