

November 16, 2014
Reverend Claire Feingold Thoryn
Sermon: Likeness
Theme: Truth

Offertory: “One Voice”

This is the sound of one voice
One spirit, one voice
The sound of one who makes a choice
This is the sound of one voice

This is the sound of voices two
The sound of me singing with you
Helping each other to make it through
This is the sound of voices two

This is the sound of voices three
Singing together in harmony
Surrendering to the mystery
This is the sound of voices three

This is the sound of all of us
Singing with love and the will to trust
Leave the rest behind it will turn to dust
This is the sound of all of us

This is the sound of one voice
One people, one voice
A song for every one of us
This is the sound of one voice
This is the sound of one voice

Reading: Mockingbird by Louis Jenkins

I remember when I was a child I had a pair of canaries in a cage in my bedroom. I had the idea that I would raise and sell canaries. I asked one of my sisters if she remembered them. She remembered that they were parakeets, not canaries. I asked another sister. She said she didn't remember any canaries but she remembered how mean I was to her. My youngest sister doesn't remember having birds but thinks that we had a pet rabbit. I don't remember that. My brother thinks we

had a pet crow that talked. I don't remember a crow but I remember we had a myna bird for a while that said, "Hello sweetiepie," but he belonged to someone else. My mother says that she would never have allowed birds or any other animals in the house. I remember how the female canary ignored the male but chirped plaintively to a mockingbird that sang outside my window all summer long.

Sermon: Likeness

Canary or parakeet?
Mockingbird or myna bird?

Truth is not as absolute as we often believe it to be. As Rev. Parisa Parsa said last weekend at the workshop on Culture, Change and Diversity, "We each experience our experiences differently."

Even when we are striving to tell the truth, to the best of our human ability, that truth is almost always not the whole story.

Emily Dickinson said "Tell the truth but tell it slant."

This morning I'll explore three places where the truth is slanted:

Art
History
and in our own personal narratives.

First, art. I took some painting classes a few years ago. Have you ever tried to paint people? I could paint a bottle and it would look like a bottle. But when I tried to paint the model in front of me: it would appear to be a human, even a human with a face, but that specific person—no.

The "likeness" was not there.

My teacher told me that John Singer Sargent, the American painter, said that "A portrait is a picture in which there is just a tiny little something not quite right about the mouth."

So now I have even more respect for skilled painters, who are able to create a true "likeness." Art tells the truth in ways that facts and figures cannot. What is more true, for me to tell you that Van Gogh was depressed, or for you to look at one of his self-portraits and see the pain in his eyes, see the deep angry marks of his brush?

Second, History.

As our guest preacher a few weeks ago, Representative Byron Rushing, said, our history is defined by what we remember and by who tells the story.

In essay assignments in my high school history class, we were required to include at least five important dates in each essay and then circle the dates so our teacher could easily find them. I would always begin by writing something like: “As I write this essay on November 16, 2014...” It was not an especially rigorous high school. But history is so much more than dates. It is how we tell our national story.

Most young people learn their history through history textbooks. In the US, the Department of Education has no say in textbook production or adoption, so textbooks vary by state, district, even town. Many nations, however, have some form of an official, state-sanctioned history textbook.

This great book, titled *History Lessons*,¹ is a collection of excerpts about American history from international high school textbooks. So in here you find:

--What the British textbook says about the American Revolution (it was a civil war, of which the textbook asks in all caps, “WAS IT REALLY A REVOLUTION?”).

--How the Canadian textbooks describe the War of 1812 (an example of one of our many failed aggression attempts to conquer and annex Canada.)

--the way the Nigerian textbook gives context to the American slave trade (putting slavery in a global perspective).

--And also: excerpts from the Cuban textbook on the Cold War; the Saudi Arabian textbook on the conflicts in the Middle East; and the North Korean textbook on modern-day nuclear weapon proliferation.

Some of these stories vastly differ from the US version of the same events.

We experienced our experiences differently.
We thought we were the canary,
they thought we were the mockingbird.

We can see the picture these narratives are trying to paint, but now it seems that all of them, including ours, have “a tiny little something not quite right about the mouth.”

Finally, the stories we tell ourselves about our own lives.

¹ Edited by Dana Lindaman.

This story is from Emir Kamenica, who told it to the writer Michael Lewis on NPR's "This American Life."²

Emir tells the story of his life as a series of happy accidents and one angel who set him on a privileged path.

Emir grew up in Bosnia and was 13 when war broke out there.

--Emir and his mother and sister managed to escape the Serbian troops
--his father was murdered, and his neighborhood was destroyed.
--yet he talks about good luck: to have escaped at just the right moment; to have managed to get a ride in the convoy of refugees to the Croatian coast; to have a friend offer to let them stay in her apartment in Sarajevo.

But then, Sarajevo was full of Croatian nationalists who were hostile to Emir's family, because they were Muslim. Which was strange to Emir, because he had never thought of himself as a Muslim—his family actually defined themselves as atheist. But, as Muslims, Emir and his sister were not allowed to go to school and his mother was not allowed to work. Emir would run to and from the library to get books, hoping to not get beat up along the way.

There was one book from the library he loved the most, and read it again and again, titled *The Fortress*, a story of a young man who survives war.

Then another lucky break came: Emir and his family, out of a million Bosnian refugees, were among the first couple of thousand to receive tickets to the United States. All they have is their few items of clothes—and Emir takes along the library book.

They don't know a single other human being in the United States. They get dropped off in Atlanta.

As Emir remembers it:

Their apartment was filthy and over-run with cockroaches. His high school was scary and chaotic and had very low educational standards.

And he could not speak a word of English.

² September 2013, "How I Got Into College."

So to comfort himself and learn English, he sat at home every night, translating the library book, *The Fortress*, from Bosnian to English. And this was the thing, Emir says, that gave him the biggest stroke of luck.

In English class, they had a student teacher named Ms. Ames. She was only there for two weeks. But she asked kids to write an essay, and he was worried because he didn't know enough English to write an essay.

So instead, he plagiarized a passage from the book. Since *The Fortress* had never been translated into English, he couldn't get caught.

Emir says:

I closed my essay with this bit of internal monologue [from the protagonist], which roughly says, I'm slowly becoming a repository for decomposing sorrows, regrets, ignored injustice, and forgotten promises. I can still feel its stench. But when I get accustomed to it, I will call it experience.

So, as far as high school essays go, pretty impressive.

Well, as Emir remembers it, this essay struck Ms. Ames so deeply she came over to him after reading it and whispered in his ear, "You have to get out of here."

She takes him to an elite private school in Atlanta called Paideia for an interview.

In Emir's story, Paideia took pity on him as a refugee, even though he had no money and very little English. He was able to go to this fancy private school for free for the rest of high school. He didn't see Ms. Ames again.

At Paideia, he finally felt safe.

And the feeling of safety made him able to learn.

From high school he got a full scholarship to Harvard, and then went on to get a PhD from Harvard, where he also met his wife. Then he got tenure at a young age from the University of Chicago. He is a rising star in the field of behavioral economics, all thanks to Ms. Ames being fooled by his plagiarized essay.

It was all due to luck, happy accident,
and one angel of a teacher.

At least, that is how Emir remembers and tells the story.

But it started to really bother Emir that he didn't know what happened to the woman he thought was responsible for everything good in his life. But he didn't know how to find her. So the producers of "This American Life" hired a private investigator who finally managed to track her down after months of searching.

Ames is a pretty common last name.

And in talking with Ms. Ames, they basically fact-checked Emir's recollection of his life story.

Ms. Ames remembered Emir as brilliant, a once-in-a-lifetime student she just happened to get in her very first year of teaching.

The only way she had ever tried to see what happened to him was by checking the list of Nobel Prize winners each year.

She was a student teacher in his classroom his whole freshman year, not just two weeks. His English was "tremendous."

His math and science teachers also raved about his phenomenal skills.

She remembered the public school as actually a pretty good one, full of international students and good teachers—but that she asked Paideia to consider Emir because he was *exceptional*.

Her impetus was not an essay,

but when he helped her diagram sentences on the chalk board.

In fact, she did not remember the essay that Emir plagiarized from the book—at all.

The part of the story that Emir had never known, was that in helping him get into private school, Ms. Ames had basically let the best student at the public school get poached away. Her principal and others were so angry they drove her out of teaching by treating her so badly the next year she quit.

Emir heard her tell the story, but he couldn't take in the fact that she did not remember the plagiarized essay, that it had not been simply luck that had gotten him on his track to success, but his own talent.

But he did take in the new information that Ms. Ames had been not only an angel for him, but in getting pushed out of teaching, had been a martyr. After talking with Ms. Ames, he didn't change his understanding of his story, except to increase his gratitude for Ms. Ames.

As Michal Lewis said in the radio piece,

He needed his story to be what it was, and so he was sticking to it. ... Why does a man who makes his career as a scientist cling to his story in spite of evidence that it isn't true?

... One thing that Emir, and everyone who knows him says, is that he is a remarkably happy person.

When you insist, the way that Emir does, that you're both lucky and indebted to other people, you're prepared to see life as a happy accident...

It's ... different than if you tell yourself that you simply *deserve* all the good stuff that happens to you, because you happened to be born a genius or suffered so much or worked so hard...

These stories we tell about ourselves—they're like our infrastructure, like railroads or highways. We can build them almost any way we want to. But once they're in place, this whole inner landscape grows up around them. ...Once you've built the highway, it's very hard to move it. ...If your story is about an angel who came out of nowhere and saved your life, not even the angel herself can change it.

Emir saw an angel.
Ms. Ames saw a canary released from a cage,
finally able to fly.

We all experience our experiences differently.

What story are you telling about yourself, about the world? Does it help you or hurt you?

Perhaps your story bears a likeness to the truth,
Or perhaps there is tiny little something not quite right about the mouth.

Finding the truth requires more than one voice.
More than two or three voices.

The truth requires all of us:

Singing together in harmony
Surrendering to the mystery

Amen.