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Sermon for July 10, 2022

TRUE STORIES

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Whatever things are true...think on these things.

I'm sure you'll remember a story that was in the news a couple of years ago. A young television actor reported to the police that he'd been attacked late one bitterly cold winter night in Chicago while he was walking away from a Subway sandwich shop, and his attackers assaulted him and tied a noose around his neck and hurled some awful racial epithets at him. Because he was a celebrity, the story made national headlines, and contributed to a general conviction on the part of many people that racism was still deep-rooted and rampant in our society, particularly on the part of supporters of one particular political party. It fed a narrative, as people say these days, and people adhering to that narrative were upset and angered and outraged: the story, in other words, had serious and painful real world consequences.

The problem, as events later established beyond any reasonable doubt, is that the story was false, and the young actor who told it is in fact, I believe, now serving time in jail for having lied to the police.

The reason I mention this story is because I read a couple of weeks ago that Hollywood was planning on doing a remake of a movie called LORD OF THE FLIES. That movie was based on a novel of the same name that was published and became all the rage back when I was a young man, several hundred years ago.

No, seriously, it was published in 1954. The author was a man named William Golding, and the book told the story of a group of young British boys who get stranded on a remote island, and are forced to fend for themselves. What we see during the course of the novel is that the boys gradually lose all traces of civility and mutual regards as they cope with their primitive conditions, until at the end they are reduced to a level of the worst sort of barbarity, literally killing each other,

and eventually worshipping a God represented as the lord of the flies, a name taken from a mistranslation of one of the titles the Bible uses to refer to Satan.

The point of the story was obviously that human beings, at heart, are really brutal and cruel animals, and that human nature is only kept from showing its true colors and descending to the level of vicious animality by human hypocrisy and self-deception.

The book was enormously influential. William Golding in fact was eventually awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, based almost entirely on the influence and impact of that one novel. It was read by every English major in every college in the English-speaking world, and largely shaped the world view of an entire generation – my own – by supposedly laying bare the reality of who we all are essentially as human beings, that we are all, really, wolves in sheep's clothing, if we only had the honesty and courage to face the truth about ourselves.

But the problem is, the story was just that, only a story. Many years later, well after the great heyday of the novel, a group of boys were in fact stranded on a remote island for an extended period of time. And the result was that they turned into a cooperative group who organized themselves into a working unit, set up a functioning and even admirable system for governing themselves and dealing with their extremely difficult circumstances, and were getting along very peaceably and almost comfortably when they were eventually rescued.

And William Golding, the author, as his life unfolded, turned out to be a really miserable person, a terrible alcoholic whose life was noteworthy for its misery and unhappiness, and who eventually succumbed to his disease, but not before making a wreck of his own life and the lives of many of those close to him, and whose subsequent books were almost unreadable, and are today largely forgotten and totally ignored.

In other words, what we had essentially was a man who translated his own cynical and horrific worldview into a story and told that story in a skillful and compelling fashion to the world, and the world sadly accepted it as true, not literally true, of course – it's a novel, after all – but true in the sense of revealing something deep and fundamental about human nature.

Now let's compare that to another famous writer. I've been reading the stories of W. Somerset Maugham lately – a writer pretty much forgotten these days. His stories are usually set in the remote parts of the fading British Empire during the first half of the twentieth century, and Maugham himself lived in those areas during that time.

One of the stories is about a Christian missionary and his wife in the South Seas, who take it upon themselves to convert and reform a woman of ill repute. During the process, they emotionally brutalize the woman, gradually breaking her down, until at last she submits and repents, and is about to join their Christian flock. And then something terrible happens. I won't tell you what it is, but it is unexpected and it is shattering, and it brings the story to its close.

When I read the final words of that story, I was really moved. I felt my Christian faith had been affected, although I couldn't really at that moment say how it had been affected. But then I thought: What if Maugham just made this story up? What if it's not how anyone actually ever behaved, but rather just Somerset Maugham's attempt to influence his readers by telling them a gut-wrenching story, but one that has no basis in reality?

You all know what I'm talking about, I'm sure. People's emotions are so easily manipulated. We cover our eyes and our hearts race at horror movies. We rise and cheer when Rocky Balboa wins the championship. We cry at commercials, for heaven's sake. But at some level, when we're reacting that way, we're aware that we're not actually being told the truth. We're aware that we're being manipulated, not educated. We're reacting to a dream – someone else's dream – rather than reality.

That's why, when I followed up by reading more about W. Somerset Maugham, and learned that he usually based his short stories on real incidents he had either experienced or been told about, and that in this particular case, he had actually known the prostitute, I felt in a way relieved, but at the same time even more deeply shaken by the story. In other words, the story Maugham told was the truth, and my reaction to it was therefore a reaction to the truth, not just someone's fantasy.

And it is for that exact reason that I believe the stories Jesus told us in his parables were true stories, not simply figments of his fertile imagination. Jesus was and is the truth. He is the source and life of all that is true, and it is from the very reality that He Himself created that he draws to teach us about Himself, to teach us about the truth.

The parable of the prodigal son, the parable of the sower and the seed, the parable of the unforgiving servant, and all the other stories Jesus told were undoubtedly true, things that really happened, and when Jesus tells them, He is therefore drawing on reality, on actual life, to offer his instruction.

And that brings us to our gospel reading for this morning, a reading that contains one of the great stories Jesus told, and one of the great stories of our faith, a story that tradition calls the parable of the Good Samaritan.

So let's read it together, and as we do so, let's keep in mind that this isn't fiction, this isn't something Jesus made up to advance or illustrate his instruction. This is something that really happened, and that Jesus is using it to teach us something true about the real world in which we live.

Read Luke 10: 25-37.

The road between Jericho and Jerusalem is 17 miles long, and at that time it was a narrow and twisting path that led through the mountains, and it was notorious for the thieves and bandits that lurked in waiting along it for helpless travelers. In that real, actual setting, Jesus recounts the story of a man who was robbed and very seriously injured by bandits, and left alongside the road to die. After a pair of religious leaders from his own people pass him by, his rescuer turns out to be a Samaritan, a member of an ethnic group that were at that time hated and feared by all full-blooded Jews.

So the setting of the story is true, and what happened that day on that primitive road is also I believe, undoubtedly true, something that the people listening to him would almost certainly also have heard about. You know how often here in Albion these days we mention to someone something that happened locally, and they say, Oh yeah, I read about that in the Hub? Well, that's exactly what Jesus was doing in telling these stories to the crowds who came to hear him speak. "You've all heard, right?, about that Samaritan who helped so-and-so when one of our own priests and a Levite walked right on by?"

So what is the moral of the parable of the Good Samaritan? Typically that would be the subject of the sermon, and we've all heard many sermons with that subject. We'll leave that for another occasion, but for today, I'd just like us to focus on the fact that it's true, it happened. I don't want us today to focus on what a **story** might mean, what the author might have intended by telling us a **story**, but rather on the fact that Jesus is always calling us to pay attention to the world, not just to stories. Here and everywhere, Jesus is teaching us about heaven, not by asking us to imagine some ideal place, some other-worldly realm of higher values and purer motives, and nobler beings than what we find in this world.

Here and everywhere, Jesus is asking us, not to use our imaginations, but to use our eyes. He's directing our attention, not at the stars, but at the streets of our home town. He's teaching us to search out God and God's ways in the world in which we live.

There's a married couple who come into my gym three times a week. A few years back, the husband suffered a traumatic brain injury that makes walking and talking very difficult. Three times a week, his wife brings him to the gym, and they spend an hour or so. She gets him situated on the various exercise devices, helps him get started, and then usually just chats with him or the other people in the gym, or sometimes gets on a different device where she can keep an eye on him. Sometimes she'll stand by him as he slowly walks on the treadmill, holding him by the back of his trousers with one hand for stability, and with the other she's reading a book. And at all times, she's cheerful and friendly and completely unselfconscious, as if there's no place else she'd rather be and nothing else she'd rather be doing.

And every time I see them, I get a little deeper familiarity with how love can manifest as devotion and good humor and unpretentiousness. And something in my own spirit tells me that right here, right now, I'm looking through a window into heaven.

This is a true story. You see why it matters that it's true?

When Jesus says:

Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them (Matthew 6: 26), he's pointing up at actual birds, and saying, "Look up, look at those birds up there. That's what heaven is like, that's a piece of heaven on earth." He's not imagining little animals that might fly, he's *pointing* at little animals that do fly.

There really was a rich old man in a morally unforgiving community in the Middle East whose son violated every expectation of respect and obedience in that community, took a significant portion of his father's wealth and squandered it; and yet, when the son came back to apologize, the old man lifted his skirts like a young girl and ran to embrace his prodigal son, while his elder brother fumed in anger. That's a true story. That's why Jesus tells it.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul famously writes: *... whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*

My friend in the gym, entirely without any intention of doing so, is showing us that God is patient and cheerful; the missionary in Somerset Maugham's story is showing us the awful damage hypocrisy has done before, and can therefore do again; the Good Samaritan shows us that God's loving nature is real, is already here among us, is already active and alive and filling the world with prodigies of wonder.

And so Gracious God, our prayer for this morning is that you open our eyes, not just to the great displays of virtue, but to the simple signs of Your presence among us; that you open our ears, not to profound truths, but to the soft notes of your love that almost unnoticed provide a musical background to our days. We have for the assurance of that love, not distant and lofty dreams, but our everyday reality. We pray for the heart to recognize these things, and the determination to think on these things, because they are the things of Christ, and it is in His name we pray.