

In Retrospect: Interruption

Apologies & Explanation:

Let me begin this morning by apologizing, especially to the three of you who have been keeping track from that little bulletin insert that I gave us, about what's coming up in this sermon series, because I'm not going to give the message our bulletin says I am.

I was preparing the message, "Attend To Your Context," which was going to be this really great message on how important it is to pay attention to our context, because it so deeply affects us, and how we can in turn affect it for our good, God's good.

But I realized that before I did that--and we may come back to it, but before I did that--what I really felt like I needed to do was to position us to think more critically about how we're living in the first place. I want to offer us a tool for thinking critically about whatever situation we find ourselves in.

This fits with the series we're in, this look at things that I wish I'd known years ago, because it would have been good for me, for others, for God to have known them. But today is an interruption to the plan. So.

So today, we're going to talk about thinking. That sounds riveting, right? I'm going to give us a way to think through the events of our lives in way that helps us reflect on them theologically and helps us to make sense of what we find there. Let me pray.

Prayer:

Making Faith-Sense:

We've talked before about our need to make "faith-sense" of life's stuff.

We're always making sense of life, right? This is part of the human condition, this is what it means to be us. To keep living, to move forward and not stall it, demands that we make sense of life.

And for we Christians our faith, to lesser or greater degrees, influences how we make sense of life. For some of us, God is it, man, the bottom line. Everything we experience gets funneled through what we know about God. If we take away God from our lives, then life literally doesn't make sense anymore. For others of us, God is a part of how we make sense of life, but there are whole areas of our lives--hobbies or habits, these relationships, things done in that place--that our Christian faith hasn't much intruded upon.

But we need to be able to make "faith-sense," theologically reflect on the stuff that happens in our lives. We just have to.

And we have to, because Jesus did, and he's our standard. Jesus lived with a theological awareness about who he was, who God was, and how his life should be lived. We're called to the same sort of life.

All We're Talking About:

Let me give us a word. The word is "NAME." This word is an acronym for a process of thinking through the events of our lives in a way that helps us to reflect on them in a theological way. This process of reflection is something that

any of us can do, anywhere we find ourselves, and as we do it we'll become better and better at doing it. So that if, say, some pastor asks us to pay attention to our context, we'll know exactly how to think through what we discover.

This is basically all we're talking about today. Most of today's stuff comes from the book *"Making Faith-Sense: Theological Reflection in Everyday Life."* Another book, *"How To Think Theologically"* has been useful in this. Stuff from other places, too, of course.

N.A.M.E: A Thinking Process

NAME stands for "Narrating, Analyzing, Meaning-making, Enacting."

Narrating, Analyzing, Meaning-making, and Enacting.

These are the steps that we take in making faith-sense, theological sense, of the stuff that happens to us in our lives.

We narrate whatever the thing is--that conflict with our neighbor, that promotion at work, the new relationship we're in. We lay out its story, its events. Then we analyze this situation that we find ourselves in. We figure out what meaning this situation has for us. Finally, we change how we're living, how we're acting. We enact whatever insight we've discovered.

This is what it means to NAME the events of our lives. We narrate the situation, analyze it, discover the meaning it has for us, and enact some changed behaviors because of what we've discovered. So. Narrating.

NAME: “Narrating”

Narrating means this: “telling what happened.” It’s probably easiest, of course, to tell someone else--and this is where Christian's who care for us come in handy. But if we can’t or won’t tell someone else, then we have to tell ourselves--we have to write it down.

This isn’t hard. This is what we do all the time. “What happened?” is the main question we answer in life. We tell our friends and co-workers and families what happened in the places we’ve been in. There’s not much more human than the “this is what happened” story. Whether it’s gossip or biography or whatever, “what happened” is the thing we talk about when we gather together.

Step one is narrating an account of events. Write it down or talk about it with someone who hears you. We do this as factually as possible. This is the “who? what? where? when? and how?” part of the process. It’s not the “why?” part, though. That’s the next step. In this step we’re simply laying out the facts, as best as we’re able, in a story form.

So let me be technical for a moment, and follow along here if you can:

Narrating: Questions Answered

We answer these questions, then:

Who was involved?

What happened?

Where did the events take place?

When did the events occur?

How did events unfold?

Narrating: Upgrading: "Symbolic Importance"

And we can make this exercise a little better if we want to go one step further and not just ask "Who was involved," but also: How important are these people to me? Not just "Where or when did the events take place?" but "What is the symbolic value of this place or this time." So, for example, Carolyn can tell me I'm failing at some basic role in our marriage, but if she does it during an anniversary date, it carries a different weight than if she tells me on a regular Tuesday morning, right? It just does. So we can fill this narrating step with more power if we simply think a little more deeply about the symbolic importance of the things that happened to us.

And then we ask this question, to check ourselves:

Narrating: Checking Ourselves:

Have I narrated the events without inserting judgments about people's motives or an interpretation about what these events mean?

When we're done narrating, we're ready to do some analysis.

NAME: "Analysis"

Why?

This is the question we ask in the analysis phase? Why? Why did I respond that way? Why did the timing matter so much to me? Why did I not trust God up to that point? Why didn't so-and-so talk to me first? Why does that person or idea have so much influence on me?

Asking why questions is an art and a science. It's design and engineering. We need as thorough as possible a narrative for this step, because the best thing to do with "Why?" is to ask it of those "who, what, when, where, and how" facts.

Look for answers to "why" that are concrete. "The unseen mysterious divine plan of God" might--maybe--be an answer as to "why," but it's probably not very helpful in making sense of a situation, right? It's hard to move from that into wisdom or clarity or new behaviors. Something along the lines of "I expected that person to be hurtful, and so I avoided them" is helpful.

The goal here is to pay attention and discover what we can discover. We have to have courage, so that we can be honest, and we may need those partners I mentioned before--others who can help us answer more frankly and honestly than we could on our own. Others who are better at asking questions than we are.

Analysis: Questions Answered

These, then, are the questions that gets answered in this second step in "naming" the events of our life.

Why were these people involved?

Why did things happen the way they did?

Why was the situation structured the way it was?

Why did things happen at this time?

Why did this sequence of events occur, one thing leading to another?

And with the "why's" in hand, we get to do what is, maybe,

the heart of the matter: we begin to make meaning of this.

NAME: “Meaning-Making”

This is the fun part. Really. You’re like: “Fun like a catheter!”

This is where we bring this situation into conversation with our faith. Whatever we know about God, and whatever faith experiences we’ve had, we bring them to the table--along with a willingness to learn more.

We do this with an openness to God and a willingness to follow where God’s Spirit seems to be leading us. We may focus on ourselves or others in that story we’ve narrated. We may begin to think about the way this event is similar to other events we could narrate, and explore that. This is the step that may potentially take a lot of time, or maybe no time at all.

Things matter for all sorts of reasons, and this is the time to figure out why the event matters so much.

Meaning-Making: Faith-Sources

To do this well, this “meaning-making” step, we need to draw on those Christian faith-sources that we know well and be ready to go to other Christian faith-sources that are relevant.

We go to Scripture, the foundational source. This is where we get our stories, our analogies, our metaphors that can be mirrors we hold up against our own experience we’re trying to evaluate. This is where we learn what it means to be human, and for God what it means to be God.

We can go to Church history. For me, the experiences of the

early Anabaptists and what they dealt with are significant, and I remember them as I try to make faith-sense of my own life, reflect theologically on my own experiences as a Christian person. So are the experiences of the early Church. I learn from the failures and successes of the Church during the Middle Ages, and excesses and zealousness of the Reformation Church.

For some of us, Worship may be a powerful ingredient in how we make sense of our experiences, a thing we draw on. The songs we know and sing to ourselves, the symbols that we're used to seeing, the rituals and ceremonies that we've been a part of. These are powerful things that can serve as jumping-off points for how we make meaning from the experiences we have.

We of course go to other Christians, who have the Holy Spirit like we do, and who can help us theologically reflect on our experience well. Doctrinal beliefs and moral and ethical Christian principles could be resources, too.

And the authors that have influenced my thinking on this suggest that whatever the experience is that we're looking at, we're going to either end up affirming what our faith says about something, or we're going to have to adapt our beliefs in some particular way, or we're going to have to undergo some sort of conversion in how we think about some part of that experience.

Meaning-Making: Affirmation

Most of what we'll do is affirm what we believe, frankly.

This is good. This means that we're doing what we should be

doing, which is allowing our faith to influence our lives, and the choices we make in them. Life shouldn't be one gigantic surprise all the time.

As we reflect on the experience, we'll discover that we're not alone. We'll remember Scripture, some parable or passage, that illustrates for us what we're going through. We'll learn a lesson, and be reminded of some truth that we've forgotten or need to live up to a little more completely. We'll discover some point of contact between our experience and the experience of another Christian, and we'll be encouraged to act like the Christian we are, or depend on God anew, or any number of things that at the end of the day are affirmations of what we already believe.

And as our reflection on our situation affirms what we believe, abstract things become concrete: reconciliation becomes more than an idea, but something we do when we help the co-worker who tattled on us. God's patience with Israel becomes something that we mimic in our work raising our kids. Our faith shows up in our life, and we discover God all around us.

Meaning-Making: Adaptation

But sometimes our experiences don't affirm our faith. They challenge it. They confront us with questions that we don't have easy answers for. They force us to re-think what we believe, and force us to adapt our beliefs.

This happens in different ways. Maybe we just modify what we believe. An experience helps us to understand a particular passage of Scripture differently than we did before. We may rearrange our priorities based on some

experience: we volunteer with those in need for awhile, and come to prioritize care of the poor over some other way of serving Christ. The death of a person may lead us to reprioritize sharing our faith.

And there are great benefits to this adapting of what we believe and how we live. The biggest is simply that our faith becomes our own. When our faith is challenged, and we respond well, we remember that our faith is alive, that the Spirit is real, that Christianity isn't irrelevant, but it's the most relevant thing.

Meaning-Making: Conversion

Sometimes what we experience doesn't lead us to affirm what we believe, or lead us to adapt our beliefs in some way, but leads us to straight up conversion. We change what we believe.

Biblically, this is what Jesus was doing when he made Scripture, saying "You've heard it said...But I say to you." He was saying "This is what you've believed, but you need to give it up, because here's what you should believe."

Conversion is rarely immediate; it's usually a process that takes a long time.

Let me very frank; I'm not the Christian that I was when I first became a Christian. I became a Christian surrounded by a group of people who, theologically, were all very similar. Going to Seminary was a difficult time for me, because I was exposed to Christians who were Christians, fully and completely, but believed very differently from me about all sorts of things. The hardest thing was to discover that there

wasn't a sort of timeless, permanent, "right way of being Christian," that I was a part of, which included the right way to parent your kids, to engage in politics, the right issues to care about or not care about, the right way to organize a household or spend your money or be involved in Church. I thought that there was one Christian way, and discovered that there were hundreds of Christian ways to do these things, and in some cases I had to convert, and the conversion meant loss, even as it meant gain.

Conversion is the hardest way that we make faith-sense of life, in that changing beliefs usually requires all sorts of other change, too. It's scary. It means that our assumptions are challenged, our ideas, and values, and behaviors can end up changing, too--even the sources of theological reflection may change. Staying compassionate and kind and respectful during a conversion process isn't easy. Figuring out how to interact in peace with others who have beliefs you are leaving behind is not easy. And of course, you might be wrong.

Meaning-Making: Questions

I've put questions in our bulletins that we can ask yourself as you come to each of these theological places--an affirmation, adaptation, or conversion in what you believe. They may be helpful; I think they are. Because of course, we can rationalize anything, right? We can compromise ourselves so easily. We hold back making decisions and waffle in this life. Affirming or adapting or converting in what we believe is a process that we should never able do alone and we we should do well.

NAME: "Enacting"

So if we've narrated our experience well, we've analyzed it as best as we're able, asking "why" thoroughly, and we've taken the time to draw on our faith-resources to make meaning of the experience, affirming or adapting or converting our beliefs, then we're left with this final step.

Enacting what we believe. Living it out. To "enact" is to "act it out."

This is the heart of faithfulness, of course. James writes "Be people who do the word and don't just hear it." He gives us this:

"If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you don't give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

Belief alone isn't much. We need to live out what we believe. But there are so many obstacles to this. It is uncomfortable. It takes initiative, and determination to move from intending to do something and actually doing it. We may simply not have enough resources--time, money, talent--to enact what we believe. We may not be in a position to put our beliefs into practice, not yet.

Here are the questions we should ask for this step in the "NAME-ing" process:

"Enacting:" Questions Answered:

What obstacles am I facing in enacting--living out--my

conviction?

Is this enacting a result of the process of reflection I've gone through (NAME) or did I want to do this from the beginning?

Have I planned how to live out this belief? What's the action I should take? Who is involved or affected by it? How and when and where will I implement it?

Is this choice to act building my faith and moving me toward Christ-likeness?

Conclusion:

I haven't talked about Jesus much this morning. I haven't quoted that much scripture. I regret this the tiniest bit, but not an enormous amount, because honestly, I think we need this stuff.

Sometimes we just need to talk about a way to think through something more completely. It's hard to "take every thought captive" for Christ if our own thoughts are scattered; it's hard to love God with all our minds if our thinking is foggy. We may not want to conform to the pattern of the world, we may want our minds renewed, but sometimes we need a path to help that happen, and to help us test what God's perfect and pleasing will for our lives really is.

We need to be better at this, because our "why's" need answered in this life, and how we answer them determines in some real way how we live and who we become. What we believe about God really does impact our lives.

I had to take our dogs to the vet and I was given two options: I could give our sick dog an injection, called "Convenia"-- doesn't that sound SO convenient!!--that cost a fortune, or I

could give her three pills every morning and night for a month. Well, mostly Carolyn could.

There's no "convenia" for becoming a person who understands what they believe and acts on those beliefs. There is no shot we can take to think more critically about how we live, and then change our way of living. There's only the slog of pills, the work, the steps that we take--like this NAME process--to help us become who are like Jesus in every way.

Someday you'll need what we talked about this morning, even though it wasn't lively. I hope when that day comes, this will be helpful. For those of us who see the benefit in this now, and are in situations at work, at home, with our kids or our parents, with our neighbors or our Church, situations that need to be brought into conversation with what we believe--today's your day. Have at it. God will bless us for it.