

Claire Feingold Thoryn
Theme: “Connections”
Sermon: “Meaning Making”
September 27, 2015

Call to Worship

is the last verse of the opening hymn "Dear Weaver of Our Lives' Design"

“Let eyes that in the plainest cloth a hidden beauty see discern in us our richest hues, show us the patterns we may use to set our spirits free.” We join together, a human tapestry of faith and doubt and hope and sorrow. Joy and woe are woven fine. Here we can lay out our plainest selves, and know that others can see our inner beauty, our richest hues. In this hour may we find a new richness in the patterns of our lives, and the courage to share our gifts with the world.

Reading: Post Hoc by Jennifer Maier

It happened because he looked a gift horse in the mouth.
It happened because he couldn't get that monkey off his back.
It happened because she didn't chew 22 times before swallowing.
What was she thinking, letting him walk home alone from the bus stop?
What was he thinking, standing up in the boat like that?
Once she signed those papers the die was cast. She should have waited an hour before going in;
everyone knows salami and seawater don't mix.
He should have checked his parachute a seventh time; you can never be too careful.
Why didn't she declare her true feelings?
Why didn't she play hard to get? She could be out at some nice restaurant right now instead of in
church, praying for the strength to let him go.
It all started with that tattoo.
It all started with her decision to order the chicken salad.
Why was he so picky?
Why wasn't she more discriminating?

He should have read the writing on the wall; listened
to the still small voice, had a lick of sense. But how could he when he was blinded by passion?
Deaf to warnings? Really dumb?
Why, why, in God's name, did he run with scissors?
If only they'd asked Jesus for help.
If only they'd asked their friends for help.
If only they'd ignored the advice of others and held fast to their own convictions, they might all
be here, now, with us, instead of six feet under; instead of trying to adopt that foreign baby,
instead of warming that barstool at the Road Not Taken Eatery and Lounge, wondering how it
might all have been different, if only they had done the right thing.

Sermon: Meaning Making

What if...
If only...
It all started when...
How would you finish those sentences?

Each month, to go along with the Worship Theme, I come up with a spiritual exercise. I give the spiritual exercise for our covenant groups, to do over the course of the month, and talk about in their time together. Of course, even if you aren't one of our 140 or so members in one of these small groups, you can still do the exercise, I always describe it in my monthly column on the website. (And if you want to learn more about covenant groups or join one, tell Rose Gonzalez, our Director of Community Engagement.)

Our spiritual exercise for this month's worship theme of connections gave us an opportunity to connect with ourselves—within—and share that connection with others. I asked: If you had to choose one story to explain who you are, what would it be? What one story might you use to explain yourself to others? What one story do you frequently return to, to remember who you really are?

To quote one of my favorite adolescent television shows, "My So-Called Life," the protagonist Angela asks the mysterious character Jordan "Why are you like this?" and he responds "like what?" and she says, "Like how you are."

My hope in this exercise was that people would share a defining moment in their lives: the story of how *you* became *you*. To share that story with someone else and hear their story allows for a very deep connection. It's interesting, that even though these stories can be core to who we believe ourselves to be, a story that is foundational in our lives, they may not be something we share with many people.

It's common, when asking this question, for someone's first thought to be how they experienced a big historical event, like 9/11. It is also natural to think about big personal life events—like a birth or death, or a marriage or divorce. A big trauma or a big joy. And those might be your defining stories—or they might not. Your story might be something very small and unique and personal, not a milestone for anyone else but you. Maybe it really did all start with your decision to order the chicken salad!

I asked my husband Ben for his one story that explains the essence of Ben. His story happened in middle school, when he was about 12. He looked around at his classmates one day and thought to himself that everyone there, no matter how cool or uncool they seemed, they really all wanted the same thing. *They all just wanted someone to talk to them.*

With that realization, he started talking to everyone. He made a lot of friends. The thing that made this a life-defining moment was when he turned his attention to the cutest girl in school—who no boy would talk to because she was so terrifyingly cute. Ben asked her out...and she said yes! They had an epic relationship lasting two whole weeks (that's epic for middle

school), one week of which was school vacation week and Ben was out of town.

But that was all Ben needed to solidify the moment of self-definition: “Everyone wants someone to talk to them, everyone wants to make a connection. I can make that connection.” And I think if you know Ben, you know him as a connector. He still will talk to anyone.

Two stories come up for me, one of which I know I have shared with you already: the story of my experiences of the divine, the holy, as a young child standing at the oceanside. It was in that moment, for the first time, I felt deeply connected to God—though I didn’t use that word then—and to all of humanity. The other story all started with my decision to order the chicken salad. No, just kidding. It’s the story of the day I decided not to be shy anymore.

I had been a painfully shy child. I did have friends, but it was painful getting to know new people because I couldn’t introduce myself to anyone. I was so nervous I often had trouble even making eye contact, especially in crowded rooms full of people I didn’t know. So going off to college was a big challenge.

On the first day, after moving in my stuff and meeting a few people on my hall, I went off to the big gathering of all the incoming freshmen. Some 400 teenagers filtered into the concert hall where the Dean was about to speak. The entrance to the room was near the stage, and the chairs stretched up in stadium style seating, and they were all filled with people. When I try to remember how it looked, the image is all blurry, the same way the whole room was swimming before my eyes. I remember thinking, “This is it. I can choose to be shy and not make any friends, or I can just choose to not act shy anymore. Let’s do this.”

And I started walking up and up those stairs. Finally I saw an empty seat and sat down, and I leaned to the people near me and said “Hi, my name is Claire.” And a girl nearby said “Hi! My name is Alice!” and you know what...turns out making friends can be just that easy. So my self-defining moment was when I stopped letting myself be the barrier to connecting with people.

That self-defining story of connection has really helped me through some hard times. In times of loneliness and worry I was able to maintain confidence that I could make new friends. I just had to be able to walk into a room of people and *not act shy*. And finally after some year of this, it is very rare for me to feel shy anymore. Like Ben, I’ll talk to anyone.

The meaning we take from a life event at age 18 may be different from how we look back on it decades later. We are given the free will and ability to make meaning of our lives. And when we have a foundational story that we feel describes who we really are, it is useful over the course of our lives to examine, am I still living this ideal of who I want to be in the world?

This is true for communities too. We at Follen love to tell story of our founding as a place where abolitionists spoke out. No one else in town, no other church, would let local abolitionists, fighting to end slavery, speak about their views. So our spiritual ancestors built that building right there, and then they started the East Village Fair, now in its 177th year, to raise the money to build this building right here, and they created a church founded with the mission of

justice and compassion.

To turn the poem on its head, They *did* ask their friends for help. They *did* hold fast to their own convictions, And here we are now. That is a community-defining birth story.

Holding that up, we can ask ourselves: what more can we do to support the grandchild of the abolitionist movement, the modern day freedom fight, the movement called “Black Lives Matter”? Abolitionists were trying to free black people from the demeaning and violent bonds of slavery; Black Lives Matter is trying to free black people from the demeaning and violent bonds of racism. We have a group of Follen members asking how we can effectively and meaningfully support this movement—and we are having an open meeting in October for all who are interested.

For our self-defining stories to still be self-defining, we have to live up to them, again and again. I’ve told you positive stories of self-definition, but I think we all have our terrible, horrible, no good stories of self-definition. Why didn’t we check our parachute for the seventh time? Why didn’t we declare our true feelings? If only we hadn’t been blinded by passion? Deaf to warnings? Or so dumb?

Brene Brown frames these negative self-defining stories in terms of loveability, divinity, and creativity. Anyone who has gone through a break-up or divorce, or any kind of betrayal from a loved one, could be stuck with that says “I am unloveable.” Anyone who in childhood or adulthood was shamed by their religious institution, could end up with the story “I am not worthy.” And Brown says that in her research 85% of the people she spoke to had an experience in school that was so shaming it affected how they understood themselves as a learner. She called these creativity scars. They leave us with the story: “I am not good at that, and I’ll never be good at that, and I shouldn’t even try.”

It is part of our life’s work to hold our stories up to the light, again and again. I hope we can ask ourselves: Is my story still true for me? Was it ever true? Maybe this story was never really mine—maybe someone gave me a burden to carry years ago, and my story is really about how I learned to put it down.

Some people say that everything happens for a reason. You know, you were destined to order that chicken salad. I don’t say that. I don’t believe in some kind of Intelligent Designer, a supernatural being who set this world into motion and controls every single moving part with a pre-destined plan for the end of time. In that worldview, the reason things happen exists externally—the reason is embedded in the event to teach us some specific lesson—and it is the little human’s job to figure out that pre-ordained reason. That is a top-down way of understanding the meaning of events.

What I do believe is that life happens to us and around us, and as it does, we can hold up the events of our lives, the joys and the sorrows, and examine them, question them, pray over them, and create meaning from them. With free will, we humans create meaning, change the meaning, and learn and grow from the meaning. I think the meaning in our lives comes less from up *there* (up/sky/God) and more from in *here* (heart) and *here* (the gathered community).

To put it simply, I don't believe everything happens for a reason. But I do believe that everything that happens can have meaning.

We get to choose what stories define us. We get to choose who we tell those stories to, and what they mean. Our lives are full of meaning making. Everything that happens can have meaning.

What if...
If only...
It all started when...

“Let eyes that in the plainest cloth a hidden beauty see, discern in us our richest hues. Show us the patterns we may use to set our spirits free.”

May it be so. *Amen.*