

“A Sermon about the Single Stories We Write”

John 9:1-41

February 11, 2018

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian author who talks about something called the single story. She describes a childhood incident when her middle-class family got a new houseboy. The only thing her mother told her about the houseboy was that his family was very poor. And so out of pity, they would send the family yams and rice and their old clothes. But one day she went to visit the family, and she writes: “His mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.”

Years later, she would come to the U.S. to study at a university, only to experience herself as the subject of the single story when her American roommate assumed she didn't know how to speak English, even though English is Nigeria's official language. And when the roommate asked if she could listen to Adichie's “tribal music,” she was consequently disappointed when Adichie produced a tape of Mariah Carey. Adichie writes, “What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.”

In this morning's Gospel text, it appears that the healing is probably not the point of the story, since the author devotes only seven verses to the actual healing, while using the rest of the chapter to talk about the single-story image everyone had of the man who had been born blind.

Take, for example, the disciples' single story of the man in the opening verses. They encounter a man who is blind, and has been all his life. Maybe he is such a fixture on this street corner that the disciples no longer think about his circumstances. Or maybe they never did. All we know is when the disciples encountered this man, the only thing they saw before them was an object lesson. He was not so much a human being as he was the subject of a theological discussion: was it this man's sin or his parents' sin that had caused the blindness?

And because of the Greek language in which this story was originally written, there seems to be some disagreement as to how Jesus responds to the disciples. You see, there is no punctuation in ancient Greek. So we have to figure out on our own where things like periods and commas go. Depending on where we place the punctuation, Jesus might be explaining that the man was born blind and had spent his entire life blind in order that God's glory might be revealed in him. That's the traditional translation which gives me an image of a cruel and impersonal god, a god who allows humanity to suffer if that suffering will result in the god's own glorification. But a translation that is equally plausible would have Jesus simply saying neither the man nor his parents sinned. And then going on to say, “But, in order that the works of God might be manifest in him, we must work the works of the One who sent me.”

I like this translation much better because in it Jesus shifts the conversation from an impersonal, theological discussion to that of an action-oriented, social justice one. In the second version, Jesus is telling the disciples they are asking the wrong question. They should, instead, be asking what can be done about this situation.

Have you ever been guilty of looking at a human being and seeing them as nothing more than an object lesson? I know I have! It happens when I don't see the humanity in the panhandler, but instead, concern myself with how they ended up there. I see the addict or alcoholic as an object lesson when I comment with a quick “There, but by the grace of God, go I,” without doing anything to ease their circumstances. It happens when I am more concerned that an undocumented immigrant has broken the law than I am about why they may have felt compelled to break it.

Yes, I am guilty. And I'm guilty because I only see a one-dimensional person. I only see a panhandler, an addict, or lawbreaking undocumented immigrant. Nothing else. Ignoring their dignity and humanity, I've written only a single story of that person.

But the friends and neighbors in our story were also guilty of assigning a single story to the man. After the man was healed, they didn't even seem to recognize him: "Is this the blind beggar?" "No, it can't be him! Maybe it's just someone who resembles him." The community was so invested in the single story of the man's blindness, that after his transformation, he was simply unrecognizable to them.

I like to dress comfortably during the week. You'll most likely find me in tennis shoes, jeans, and a T-shirt. And in the summer I'm wearing shorts. When new church attendees make an appointment to speak with me during the week, apparently it's somewhat unsettling for some of them to see me in something other than a clerical collar. Likewise, for those who only see me during the week, they seem surprised when they discover I actually own a suit. When we realize that there's more to a person than the single story we've created, sometimes the person is almost unrecognizable.

The Pharisees reveal their single story of the man after he gives his testimony for the second time to them, drawing his own conclusions about Jesus' identity as a person sent from God. You can almost hear their disdain for him when they respond, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" The single story they had constructed of this man was that of a sinner. He was not a beloved child of God. He was nothing more than a dirty, lowdown sinner.

Has anyone tried to deny your belovedness? Have you ever felt as if you were reduced to a single story? Or have you ever been guilty of writing only a single story for someone else?

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. . . . I've always felt," she says, "that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar."

In this morning's text Jesus tells the man to go wash the mud out of his eyes. And when he did, he was finally able to see. The problem with so many of us – myself included – is that we've got mud in our eyes that needs to be washed out. I am guilty of seeing people only with the single-story image of their skin color, their gender, their religion, their national origin, or their sexual orientation. When in fact, they are multi-layered human beings who stress over life, fear the unknown, laugh when they shouldn't, and grieve the loss in their lives just the way I do. But the part of their story which I must never forget is their belovedness. Like me, they are beloved children of God.

There is a Hindu greeting that's usually spoken with a slight bow and hands pressed together, palms touching and fingers pointing upwards, thumbs close to the chest. The word that's spoken is "Namaste," and roughly translated, it means, "I bow to the God within you," or "The Spirit within me salutes the Spirit in you."

There's wisdom in that. If we were all able to see beyond the single stories we've created for each other, if we could manage to recognize the God within each person we encounter, if we could accept that they are beloved children of God, just like we are, then we might be more inclined to grace and mercy and compassion. The world might be a better place in which to live. And the experience of God's presence might be a reality instead of a dream towards which we strive.

But it won't happen unless we are able to see beyond the single stories we've written about other people. May we take the time to encounter each other intimately so that we can know more than our single story of them. And may God grant us the willingness and the ability to rewrite those stories. Amen.