

January 8, 2017
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "Reading Memoirs"

I love to read.

I have always loved to curl up with a book and get lost in the story of someone else's life.

As a young child I particularly loved biographies.

I was intrigued by other people's accomplishments, challenges and personal dramas.

Reading opened up the whole world to me.

I could travel to places I had never even heard of and look in on people whose traditions were dramatically different than my own.

I have always chosen the written word as entertainment, rather than television or movies.

For the past several years much of my reading has been academic, so this year for both my birthday and Christmas, my friends and family gave me books that had nothing to do with my studies.

Most of them were memoirs.

"A memoir (from French: *mémoire*: memoria, meaning memory or reminiscence) is a collection of memories that an individual writes about moments or events, both public or private, that took place in the subject's life.

The assertions made in the work are understood to be factual, as remembered by the author."

Of course, we can all attest to having different memories of a particular event than others present may have had.

It is part of what makes family gatherings so interesting!

Over the Christmas break, I had the luxury of time to read and I settled into my corner of the couch to explore the lives of people in Appalachia, South Africa, Nigeria, and Virginia.

The memoir differs from a biography or autobiography in that it is often just a snapshot of a life – just a moment in time or a phase.

There are large gaps in chronology and the ending of the book is not necessarily the ending of the person's life.

Several times I found myself wanting more information, more detail.

As I was reflecting on the books I read, I began thinking about the scripture stories that define our lives.

Much of scripture can be described as memoir in that someone is recounting events from their own perspective.

In today's passage Matthew is the writer describing events that he either witnessed or was told about.

All of the other gospel writers include this story, with only slight variations.

This was important.

Everyone remembered the time Jesus came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John.

Everyone remembered the Holy Spirit descending like a dove and the voice from heaven calling Jesus the 'beloved son.'

This was a story that was passed from generation to generation – a defining example of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

I imagine that Jesus, hearing this profound blessing, carried it with him throughout his ministry.

We know that he left the Jordan and went out into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil.

I like to think that Jesus' ability to withstand the devil's offers is at least partially rooted in the deep love conveyed in his father's blessing.

For me, the conclusion of today's passage "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased" defined my relationship to my own sons.

When I first heard this statement, as an adult newly returned to a faith community, I was moved to tears. 'Yes, this is how I feel about my sons' I thought.

We must tell our stories.

We must bless our children.

These are the building blocks of a civilized society.

We read and tell stories to help us understand ourselves better.

When we are privileged to the private thoughts and actions of another person's life it helps us to examine our own life.

Another person's description of their decision-making strategies shines a light on our own internal process.

This is the reason that the biblical stories endure over the centuries.

Each one of us can read or hear a story and glean from it a word of wisdom for our own life.

Stories also help us to understand what someone else's life might be like.

All of the memoirs I read shed light on what it was like to live in the author's world.

The poverty of Appalachia; the violence of South Africa; the patriarchy of Nigeria – glimpses of another's experience.

This is what our *Peace Through Understanding* series is based on.

The idea that by hearing the stories of people from different cultures; reading their poetry; listening to their music; seeing their artwork – all of this leads to understanding.

Not complete understanding – but a glimpse into worlds different than our own.

We never fully understand someone else – I don't think we ever even fully understand ourselves.

However, I do believe that our lives are enriched when we encounter a new person or a new idea.

Earlier this week scholar, theologian, author Huston Smith died.

Professor Smith was best known for his 1958 book "The Religions of Man."

This work has been a standard textbook in college-level comparative religion classes for half a century.

In 1991, it was abridged and given the gender-neutral title "The World's Religions" and in 1994 it was revised to include illustrations and artwork.

We have this book in our church library.

Many millions of copies have been sold worldwide.

The book examines the world's major faiths as well as those of indigenous peoples.

Smith was often asked why he was a Christian, after his having admired, studied, and practiced elements of so many other faiths throughout his lifetime.

His response was "Because I know my need for forgiveness."

Just as Jesus understood his need for baptism by John, Smith understood his need for Jesus.

Reading Smith's obituary and all of the commentaries that accompanied it was insightful – the faith part, not necessarily the drug part!

Again, it was the story of a man who explored God's presence in the world and came away deeply rooted in his own faith.

He once said 'You subtract Christianity from Huston Smith, and there is no Huston Smith left.'

The story of Jesus' baptism inspires me.

Huston Smith inspires me.

He took the stories of faith and dissected them piece by piece until he was left with the truth.

He observed that all traditions express the Absolute, which is indescribable.

He concluded with a kind of golden rule for mutual understanding and coexistence: "If, then, we are to be true to our own faith, we must attend to others when they speak, as deeply and as alertly as we hope they will attend to us."

In the year that lay before us I pray that our lives will be enriched by the stories of heroes like Huston Smith.

I want to close with a prayer that Peg Heck offered at Women's Bible study on Thursday from a book "Prayers from Chatauqua" by Joan Campbell:

Loving God,

Take our wondering, our worrying, and our wandering and weave it into something strong.

Take our differences, our suspicions, and our tightly held perceptions and help us to see common wisdom.

Weave the strands of our diverse personalities and beliefs into a tapestry made beautiful by virtue of its multitextured threads.

You are our God and we are your people.

Feed us with things of the spirit.

Open our eyes to a vision of the future that is bold and brave and worthy of the gifts we have been given.

We are called to be hopeful people who believe that every darkness is broken by the dawning of a new day.

I pray that we will open our hearts to people who may be on different paths than our own.

I pray that each day we will remember our baptism and rest in the fact that God indeed calls us beloved.