

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 3/17/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

Most everyone is familiar with the saying, “There are two sides to every story.” Indeed, in accidents, arguments, or other incidents, people will have their own version of what happened, what was said, and so on. Often these narratives will differ quite a bit from each other.

The Bible is filled with stories where two sides are presented, though we don’t often read them that way. It can be quite valuable, however, to look for and ponder these two perspectives. Then think about what they say to us and our situations, because it will matter significantly for determining for our own life which version we will select.

Consider the story of the woman caught in adultery. The crowd is ready to kill her because of her sin that has disrupted the life of at least one family. Her version of her life is that either she has been unfaithful to her own husband or has participated in damaging another man’s marriage. She has committed a grievous sin that must be condemned and punished. JESUS, though, tells her a different version. The crowd will no longer convict her and that HE, on behalf of GOD, will not either. More than that, she has the power to change her life by abandoning this illicit relationship and instead striving to live as GOD wants her to. The implied question at the end of the story is, “Which version will she choose?”

Or there’s the tale of Zacchaeus. This short man who works as a tax collector and is disliked by the people of the community in which he lives and works. His version of his life is that he is a cheater who has taken far more money than required from others and lined his pockets with it, that he is selfish, that he associates with those who are enemies to the people of his nation, and that no will even show him enough courtesy to move so that he can see JESUS come to town. JESUS, on the other hand, has a different version to tell him of what his life could be. We don’t get to hear that image as JESUS presents it but, in this case, we know that Zacchaeus chooses JESUS’ version. He pays back four-times what he has cheated from others and gives half of his money to the poor.

Then there is the story of Samaritan woman at the well from whom JESUS asks for a drink of water. In the course of their conversation, JESUS reveals that HE knows that she has had five previous husbands and the man with whom she is now living won’t marry her. Further, because she comes to draw water in hottest part of the day when no one else will come to the well suggests that she either is so disliked by or so dislikes her neighbors that she doesn’t want to have to encounter any of them. Her version of her life is that she can’t maintain a meaningful relationship with anyone and that she is all alone in life. The other version, however, is the one JESUS shows her—that she is loved of GOD, that GOD has good things to give to her (living water), and that she can have a meaningful relationship with GOD. In this case, she chooses JESUS version and finds relationship, not just with GOD but also with her fellow townspeople. She goes and tells her neighbors about JESUS so that they, too, can come to believe in HIM.

Or think about the parable called the Prodigal Son. The younger son of a man gets his share of the inheritance (before his father is even dead) and goes and spends it wastefully until nothing is left. His version of his life is so poor, that he can only envision a version where he works for his father as a servant. His father’s version, representing GOD’S version for us, is that he is welcomed back into the

family and restored to his place of honor in the household. In fact, his return is so joyously received, that a party is thrown in his honor. We should not be surprised by the version which he chooses. This young man has a brother with his own version about himself in this family. When he sees that his brother has returned and that his father is having a party in his brother's honor, he wraps himself up in his own version to the point of great resentment. In his version, he has been faithful to his father and yet that faithfulness has not been rewarded. He hasn't even been able to roast a goat for a party with his friends. (Goats have very little meat on them, as opposed the fattened calf used in his brother's party.) His brother gets treated like this and he gets treated like that? But his father's version (GOD'S version) is that this older son is always part of the household and everything that his father has it his. He can have, he can be, whatever he wants. Loved, blessed, celebrated—whatever he wants. And the story ends with us wondering, which version will he choose?

Over and over, when reading the Bible, it is good to stop and ask what are the two versions presented in the story, and to read or wonder which version is or will be chosen. And then, having done that, we have the opportunity to look at our own life and consider what is the version we are telling about ourself. How do I describe myself and how does that define my future. What is my version? Then, think about GOD'S version. What does GOD say about me and what is GOD'S future for me? You are a child of GOD, dearly loved. GOD wants to be in relationship with you always. Everything GOD has is yours. Loved, blessed, celebrated. Which version will you choose?

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey