

## Stories We Tell; Stories That Tell Us

Preached FCCW September 15, 2019

Luke 15:1-10 and 1 Timothy 1:12-17

We all have stories that we live by. These stories evolve early in life from messages that we pick up from others, or from the things that happen to us. But, at some point, we internalize these stories, so that they become stories that we begin tell ourselves about ourselves. After we've told ourselves these stories long enough, the stories we believe about who we are, acquire the power to shape the choices we make in life.

So, the stories we tell ourselves, become the stories that tell us. What we believe about ourselves on the inside gets projected outward so that it ceases to be a story that *we tell*, and becomes a story that *tells us*, instead. We get trapped in the stories, like flies stuck in amber.

Does that sound familiar to you? Is there a story you tell yourself, and believe about yourself, that either holds you back, or drives you forward; so that it becomes the story that tells the world who you are?

In a way, Jesus came to rewrite all of our stories. He had new stories to tell us about ourselves, about each other, and about God. Stories that exposed the untruths embedded in the stories that we were telling ourselves. Some of the best of those stories can be found in the parables he told. And the two parables we heard this morning rank among the very best of the best. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.

Now, it's as important to notice the reason why Jesus told these parables as it is to hear the stories themselves. It says that "all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.]" The story these tax collectors and sinners had been told about themselves, was that they were rejects. There were rules about good people not having close contact or dealings with people like them. If you were an upright person, you kept your distance from them. And they were taught to keep their distance from you. That's the way it was. After all, their story was that they were unworthy and unwanted.

But these rejected sinners felt *welcomed* by Jesus! It seems that they were hearing from Jesus a different story about themselves than they had ever heard before. These two stories Jesus told them differed in their details, but preached the same message. That God loves lost sheep enough to leave a herd of 99 to look for one stray. And when he finds it, he celebrates with his friends. And that God loved lost coins so much that he (or in this story, she) turns the household upside down to find it. That God is so happy, when what was lost has been found that she throws a party to celebrate. A party that probably cost more than what the coin was worth.

Of course, these stories were not really about lost sheep and lost coins. They were really about lost souls. Like them. These tax collectors and sinners recognized themselves as the sheep who

strayed or the coin that had been tossed aside. But this was a story with a new twist; a story where they were not forgotten and forsaken by God, as the other stories said they were. These were stories where God was moving heaven and earth to bring them back home, where God believed they belonged, even if they had long ago stopped believing it about themselves. They that had only known themselves as judged and rejected by God, were suddenly confronted with the stunning possibility that God had been lovingly searching for them all along.

The tax collectors and sinners weren't the only ones who were having their stories rewritten, though. Observing all of this were the scribes and the Pharisees; the religious and scholarly authorities, who lived by a very different story. The story they told themselves was that they were acceptable in God's sight because they devoted themselves to keeping God's commandments, not breaking them. The story by which they lived said that avoiding the commission of sin also meant avoiding communing with sinners. And so, they scrupulously maintained hard and fast boundaries between themselves and the kind of unclean people who they now saw drawing near to Jesus.

They grumbled and complained that, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Maybe, (they began to suspect) Jesus was not the Godly person some people said he was. Maybe, they had gotten the wrong story on him, and he wasn't "one of them" after all.

Jesus told these parables to show them that the story they had gotten wrong was the story they told themselves. In fact, these parables seem to have been intended more for the ears of the Pharisees and scribes than for the tax collectors and sinners. Right after the verse that describes the Pharisees and scribes "grumbling" about Jesus welcoming sinners... it says, "So Jesus told THEM a parable." Who is the "them" Jesus was speaking to? The ones who were complaining about him eating with outcasts. They couldn't make sense of what Jesus was doing based on the story they lived by.

Come to think of it, maybe their story was the harder one to rewrite. Self-righteousness can be as much of a delusion as self-reproach. Could they recognize in Jesus' compassion towards outcasts, a reflection of the determined seeking of what was lost by the shepherd and the woman in the parables? Did they overlook the stark contrast between their stern disapproval for Jesus' socializing with sinners, and the joy shown by the woman and the shepherd over what had been lost, being found?

Both parables end with rejoicing and celebrating. This morning we celebrated the start of another Church School year. Because that is where our children are taught the true story of God's love for them, before the world spins the false tales of their unworthiness, or the unworthiness of others who are different.

The celebrations in these parables paint consistent pictures of the rejoicing Jesus says happens in heaven when anyone trades the stories that have defined them for the new story God offers. A parable usually draws its listeners into the story with an unanswered question that the hearers are left to resolve for themselves.

In both of these parables the question that is left up in the air is: Will the friends and neighbors of the shepherd and the woman rejoice with them? Were the scribes and Pharisees celebrating when they saw sinners and tax collectors coming to Jesus? No. They were grumbling!

We can live in a story, like the tax collectors and sinners did, where we are convinced that God could never love us. Or, we can live in a story, like the Pharisees and scribes did, where we are blinded to the possibility that God could ever love anyone who is different from us. With these two parables, Jesus was rewriting both of those stories.

What can happen when Jesus rewrites the story you live by?

The life of the Apostle Paul is one of the best answers to that question. The Apostle Paul had once been the Pharisee, Saul. His place in the parable would have been one of the 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. Or, at least that was the story he told himself. The story Saul told himself was based on the assurance of his own righteousness. And the story that told the world who he was, was written in the blood of the people he violently persecuted.

Then one day, Saul had a supernatural encounter with the Risen Jesus, who in an instant rewrote the story Saul had lived by all his life. He traded in the name by which he was known, and he traded in the story by which he knew himself. Saul, the persecutor of Christians became Paul the Apostle of Christ. He went from counting himself among the righteous who need no repentance to being just another lost sheep that needed to repent and be rescued.

The essence of his new story is summed up in his own words: “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners –of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.” Gradually, this new story told the world who Paul had become as he dedicated himself to spreading the gospel and starting churches.

Jesus tells us stories that teach us how relentlessly God searches for us when we are lost—and how recklessly God rejoices when we are found!

So, what’s your story?

If the depth of grace in these parables isn’t at the heart of the story you tell yourself; or if it can’t be heard in the story that your life is telling the world, then it’s time to let Jesus have a hand at rewriting your narrative.

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