

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH
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Changing the Narrative: Won't you Be My Neighbor
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When Diana Nyad was nine years old she stood on a beach in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, she asked her mom an innocent question. Where's Cuba? Her mom pointed to the horizon and said, its right over there, you can't see it but you could almost swim there. 20 years later Diana Nyad would attempt to do just that. She swam 78 miles in 42 hours but strong westerly winds stopped her short of her goal. That dream of becoming the first person to swim the Straits of Florida would lie dormant for more than three decades. At the age of 60, Diana figured it was now or never. Her second attempt to swim from Cuba to Florida fell short because of an asthma attack. Her third attempt failed because she was stung by a Portuguese man o' war. Her fourth attempt ended with nine jelly fish stings. And then the morning of August 31st, 2013 a 64 year old Diana Nyad would make one last attempt. In 53 hours and 110 statute miles later Diana Nyad swam ashore in Key West. Her tongue was terrible swollen but she managed to slur these words; she said, "I have three messages, one is that we should never, ever give up. Two, you're never too old to chase your dream. And three, it looks like a solitary sport but it took a team."

How did Diana Nyad do what no one had done before? How did she endure the physical and mental punishment and why did she refuse to give up after those failed attempts? Well, motivation is incredibly complicated and I don't want it oversimplified, but I think it goes back to something that happened on her fifth birthday. Her father, Aristotle Nyad, called Diana into his den and said, I have been waiting so very long for this day. Now you are five. Today is the day that you are ready to understand the most significant thing I will ever tell you. Aristotle opened up an unabridged dictionary and pointed to her name, Nyad. He said, now tomorrow, you will go to your little preschool and you will ask your little friends if their names are in the dictionary. And they will tell you no. You are the only one. You are the special one. Then Aristotle pointed to the page and said, your name is Nyad. First definition is from Greek mythology, the nymphs that swam in the lakes and oceans and rivers and fountains to protect the waters for the gods. Listened to me darling, because now is coming the most important part. Next definition, a girl or woman champion swimmer. Darling, this is your destiny.

How did Diana do it? The short answer, it was her father's voice. Her voice, his voice was her beacon, his narrative with her identity, her destiny. When the sharks circled, when the jellyfish, tongue, when dehydration and hallucination set in, it was her father's voice spoken 59 years before that I think kept her going.

Aristotle Nyad opened the unabridged dictionary. We open a book called the Bible, and in the pages of that book, we find our true name. We find our identity and our destiny and we hear our father's voice, my sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me, John 10:27. And if we could hear him in an audible voice, I think we would hear our father in heaven saying what He spoke over Jesus at his baptism. This is my beloved son; this is my beloved daughter in whom I am well pleased.

Last weekend we kicked off a series about the great commandment. Jesus said, love the Lord God with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. If we're going to be great at anything, let's be great at the great commandment. Let's love God, let's love people and this weekend we talk about changing the narrative.

If you have a Bible, you can turn to the book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible. It starts with seven letters to the seven churches of Asia, gives us a little glimpse of what heaven is like and then there is this apocalyptic moment and chapter 12 starting at verse 10.

¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice shouting across the heavens, "It has come at last—salvation and power and the Kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down to earth—the one who accuses them before our God day and night."

Now, let me pause right here. The enemy talked about in this passage is given a variety of names in scripture. He's the great dragon, the ancient serpent, he's called a liar and a deceiver, and in this particular passage he's called the accuser of the brethren. Can I remind us this weekend that we have a very real enemy, but his tactics have not changed? What he wants to do is remind you of everything you've done wrong over and over and over again so that you don't have any emotional energy, any spiritual energy left to dream about what God wants to do in you and through you. And I think it's important right here to make a distinction between two things, condemnation and conviction, because if we don't get this, we're going to stumble over it. Conviction comes from the Holy Spirit and yes, it's a feeling of guilt, but it's feeling guilt over unconfessed sin, it's something that we have not dealt with and God knows that if we don't deal with it kinda like pain or symptoms that we might ignore it is only gonna get worse. Listen, God's conviction is a wonderful thing, it's evidence that he hasn't given up on you. It's evidence that he loves you. It's evidence that he wants to help walk you through this and get you to the other side.

Now let me tell you what condemnation is. It's a feeling of guilt over confessed sin. It's sin that has already been forgiven and forgotten. In Romans 8:1 says this, *"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ."* And so we've gotta be very careful to tune out the voice of the accuser who would speak thoughts and words of condemnation. Let me zoom in on verse 11. It says, *"and they overcame him"* How? *"by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony."*

Now, I want to focus on the second half this weekend, the word of our testimony because we're talking about changing the narrative, but to fully appreciate the second half, I think you have to understand the first half it says, we overcome by the blood of the lamb. Now, if you're new to the Bible that sounds strange. Let's be honest, and so let me kind of unpack this a little bit so that you have an understanding of what this means. When John the Baptist saw Jesus near the Jordan River, do you remember how he referred to him? John said, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Now, I don't have time to do a deep dive, but Jesus is the Passover Lamb. He came to fulfill the law and he came to put an end to the sacrificial system that had been practiced for hundreds of years. What he does is he establishes a new covenant with some new ground rules in and trust me, you ought to like these rules. Now, in ancient times, you didn't

make a covenant, you cut a covenant. It was a complex ritual. We use paper and ink, generally speaking, in many ancient cultures two people entering into a covenant would exchange robes and belts and sometimes weapons and sometimes names, but that covenant was not signed, sealed, and delivered until they cut the palm of their right hand, clasp the hand of the person they were making the covenant with so that there was an exchange of blood. That's how a covenant was cut. Now I know that does not sound sanitary and I know that that sounds primeval, but it was a sacred ritual and the scar on the hand was a sacred reminder. It was evidence of a covenant that had been sealed by blood.

After the resurrection, Thomas, one of the disciples had some doubts, didn't he, about the veracity of Jesus resurrected. He could not believe it, and so what does Jesus do? What does Jesus say? That there is a layer of meaning here that's lost on us if we don't understand the way that covenants were cut. Jesus shows Thomas his scars and he says, put your finger here. See my hands. This isn't just Jesus providing physical evidence of a bodily resurrection. This is Jesus establishing covenant with a scarred hand.

Let me go back to covenant ritual. After the exchanging of robes and belts and weapons and names and blood, they would often plant a memorial tree and they would eat a memorial meal. A loaf of bread would be broken in half and they would feed each other while saying, this is my body. That should sound familiar. And they would take a cup of wines, symbolizing their blood, and they would say, this is my blood, which is now your blood. 1 Peter 1:18 says, *"it is not with perishable things like silver and gold, that we have been redeemed from the empty way of life, handed down to us."* No, it is. We are redeemed, we are rescued, we are ransomed with what? With the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish. His blood, it cancels the curse of sin. It breaks the yoke of bondage, it guarantees the promises of God and it's signs, seals and delivers his covenant with us. It is our redemption, it is our forgiveness, it is our confidence, it is our deliverance is our healing. What I'm saying is this; the blood of the lamb is in a category by itself. Is there anything that's more sacred?

And yet I find something incredibly disorienting, confusing about this verse because there should be a period after lamb. It should say we overcome by the blood of the lamb period, but there's not a period there. There's a conjunction. It's the word "and". It says we overcome by the blood of the lamb and the word of our testimony. That seems to me like those two things don't belong in the same sentence. One of these things is not like the other, but maybe that's because we underestimate the significance of story. Maybe it's because we underestimate the power of testimony. And this is where we switched gears this is not either or, this is both and we don't ever overcome without the blood of the lamb, but we don't overcome without the word of our testimony either.

Now, let me say this, gotta get a testimony first. Don't you? You cannot spell testimony without test. It's the first four letters of every testimony. The way you get a testimony is by passing a test. That's why James 1 says, *"Consider it pure joy. My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing, the testing of your faith develops perseverance, allow perseverance to finish its work."* Why? *"So that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."* Testimony, it's a powerful thing and here's why I think we need to share our testimonies with each other. And I think some of these are testimonies of pain,

testimonies of hurt, things that are very difficult to verbalize to another person. And I think some of these things are testimonies of God's favor and blessing and some of the wonderful things that we don't feel like we even deserve. How does that happen? And then it's everything in between.

But why don't we start over here because I need to hear your testimony of struggle and I'll tell you why. Because I need to know that I'm not alone. I need to know that I'm not the only one who struggles with lust, that I'm not the only one who struggles with pride or greed or anger. I need to know that I'm not the only one who gets a little depressed. Like we need to share our testimonies because I need to know that you're like me and I'm like you. You know what I think the power of AA is? I think part of it is the 12 steps, but I think part of it is just a bunch of people sitting in a circle and admitting that they are powerless over some things in their lives. And it's the power of sharing those testimonies that what happens when you share the painful pieces, when you share the mistakes you've made, guilt begins to lose its grip on your life and that's why the Bible says confess to one another, but I thought all I have to do is confess my sin to God to be forgiven. That is absolutely true. Then why does the Bible say confess to one another? Because we need to know we're not alone. We need to help. This is not a solitary sport. This is about us journeying together. Now if you flip the coin, I think we also need to share the miracles, the deliverance, the healing. It's why I share my testimony of having asthma for more than 40 years and then God healing me. Why do I share that? Because I've heard lots of other healing testimonies that encouraged me to keep on believing and keep on praying. You know why? Because if he did it for you, maybe he'll do it for me. And if he did it before, maybe he will do it again.

Can I challenge you to do something this week? Only one homework assignment. I think, you know, for most of us schools just got out, and most of you aren't in school anyway. So, here is a little assignment and it's one that I think would pay tremendous dividends in your life. Can I challenge you to write out your testimony? Now, how do I do that? Well, you know what, I would say that in our little booklet that we gave to you, I think it's page 29 there are some wonderful questions. This one right here, some wonderful questions that I think can help get you started. Start with some of those questions and begin to write it out. Some of the pain, some of the hurts, some of the things that have maybe defined your life in a way that you wish it had not and other things that maybe God has done that you need to fully vet and fully give him credit for. Now, I don't know how long this needs to be. I think probably more than a couple of paragraphs, maybe even more than a couple pages.

But this is interesting to me. A psychological research has shown that writing down your story will make you 11 percent happier with your life. So if for no other reason, I mean would you like to be 11 percent happier this week? Well, of course you would. And so write down your story because here's what's going to happen. Listen to me. Someone needs your testimony. Someone needs it. They're going to walk through something that you've walked through. God's going to redeem some of the pain in your life to help someone else walk through their pain.

Last week, Pastor Joel talked about loving God by loving our neighbor. If you miss that message, oh man, you missed it. The good news is you can watch it, we've got the podcast. Lora and I were so tremendously challenged by it and it just, it impacted me this week. I hung out with a neighbor for about an hour this week. I don't know that I would have if it weren't for that

message because I saw an opportunity. Now here's the deal. There is a vertical dimension to this thing called the great commandment, love God, and there's a horizontal dimension of love your neighbor, but the great commandment is not two dimensional. It's three dimensional. There is a piece of the puzzle that we often overlook and it's the last two words and it's more than an addendum. It says, love your neighbor as yourself, and we often don't talk about it because honestly, it makes me feel a little uncomfortable talking about loving yourself. It sounds a little narcissistic, doesn't it? But I'll tell you what. Narcissism by definition is arrogant, manipulative, and self centered. It lacks empathy for others and it's an unhealthy craving for attention. Loving yourself is the opposite of that. Philippians frames it this way. (Philippians 2) ³ *"Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves."* ⁴ *"Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too."* And then it goes so far as to say this, your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus who did not consider equality with God, something to be grasped, but he let go and he took on the very nature of a servant and he humbled himself.

Now, I talked about humility a few weeks ago. So let me talk about false humility and let me define it. False humility is thinking of yourself as anything less than who God says you are. It's refusing to believe that you are who God says you are, that you are the image of God, you're the apple of God's eye, you are his workmanship and you are a child of God. 1 John 3:1 says; *"What great love the father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God."* Ah, amazing, amazing! So here's the bottom line. If you don't forgive yourself, it's really hard to forgive the people in your life. If you don't respect yourself, it's really hard to respect the people around you. If you don't love yourself, it's really hard to love others. So what's the key to the whole thing? It's understanding how much God loves us. And when we have a revelation of that love, man it changes the way we treat other people because it changes the narrative.

Alright, last weekend a couple of professional baseball players were at our Saturday night service, they were in town playing the Nats, we had dinner afterwards and I'm fascinated by people like this. I want to know what makes them tick. I want to get up in their head space. And so I asked them, one guy's a catcher, one's a pitcher. I said to the catcher, what does through your mind, what do you say to yourself when you step into the batter's box? Just thought it sounded like a good question to ask someone to play baseball. And his answer was so fascinating to me. He said that his narrative, he has a word, and as he gets in that batter's box and he gets ready, his word is unleash, unleash. Now he's been in the big leagues I think for a decade, so that narrative has changed over time, but right now it's unleashed, but he said the key is this. He said it used to be when I got down in the count I would get defensive and he said; now I don't change my narrative. I don't care if I'm down two strikes, it's still unleashed, and he did happen to hit a three run homer on two strikes last Saturday. Unfortunately for the Nats. Okay. By the way, I asked the pitcher about his narrative, what went through his mind when he got on the mound? He said, I'm going to kill him. Well, thanks for your honesty.

Now listen, this isn't about a batter getting into a batter's box, this isn't about a pitch getting on a mound. This is about all of us who have an internal monologue. It's running all the time, whether we know it or not, we are talking to our selves. Now, I don't know how you measure this, but the kind of rough estimate is about 60,000 thoughts a day that run through our minds and according to the Cleveland Clinic, 80 percent of those thoughts are negative. That is 48,000 negative

thoughts per day. Like I mean you struck out before you got into the batter's box. And so here's what I believe when we talk about changing the narrative. I think about Diana's father that is your destiny. We open our Bibles and we begin to hear God's voice and begin to discover who we are and who God has created us to be. Please hear me. This is not a bunch of like power of positive thinking, this is Biblical thinking. This is Philippians 4:8. *"If anything is good or right or pure or just think about such things."*

By the way, if you want to be a Navy Seal, good luck. Um, I don't know much about this. Um, if we have a Navy Seal at NCC, I'd like to grab lunch with you. It involves a six month training course, starts with eight weeks of basic conditioning and halfway through there's something called Hell Week, you've heard of this. And it tests, physical endurance, mental toughness, two thirds of those who go into Navy Seal training, ring the bell, in other words they call it quits. For some it's sleep deprivation 110 hours without sleep, can't handle it, for others it's near hypothermia, but those who make it here four words, Hell Week is secured. Now at the end of that training, as I understand it, I'm a Navy study was done to discover like who makes it and who doesn't. Now, as you can imagine, a number of factors, but you know what was right at the top of the list, positive self talk. See, when we talk about changing the narrative, I think some of us think about the cultural narrative or we think about that person that we sure would like to change their narrative and we don't think about changing our narrative. In psychology, there's a technique called cognitive reappraisal, it basically means telling yourself a different story about what is happening. Oh, and this is where we are so fortunate, so blessed to have a script called scripture and it's the script cure, and that's not just the play on words. Listen, you know what most of our problems are; we're telling ourselves the wrong story.

What I'm telling you this weekend is God wants to tell his story through your life. Now he's doing it, but sometimes we don't realize it. You cannot change the narrative if you don't know the narrative. Now, let me kind of switch gears because we're talking about changing your narrative, but here's the deal. I think this is so critical when we talk about loving our neighbor, please, please hear this. I think the most loving thing you can do is listen, we do way too much talking and we think that our words are going to solve the world's problems. I think a little bit more listening would go a long way.

I want to share with you three things that kinda go through my mind before I meet with someone. Now, usually on my good days, I try to pray for someone before I meet them and it changes the way that I engage with them. That appointment often turns into a divine appointment. But there are a couple of things that go through my mind, I'm just gonna throw these out real quick for the sake of time. Everyone that you meet is made in the image of God and I think it's so critical that we understand that. I can't remember who said this, but Lora was telling me about it because at her voice event last month there was someone said something like, the image of God in me greets the image of God in you. I just, I liked that idea. I really believe if we believe that everyone is created in the image of God then we've got to understand that everybody, even those who are broken, like us somehow reflect God in some form or fashion. Now, I think we need Jesus Christ to reconcile us and to put us back together. But everyone you meet is made in the image of God.

Number two, everyone you meet is fighting a battle that you know nothing about. You know, I love what a Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said. He said that if we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life, sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility. See, we know that hurt people hurt people, but we don't stop to think maybe we should try to figure out where they're hurting. So that maybe I can help instead of focusing on how they're hurting us.

And then finally, third, every person you meet knows something that you don't and you need to learn from them. By the way, that for me goes back to *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie; read the book about 25 years ago. I think it was Ralph Waldo Emerson who said that every man is my superior in some way in that I learned of him.

What I'm saying is like, our posture is so critical in this thing. I think sometimes we go in with an agenda of what we're going to say and what we're gonna do. Can I just take all of the pressure off? You know, the way you love your neighbor. Listen. You can't change the narrative if you don't know their narrative. By the way and this is ah, this is so good, do you know the name Francis Schaeffer? I mean, he was one of the great apologists of the 20th century and he was once asked what he would do if he had an hour to share the Gospel. You know what he said? He said, I'd listened for 55 minutes then in the last five minutes I'd have something meaningful to say. We've got to do a little bit less talking a little bit more listening.

Let me close with this. Daniel Kahneman is an Israeli American psychologist, won the Nobel Prize in 2002 in the field of behavioral economics. When he won the Nobel Prize, he shared this little story with the committee. In 1942, I think he was six years old, something like that. Kahneman was living in Nazi occupied France. And as part of that occupation the Jews were required to wear the Star of David and they had a 6:00 PM curfew. Well, one day a little Daniel went to play at a friend's house, lost track of time, and he somehow had to get home after curfew and he was afraid and so he turned his sweater inside out to hide the star and he put his head down and tried to get home without being noticed. But sure enough, a member of the SS spotted him, but he would have never imagined what would happen next. The soldier stopped him, picked him up, and hugged him, then he put him down, he opened his wallet and he showed Daniel a picture of a little boy, presumably this soldier's son, and gave him some money. Kahneman said, I went home more certain than ever that my mother was right, that people were endlessly complicated and interesting. He said to the Nobel Committee, that's why I went into psychology. Everybody you meet they are more complicated than you realize. Now God knows. God knows because he knows the number of hairs on our head. They're fighting a battle that you know nothing about. I think you have something to learn from them.

You know, it's so great, you can read about Listen and Learn at this wonderful event where we invite refugees who we're loving and helping to come and sometimes they'll cook a meal or play a little music and, and then we're able to help them maybe pay rent for another month and we do these every month at NCC and, you know, what I found because I've been to a couple of them, is that I'm the beneficiary because I get to hear their story and when I hear their story, it's not an issue anymore. It's a person. And I think sometimes we're so quick to put labels on things, but can I tell you that stories turn issues into people? And if we're going to change the narrative, we might want to take 55 minutes to hear people's stories. And then I promise you, you'll have an

opportunity to share your story. Now, here's what's so funny about this weekend. I thought all week that Dick Foth should be preaching this message, by the way, that goes through my mind every time I preach. Now, the good news is he'll be preaching next weekend so we can be excited about that, but I've never met anybody who takes a more intense interest in the people he knows. In fact, so often he will tell a story about a person and if that person is present they will have forgotten certain details about the story of their life and Dick will remind them because he seems to know them better than they know themselves. I think this is about taking an interest in the people around us.

Michael Lewis, in his book about Kahneman, almost done, said Kahneman's defining emotion is doubt, which isn't surprising if you're a Jewish kid growing up in a Nazi occupied France where you really can't trust anybody. But what I found interesting is that one of his former students said this about Kahneman's doubt, he said it's very useful because it makes him go deeper and deeper and deeper. You know what? Every one of you is a library. And I think sometimes we meet someone, we take one book off the shelf and that's it, when there's a whole library of stories. But it's not doubt that drives us deeper and deeper and deeper. What is it? You know what it is? It's love. When you love someone, you want to know more about them. You want to hear another story, I need your testimony. I need it and you need my testimony and that is how we change.