



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN

CHURCH

Sermons

Making Lists

Matthew 10:29-31; Ezra 2:1-35

July 16, 2017 – Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

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When I turned sixteen, my dear Aunt June wanted to do something special for my birthday. My two requests were to visit Washington D.C. and have dinner at a French restaurant. She obliged both. While I found I enjoyed chocolate mousse much more than goose liver pate, we were having a wonderful trip, visiting museums and monuments in sweltering July. Towards the end of our visit, we made our way to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that had been completed just two years before. If you've never seen it, it's quite striking. Not because it's ornate or imposing in height, but because of its simple beauty. It's just over ten feet tall, and stretches on for about 2 acres. The highly polished black granite walls bear the names of 58,000 men and women who either gave their lives in military service during Vietnam, or are still missing. I knew very little about Vietnam, though I was born during it. There seemed to be so many confusing messages about it, and it had never been a topic covered in my history classes. It was nearly dusk, and the hustle and bustle in the mall area had quieted, and we came upon a father and son who were looking at a particular section of wall. As we got closer, I realized that the father was crying. No, not crying. Sobbing. Weeping. The kind of crying that produces mournful sounds as well as tears. He had his hand over his face as he wept, almost leaning against the wall. His son, about my age, was comforting his father, looking surprised and a bit lost. I realized in that moment that this man I did not know had lost a person, possibly

many of them, to the brutalities of war. He may very well have fought in the war himself and remembered all kinds of painful images. I can't say for sure. But realizing that the names I saw stretched along the wall for acres were people; flesh and blood, who had loved and been loved had an enormous impact on me. Suddenly, I wanted to read all 58,000 names fully and carefully because I understood that while I had not known them, they had been known by others. They had been known by God.

Our scriptures are full of lists of people long dead. It's full of names that are hard to pronounce and genealogies and connections that seem unimportant to us now. Most of us read some parts of scripture with great interest, while finding other sections unimportant or less significant somehow. Most of us quickly skip over any long list of names. But Dr. Johanna van Wijk-Bos reminds of us of the importance of reading every single one when she says, "We might want to skip on to the next section when we get to the second chapter of Ezra. It all seems one long "difficult word." Who among us is eager to wade through this material? Can we just take it for granted that a lot of different folk from different families and towns returned to Judah and Jerusalem and settled there? The problem with skipping sections such as these is that we might just miss an important bit of information. First, Ezra and Nehemiah like to list people and things; they tie matters together by reciting lists and tidying up untidy circumstances. Genealogical lists also witness to the fact that record keeping was of great importance in that time as a natural follow-up to the chaos of war and deportation. Second, it becomes increasingly important to prove that one belongs inside this circle. The notion of identity takes on a life of its own in this material, and one testimony to this idea consists of the genealogies. Third, lists are important in order to highlight certain functions; we note once more the mention

of priests and Levites. In addition, this particular list is also of interest because of whom it excludes. In a brief section toward the end, a group of people appears named with their towns, Babylonian towns this time. These folks have the misfortune of not being able to prove that they belong to Israel. They do not have the necessary papers!”

Ezra and Nehemiah deal with the Israelites’ return from the Babylonian Exile, and the way they’re written makes it clear that homecomings following exile are not neat and tidy by nature. When we consider the Exile in our modern setting, it’s easy to gloss over it with broad brushstrokes. While we acknowledge it must have been a time of disorientation and inconvenience, I think it’s difficult to grasp just how dramatically it impacted the Israelite community, not to mention the decades and emotional work of Restoration that lay ahead. If we were to read farther into the book of Ezra, we would see some of the calamitous ways that the priest Ezra led the people to become a community once again.

Instead, we’re left with a list of names and family affiliations. It gives us a sense of the scale of those who had been deported during the Exile for sure, but it also gives a pretty clear indication how clannish human nature seems to be. We are not just individuals, but parts of bigger systems that define and protect us if we’re lucky, exclude and pigeonhole us if we’re not.

But the thing we cannot know from any list of names is the stories that those names represent. Sure, we know that the family of Parosh, numbering two thousand one hundred seventy-two seemed to be a pretty prolific bunch, but we know nothing about their vocations, their physical and mental health, their dreams and aspirations, the challenges they faced, their senses of humor, or when they felt God’s presence with them most intensely. We know their names and family connections, but the details that made them human and alive have mostly

been lost to history. As the great late author and Michigan native Jim Harrison once wrote, “Death steals everything but our stories”, but with so many thousands of years intervening, the stories of Azgad and Netophah and all the others listed in the text this morning have been good and lost.

Unless we think of the ways in which human stories have a tendency to repeat themselves in echoes across history. We needn't glance back far in our own nation's history to remember that over one hundred thousand Japanese Americans were deported and sent to internment camps in remote parts of the country during World War 2. That list of men, women, and children forced from their homes and communities would take a really long time to read. An even longer list would be the names of people from Native American Tribes across this land who were forced from their cherished lands and corralled like cattle on reservations. Still today we have lengthy lists that should give us pause, such as the names of African Americans killed by law enforcement officers, two and half times more than the number of white people killed. Similarly, the systematic mass incarceration of African American men, which seems like death that happens at a slower pace, cannot be ignored. As students of history, we can look at this and see the deep roots in American slavery, the continued oppression under more than a hundred years of Jim Crow, and our country's continued problems with race, and realize that in some form, exile is still happening, it's just gone underground. I know we get tired of hearing these statistics and concerns. Maybe we even come to church to receive comfort alone, and don't want to be confronted by modern social problems. And yet, I was taught in seminary that the job of scripture is to tell us who we are (Hint: We are children of God) and how we should live. That second part is a little bit trickier to identify; human behavior is unique to life circumstances and personal experiences. But, we do have what

Jesus called the Greatest Commandment to instruct us in all things, and it comes from the same set of Laws that the Israelites followed thousands of years before from the Torah: Love the Lord your God and Love your neighbor as yourself. Surely, these are not merely poetic words, but rather, an instruction manual we are to deeply consider and put into practice in our daily living.

We see our history through lists of names. A list of names who signed the Declaration of Independence; a list of names of those killed brutally and systematically on 9/11; a list of names of people who won Nobel prizes for contributions that have made the world more beautiful and safe and kind; a list of names of people killed during the Holocaust because they were Jews, and a list of Jews who were saved from the same death camps by Oskar Schindler; a list of names of people killed at the Pulse Night Club in Orlando last June because of their sexual orientation; a list of names of people who have donated gallons of blood to save the lives of people in critical condition.

Lists themselves are just names, many of which have been long since forgotten. But once upon a time, they were people with stories. Each and every one of them began as babies who were held and bathed and fed. Each of them were children who learned to talk and walk and think. Each of them was curious about something and beloved to someone. Each of them was precious in the sight of the God who created them.

The community in Ezra, even as they continued to reel from their dislocation following Exile and Restoration quickly lost sight of the pain of rounding people up and removing them, as we learn later in Ezra, they went on to advocate for the rounding up of foreign wives and children, seeing it as cultural and religious pollution. Here, the community broke the commandment out of fear. Dr. Bos says, “Our own religious communities are as expert as was the community of

Judah in using biblical texts ‘creatively’ to exclude and even banish from our midst those we judge to practice ‘abominations.’Like Israel, if we look at our past, we see a history littered with guilt and iniquities. We see a church that instituted an anti-Jewish tradition of stupendous virulence; a church that invented the inquisition and perpetuated witch hunts; a church that went on crusades, that participated in slavery and defended it on biblical grounds; a church that at all times and in all places continued the sins of the ancestors by denying women their human dignity and equality before God. Yet in spite of all this, even now there is hope. For our hope is not build on the church. Our hope resides in a gracious God and in our teacher Jesus Christ. There is no hope in the ‘letter of the law’, no matter how creatively interpreted. Our hope is in the living word of the living God who addresses us anew in each age to meet the particular challenges that encounter us there.”

And here finally, is the crux of the human story, our Christian story. The exhortation to love God with our heart and mind and strength is separate from our exhortation to love our neighbors as ourselves in the Torah. But Jesus puts those two separate commands together to create the Greatest Commandment, and it suddenly becomes clear. How do we love our neighbor as our self? If we love God first, it becomes abundantly clear. How do we love God with our whole selves? By loving our neighbors as ourselves. These two commandments are permanently yoked together by Jesus, because we can’t really do one without the other.

My Aunt June has the honor of having her name on a monument in Washington D.C.—she served the United States Army as a nurse during World War II. When people see her name, they won’t know that she was a school nurse for more than 40 years, rode a camel in Egypt, taught Sunday School in her small

Pennsylvania town, that she was the most stubborn person I've ever met or that she delighted her family with the world's best chocolate chip cookies. The God who counts our hairs knows her story, and every human story every lived, by heart. Together, let's make stories worth being told for generations to come. Amen.