

A Scripted Life
May 3, 2009
Isaiah 55:1-3
St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
David Beckett, D.Min.

There is something sad about the title of today's sermon. A scripted life. It leaves me with a feeling that someone's life is not fully their own, that they are living according to a script given them by someone else. Are you living your own life? Or are you living a scripted life, one that has been determined by someone else?

In film and theater a script is the written account of everything that is said and done in a movie or a play. A script is a guarantee that nothing other than what is written down will ever happen. When I was in high school our youth group put on a play. I can't tell you the title or the theme. What I can say is that another teenager who struggled with epilepsy, walked out on me two pages early in the script! So I was on stage alone trying to speak my part while trying to improvise and have it make sense without the other guy. It was very unnerving.

Have you ever experienced someone who unnerved you because they didn't act according to society's script? One of the problems with churches is that they have a script for how people are to speak and act. The problem is that no one ever tells the new people!

This was the case in one formal church when a young man who had recently come to know Christ arrived to worship for the first time. His heart was filled with love and enthusiasm. During the sermon the preacher said something he liked and so he shouted out, "Praise the Lord!" You could see a wave of fluttering as people reacted to this unscripted line. A second time the young man hollered, "Thank you, God!" This time people actually turned around and glared at the man. When this happened a third time an usher approached the young man and whispered, "Young man, we don't do this kind of thing in this church." The young man replied, "But I've found God, mister." The usher replied, "Well, that is well and good, but you didn't find him here!"

Are you living according to some script? Who wrote the script of your life? I think there are three script writers that determine the course of our lives. Other people. Ourselves. And God. I want to suggest that problems crop up when we allow just one of these script writers to run our lives, and this includes God. What we need is balance. What we need is a blend of all three.

Let's take a look at what life is like when it is lived primarily when written by other people. It is easy to see how many people live a scripted life because we all start out as babies, then children. We have no script of our own because we depend on adults for our very lives. This script gives us a certain amount of security. But as we grow and discover that wonderful quality called independence, a script that tells us what to say and how to act can become a burden that squeezes the life out of us.

My life as a child in suburban Ohio in the 50's and 60's was extremely scripted. There were lots of rules and social expectations. We had to wear a coat and tie to church as children. Actually we wore hats as well. We would never dream of calling adults by their first names. We got our mouths literally washed out with soap if we

dared to speak a profanity. And then there was the hair part. There was a social rule that hair must be parted on the left side. I was almost 30 before I finally rebelled against that script. For the past 25 years I parted my hair on the right side! I am such a wild man! Looking at young men's hairstyles nowadays they say, "Part? What's a part?"

I think you could say that the social turmoil of the late sixties was in part a rebellion by young people against the repressive scripts we were forced to live out. This doesn't mean that those scripts were all bad. It means that people are not meant to live completely according to scripts adults give them.

This leads us to the second source of scripts: ourselves. People who act out a life scripted by others often are not in touch with their own desires. This describes my experience. I was so busy following rules set down by my parents, my school, and society that I had little experience in thinking what I really wanted in life. No one ever gave me permission to think outside this box I was living.

When we lived in Atlanta I was a college student working in a cabinet factory in the summer. They liked my work ethic and talked to me about staying and moving up to foreman. That night at dinner I said, "They want to make me foreman at the plant." The reaction was swift and firm. "There's no way you're going to be foreman. You have to go back to college." Deep inside I knew they were right and knew it wouldn't be a good plan. What would have been helpful was an open conversation about what I wanted in life.

Isn't it interesting how people talk around certain topics? They nip at it like a fish nibbling at bait on a hook. But they are afraid to tackle the real issues. Maybe they don't know what the real issues are, and so they keep going back to the script and repeating the same old lines. The script gives us security. It gives us a stage and a role to play. But it is not a role that is truly our own.

Do you know yourself well enough to know what you want in life? Many people think they know what they want, but their desires are born out of conflict. They define themselves by what they are against, not what they are for. We see this with siblings all the time. A younger sibling makes decisions based, not on what he or she wants, but on doing something different than an older brother or sister. The attitude is, "I don't know what I want, but I know I don't want to be like her!"

You may be 60 years old. Your brother is deceased. But you are still living out a script that was written years ago out of competition with him. It is amazing how many of our scripts that began in childhood are still being followed years later. Like a wind up toy we are powered by a script that subconsciously tells us how to speak and act.

William Stafford has a wonderful line in his poem, "Ask Me." "Ask me whether what I have done is my life." Parker Palmer uses this poem to begin his little book, "Let Your Life Speak." He talks about his granddaughter, "She did not show up as raw material to be shaped into whatever image the world might want her to take. She arrived with her own gifted form, with the shape of her own sacred soul. Biblical faith calls it the image of God in which we are all created. Thomas Merton calls it true self. Quakers call it the inner life, or "that of God" in every person. The humanist tradition calls it identity or integrity. No matter what you call it, it is a pearl of great price."¹

Palmer has his finger on something powerful here. This is a reality that is described with different language in different traditions. What is important is that we

¹ Let Your Life Speak, Parker Palmer, p. 11

live, not according to some script penned by someone else, or by our own childhood-shaped scripts. What is important is that we discover our true self, the self God created, the self God desires for us, the self that will give us life energy. We spend so much time and energy looking for life in places and people and things we think matter. In Isaiah 55 we read, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” (v. 2)

The real spiritual work is to find our real self, the one God wants us to be. Listen again to Isaiah: “Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.” (v. 2b-3a) God’s desire is for every one of you to live the life you were created to live. You do not have to settle for second or third best. God wants you to have life and have it abundantly! There is joy that God wants to see spring forth in your heart. There is life energy that God desires for you.

Here’s the key to discovering this life and joy. The three script sources we have talked about: people, self, and God? Find a balance and a blend of all three. Just because you have had little freedom to live your own life, don’t discount the advice of friends and family. Just because you felt forced to play a role you didn’t seek, don’t trust yourself alone to write the script of your life. Just because you have been living someone else’s version of who you should be, don’t ignore what God desires for your life.

On December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks did something outside what society had scripted for her life. She sat down at the front of a bus in one of the seats reserved for whites. Years later she was asked, “Why did you sit down at the front of the bus that day? Rose Parks did not say it was to launch a movement. She said, “I sat down because I was tired.” Parker Palmer writes, “She did not mean that her feet were tired. She meant that her soul was tired, her heart was tired, her whole being was tired of playing by racist rules, of denying her soul’s claim to selfhood.”²

Are you tired of your scripted life? Are you weary of playing a role someone else has forced upon you? The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that we can be freed! The script for the rest of our lives does not have to depend on what others say. We can explore our true heart’s desires. We can discover how to live God’s way.

² Let Your Life Speak, Parker Palmer, p. 33