

Flash Nonfiction

Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

“For Sale: baby shoes. Never worn.” That’s one of the shortest stories ever written. It’s an example of “flash fiction.” That story — all of six words in length — is often attributed to Ernest Hemingway. The legend is that he wrote it in order to win a bet.

The thing about flash fiction is that it draws you in, not by what it says, but by what it doesn’t say. Our six-word example is a very compact mystery novel. To whom do the baby shoes belong? Why are they for sale? How did it happen that they were unused? Was there some sort of falling-out between the person who purchased the shoes and the baby’s mother? Or was the mother so desperate for money she had to sell the shoes? Or, did something terrible happen to the baby? The thing about flash fiction is that the story itself provides no answer. The answer must be supplied by us, the reader, through our engagement with the story and as we let our imaginations run wild.

Some literati argue that flash fiction is not a new form of fiction. Consider *Aesop’s Fables*: longer than six words, the fables are all very short, but they carry a ton of meaning.

There’s even some flash fiction in the Bible. Your first thought might run to John 3:16? Which says: *“For God so loved the world that God gave an only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* It is short, just one verse, but it’s not flash fiction. Why not? Well, it’s not fiction. John is testifying to the truth here.

But even more than that perfectly obvious point, John 3:16, which is called “the gospel in miniature,” just doesn’t draw us in as flash fiction does. We are not encouraged to make up our own ending to the story. It’s not open-ended. The conclusion is right there, in plain sight: Everyone who believes will have eternal life. The end. Amen. Hallelujah! It’s a very, very short story, but it provides an unambiguous ending.

A great go-to place for flash fiction is the book of Proverbs. Not every epigram in Proverbs qualifies as flash fiction, but a good many of them have that open-ended character which draws us in. Check these out: *“Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman without good sense”* (11:22). It just begs for a little more detail, doesn’t it? *“Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it”* (15:17). Wouldn’t you love to be a guest at that unhappy banquet? *“The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down*

with her own hands” (14:1). What caused this unhappy housewife to disturb her domestic tranquility? Adultery? Greed? Envy? We’ll never know. But we can always wonder. (This one could provide the plot for more than one reality TV show!)

In our text today, the apostle Paul writes: *“If Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile.”* This story prompts numerous questions. Didn’t Christ rise from the dead? Who said he did? Who said he didn’t? Why is our faith connected to the historical reality of this event? Why would our faith be futile? What should we do or believe? How would our life and faith be different if Christ not risen from the dead? What would remain of the gospel if we stripped away that one foundational proclamation? Would the faith-structure still stand? Or would it totter like a tower of Jenga blocks, moments after one of the lower-level supports is yanked away?

Let me be clear: Paul is not denying the resurrection of Jesus. Yet, his “What if?” question forces us to confront the meaning of the resurrection for our own lives. *If Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile.*

It may help if we understand the context in which Paul did his ministry. Greco-Roman philosophy presented only a pale and insubstantial portrait of eternal life. The shades of the dead who inhabit Hades spend eternity miserably longing for the lives they once knew. While a lucky few could aspire to be raised by the gods to dwell in the paradise of the Elysian Fields, that was a reward reserved only for the few, heroic mortals who did the bidding of the fickle residents of Mount Olympus.

As for the classical Judaism – which Paul knew equally well – *Sheol*, the realm of the dead, was no cheerier a place than Hades. Which is why the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body that Paul advances here brought such hope. Writing to Christian believers who may have forgotten the bleak philosophy of the religions they’ve left behind Paul takes the Corinthians with him on a thought-experiment so they may remember who they now are. *If Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile.*

In the beloved Frank Capra film, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, an angel named Clarence gives the depressed small-town banker, George Bailey, a precious gift: the ability to glimpse the world as though he had never been born into it. As anyone who’s viewed this film can attest, the town of Bedford Falls is a much worse place in George’s alternative vision than the reality where his many small kindnesses over the years bear sweet fruit in the lives of others.

It's probably no accident that the angel's name is Clarence. His gift to George is the ability to see his own life with greater clarity. So, too, with Paul's thought-experiment about the resurrection. What would the world be like, he asks, had the resurrection never happened? Would we even want to live in such a world? In how many ways would our lives be poorer without Christ's resurrection? *If Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile.*

For modern folk, taught that there's a deep schism between the material and the spiritual worlds, one of the intellectual challenges of Paul's bold claim is his firm insistence on a bodily resurrection. His teaching seems so much easier to accept if we spiritualize it, as many have sought to do.

Christian writer C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, readily admits that he has "only speculations to offer" when it comes to describing the life beyond this life. Lewis likely uses the word "speculation" because the Bible offers few details about the life to come. The details we do have are mostly poetic in nature, as in the spectacular visions of Revelation with the heavenly city whose streets are paved with gold. Such images thrill the imagination, but they're not much of a foundation for constructing a theology of the resurrection.

Lewis begins with a little bit of Philosophy 101: "realism" vs. "idealism." If we reach out and touch the wood of a table, are we truly experiencing the wood? Or is what we experience a mere sensation of hardness that arises out of a pattern of neurons firing in precise sequence, deep within our brains? How can any of us be certain that what we are experiencing is a direct encounter with reality at all? Maybe it's all an illusion, the mere sensation of what we imagine to be real.

Well then, writes Lewis, "what the soul cries out for," even more than the resurrection of the body, is "the resurrection of the senses," the means by which we know our bodies and know the world. "We already have," says Lewis, "some feeble and intermittent power of raising dead sensations from their graves." He's talking about memory. Through memory, we call to mind some semblance of how the turkey tasted last Thanksgiving; of the soft fur of a childhood pet; of the distinctive laughter of one we loved deeply and well and who is separated from us by death. The richest experiences of our lives live on, in memory. Lewis unfolds his argument from here:

"Don't run away with the idea that when I speak of the resurrection of the body I mean merely that the blessed dead will have excellent memories of their sensuous

experience on earth. I mean it the other way round: that memory as we now know it is a dim foretaste, a mirage even, of a power which the soul, or rather Christ in the soul (He went to 'prepare a place for us'), will exercise hereafter...

At present, we tend to think of the soul as somehow 'inside' the body. But the glorified body of the resurrection as I conceive it — the sensuous life raised from its death — will be inside the soul. As God is not in space but space is in God. ...

Then the new earth and sky, the same yet not the same as these, will rise in us as we have risen in Christ. And who knows, after what aeons of the silence and the dark, the birds will sing and the waters flow, and lights and shadows move across the hills, and the faces of our friends laugh upon us with amazed recognition."

Lewis acknowledges that this raises us high into the ozone of philosophical speculation. Yet, this ought to come as no surprise, even though the resurrection of the body truly is a difficult idea around which to wrap our minds. The resurrection is a sort of threshold between this life and the next, and discussing it is a matter of our all-too-human minds racing ahead, endeavoring to touch the thing we can never fully know in this life.

The apostle Paul gives us a possible flash-fiction story here. It's flash because it's quick and short. It's fiction if you can't believe. *If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins* (v. 17). Seventeen words. It's a story of a world in which Christ did *not* rise, the stone was *not* rolled away, the linens were *not* discarded, and the tomb is *not* empty. It's the story of a world in which faith is useless and where hope is shattered.

Yet, Paul argues only verses later that although the story can be stated succinctly, it is not fiction. It's flash *non-fiction*. *But, in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead* (v. 20). Faith springs anew! Christ is alive! End of story! Hallelujah! Amen.

Prayer: When our faith stands at the grave, grieving for a stone that's rolled away, forgive us. When our faith is short of understanding though the truth is there to see, forgive us. When our faith, beset by doubt, sees no further than an empty tomb today, forgive us. Recall the cry of Mary, 'I have seen the Lord!' and grant us faith to believe! Amen.

Sources:

- "Einstein's thought experiments." Wikipedia.org. Retrieved August 23, 2018.
- Lewis, C.S., *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. G. Bles: 1964, 121-22, 158.