

PENTIMENTO
Father's Day
June 18, 2017
Rev. Diana Bohn

It has been said that our lives are a blank canvas. I don't agree so much with that metaphor because I think we're all born with a significant uniqueness of personality and circumstance already coloring our life canvas. But I do believe that we all get only one canvas on which to compose the masterwork of our lives, one canvas upon which our lives will be painted in all their glorious and chaotic colors, some moments carefully defined and others haphazard splashes. We are all the artists of our own lives, sketching, redrawing, and then changing the lines and colors that become who we are for all the world to see.

On Father's Day when I look back at the masterwork of my Dad's life, there is one moment in particular that I remember him painting with great mischief making in our kitchen in Dallas. I see the silky brown mahogany table top where his chair waited for him and the warm yellows and greens of the summer morning outside our window in Texas. It's breakfast time and my Dad arrived at the table and sat down to eat without a shirt on. That really annoyed my Mom... My little brother and sister, Scott and Kim, and I used to watch this play out morning after morning. For about the first week my Mom brushed off her irritation with my Dad pretty quickly. But then the routine got old and we kids watched her start to kind of boil underneath the surface.

Finally one morning...she couldn't take it anymore. "Ralph", she said "go put a shirt on!" My Dad got up from the table and came back again with no shirt on – but with a perfectly tied necktie flapping against his bare chest. We kids howled with laughter and my mom tried not to, but she smiled.

Pause

"PENTIMENTO "-- an alternation in a painting, evidenced by traces of previous work, showing that the artist has changed his or her mind as to the composition during the process of painting. The word is Italian for "repentance."

My Dad had shown up day after day for breakfast no shirt on and then – with one wonderful brush stroke, he altered his previous work, changing his composition during the process.

PENTIMENTO. The scene was transformed from a tense moment at breakfast, to peals of laughter—all because the artist altered his previous work by painting a bright broad line right down the middle. Pentimento.

Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of the paper book *"Eat, Pray, Love"*, talks about pentimento in another way. She talks about the powerful craft of transforming the incidents in our lives into stories that refresh and heal us. Listen to what she writes in her brief article "Speak Memories."

Everybody in my family is a talented storyteller. We can't play team sports, we have a tiny little problem with drinking and we're all pretty dysfunctional about money – but man oh man, can we tell a good story.

I spent my childhood watching narratives get spun, twisted, and renegotiated as family events were transformed from incidents into stories. There's a big difference, it turns out, between the two. An incident is an event that happens in real time, with real consequences, usually involving real (and raw) human emotion. A story is what you make out of it later. Incidents are wild and dangerous, stories are controlled and reassuring. In the process of building a story, you sand down the sharp edges of an incident, buffing away all the pain and immediacy and urgency, creating something you can carry around safely in your pocket.

Growing up, my grandfather used to tell the tale of his cousin who had a habit, back in the 1950's, of getting drunk late at night and then going for nude swims in the Eerie Canal, all alone. One night this poor fellow locked himself out of his truck—which contained his clothing. He was forced to walk home, several miles along the one main road of his hometown, wet and naked.

But it gets better! My grandfather's cousin had found a tiny washcloth in the bed of his pickup truck—the only thing he could use to hide his nakedness. As he walked home, whenever he saw a car approaching from the front, he would use the washcloth to cover his private parts. Whenever he heard a car approaching from the back, he would cover his bottom... Inevitably, of course, two cars approached from both directions at exactly the same time. Should he cover his privates of his bottom?

“So I asked him,” my grandfather said, “What did you do?”

And the cousin shook his head ruefully and replied, “All I can say is this I've always hoped that I made the right decision.”

Each of us, as artists painting every day the masterwork that is our life are faced with the same questions Elizabeth Gilbert's wonderful story poses, which incidents do I paint in and which ones do I paint out? Which private parts of myself should I cover up, and which private parts should I reveal? The choices matter because, choice by choice, we sketch the lines that shape our lives.

The Bible is filled with stories of imperfect people just like us making these very hard choices in the course of painting their masterwork. Eli is one of them. Our scripture reading today is familiar to many of us as the story of Samuel, a young boy who was consecrated to God by a mother grateful for his birth. The “grandfatherly” Eli becomes Samuel's mentor in the Temple and teaches him to listen for God's call in his life.

A very powerful part of the story that has been painted out of our friendlier Sunday School versions, hinges on Eli, more so than Samuel. The aging Eli, who had dedicated himself to raising young Samuel in truth and in faithful relationship with God and others, was carrying a terrible history of relationship with his own two sons. Phineas and Hophni were corrupt and despicable sons and priests, who abused their offices and took advantage of vulnerable people, and had no regard for their father. Eli had spoken to them, tried to tell them their awful deeds

were known throughout Shiloh. Why do you do such things my sons? Your hearts are not with the Lord. But the Bible says, “They would not listen to the voice of their father.”

So, at a time when visions were rare and Eli had grown blind, God began raising up a new prophet, a young boy placed in the care of an old man with a new chance.

PENTIMENTO, Eli. The dark heavy lines cross the canvas of Eli’s life in relationship with his two sons were giving way to streaks of light and faint outlines of possibility. Eli’s chance had come to paint differently at a time when he was needed to play a bold new part in God’s Holy History.

I can just see the young boy Samuel, timid and fearful, perhaps trembling as he approaches Eli in the morning carrying the awful vision he had received from the Lord during the night. “What is it that the Lord told you?” the old man asked? Don’t hide it from me. The vision was one of judgment against Eli’s house. But Eli had seen it coming—He couldn’t stop it from happening. He had watched it gradually playing out over years and years. Nothing good could come from the legacy his sons were leaving. He knew that. But what courage Eli summoned at that moment to teach a young boy how to speak the hard truth when it is called for, and hide nothing in service of a powerful vision.

What part should I hide from him, and what part should I tell? Young Samuel wrestled the whole night with these questions before opening the doors of the house of the Lord. The text says “Samuel lay there until morning.” He couldn’t sleep, what he knew would hurt his beloved mentor, and the man who been more father to him than his own. But Samuel told Eli everything. Eli received it with courage. Though his vision was failing, Eli could see clearly how to do his part in raising this young boy. This pass at fathering would be painted .outside the lines of his previous experience.

We all have opportunities great and small to redraw the lines that determine the shape of our lives. My dad did it. Elizabeth Gilbert and her relatives do it. Eli did it. We all encounter countless grace moments when what we have experienced teaches us, little by little, to paint our lives in some new way. By God’s grace we all grow into newer, braver versions of ourselves—a human creation with ever-changing colors, borders, and boundaries.

I invite you to listen now to one more story... a story of a father and a son, a story that engages the most contentious issue currently facing our denomination, and one that captures the slow and subtle transition in a father from black and white to softening shades of gray in the course of a lifetime.

This is a story called “*Boys In the Street*” written by Greg Holden.

BOYS IN THE STREET

*When I was younger
My daddy told me I would never
Never amount to nothing special
He'd come at me from every angle*

*He'd say You're the last thing I wanted the last thing I need
How am I gonna answer when my friends tell me
My son was kissing boys in the street
My son was kissing boys in the street*

*He'd try to change me
Say I'm embarrassing my country
How could I do this to my family
Do I wanna grow up being lonely*

He'd say We've worked for our money we've put you in schools

*Is this how you repay us? Do you think this is cool?
My son, stop kissing boys in the street
My son, stop kissing boys in the street*

*Now that I'm older
My daddy's hearts a little warmer
But he still wont hug me like my brother
And he still wont kiss me like my mother*

*He said, "You're a part of this family, I made you myself
But the way that you act isn't good for your health
My son, stop kissing boys in the street
My son, stop kissing boys in the street*

Ooooooooo

Ohhhhhhh

*My daddy's dying
And he's finally realized I'm not lying
We sit in silence but we're smiling
Because for once we are not fighting*

*He'd say, "There was no way of knowing 'cause all I was taught
Is men only love women, but now I'm not sure
My son, keep kissing boys in the street
My son, keep kissing boys in the street
When I'm gone keep kissing boys in the street"*

PENTIMENTO.

An alteration, evidenced by traces of previous work, showing that the artist has changed his mind as to the composition during the process. The word is Italian for repentance.

I give thanks for all the courageous men who dare to paint over or paint again when their experience teaches them new perspectives in service of a vision of compassion and wholeness. May God bless all of us artists who pick up the paintbrush every day, and may God bless each of the canvases of our lives with countless, grace filled pentimenti!

Amen