

The Stories We Tell Ourselves

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Texts: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

I initially chose these two stories because they were both about money – more precisely, stewardship, and we are, after all in the middle of the annual stewardship campaign. But as I got to thinking about these stories together, I realized that they have something else in common, too – they are both about stories, and specifically about the stories we tell ourselves, and the impact of those stories on our behavior.

We all tell ourselves stories – narratives, stories, are how we explain the world and our place in it. We tell ourselves stories about who we are, and who God is, and how we are in relationship to God and to other people. And we tell each other stories about how the world is too. What facts and what values are represented in the stories we tell ourselves? Clearly, the white men who marched in Charlottesville chanting “You will not replace us” were telling themselves different stories about the world and their place in it than Mother Teresa and the women who joined her in caring for the world’s poor.

As we become more aware of the stories we have historically told ourselves, and the ways in which those impact our feelings, our reactions and responses, and our experience of life, we can begin to make choices about what stories should shape our world. Perhaps the stories that we’ve always told ourselves aren’t really consistent with the way we now understand the world. Maybe we used to tell ourselves that life was about us, and now we have a deeper appreciation for the common good, or the Kingdom of God. Perhaps the stories we tell ourselves aren’t consistent with our hopes and dreams for ourselves. Perhaps it’s time to find new stories to tell ourselves. That is part of the power of prayer – as we rest in God’s presence, we can let God’s love shape a new reality in our hearts and minds. As we learn the stories of the Bible, we remember that in each of us the cosmic intersects with the mundane – that our lives and God’s life are not separate after all.

The Bible has shaped many of the stories people have told themselves over the years, and shaped the stories we tell ourselves about being people of God. One of our Scripture stories this morning is from Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy purports to be the speeches given to the Hebrew people by Moses as they are about to enter the Promised Land. So Moses tells the people that when they come into the Promised Land they should take the first fruits of their harvest to the priest as an offering to God, and when they give the basket to the priest, that giving is connected to the stories they tell of how God freed them from slavery in Egypt, and Moses said that after giving their gifts, they should “... *then celebrate all the good things the Lord your God has done for you and your family....*”

Giving thanks is a mode of celebration! And it’s a celebration rooted in remembering, and accompanied by telling the story – and so too for us: our worship, our giving, our serving, our celebrating all are rooted in the stories we tell about who God is, and who we are.

Giving thanks is more than a practice we should do once in a while – it is a stance toward life. Walter Brueggemann has said that the central issue facing the Christian Church in America is

whether the Good News of God's abundance can be trusted in the face of the story of scarcity – because that is the dominant story in our culture. Even when times are good, the story we tell ourselves is that we need more. We don't have enough. Our computer isn't fast enough, our car isn't new enough, our clothes aren't trendy enough. The conflict between the worldviews of abundance and scarcity is not a new one – it runs all through the Bible. The opening verses of Genesis tell the story of an abundant Creation – day after day, God creates, and everything God creates is good. God created light and it was good. God created Sky and Land and Seas, and it was good. God created plants and fruit trees, and it was good. God created the sun, moon and stars – good, good, good. God created fish and birds, wild animals, and livestock, and it was all good. And God created humanity in God's own image, male and female God created, and God blessed us, and gave us work in God's good creation, and God saw all that God had created and it was supremely good. And in the wink of an eye, although we had been given access to everything...except one tree... it wasn't enough. We began to tell ourselves a story of scarcity, even in the midst of God's good and abundant creation.

In the story of Moses and the Hebrew people, the story that culminates in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is always having to counter the story that the people are telling about their lives – a story of scarcity: God freed them from slavery, and soon the people were asking, why did we leave Egypt, where we could eat pots of meat and as much bread as we wanted? Now we will starve to death in the wilderness. And so God provided them with manna, bread from heaven that fell each night for them to gather in the morning and eat each day. God gave them the manna, and the people eventually asked, why do we have to eat manna all the time? In Egypt, we had fish for free, and melons, and cucumbers, and onions and garlic – all we have here is manna. And it's easy to point fingers at the Hebrew people, but we also complain. We have an amazing amount of stuff – we even have an entire industry devoted to storing the stuff we don't have room for in our homes, and yet, we're still buying more stuff. The story we tell ourselves is that we don't have enough. The story that God tells us is that we have more than enough, and that we will discover joy when we join in God's rhythm of gratitude and generosity, and that gratitude and generosity have to do with what's in our hearts, not what's in our houses.

That's the point of the story from Matthew too. This story is not really about investment strategy – it's about life strategy. And about how we are in relation to God. The first two slaves do just fine – they invest the money, grow it into more, and return it to the master who says, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." But the third slave is afraid of potential circumstances and afraid of the master, and so all he does is keep the money safe. I'm reminded of a t-shirt I saw that was imprinted, "I don't intend to tiptoe through life only to arrive safely at death." Is life about staying safe and holding onto security? Is that the story we tell ourselves about life? Jesus, in another passage reminds us that, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." [John 12:23-25] In the parable, the slave is more afraid of the master, and the story he tells himself about the master leads him to live out of fear – choosing to simply guard what he has rather than reaching out for a fuller, deeper life. What is the story we tell ourselves about God? Is God a harsh and punishing God whom we need to fear? Or is God a loving and generous God, a God who invites us to participate in the joy of the Kingdom? Jesus seems to be suggesting that if we are living out of fear from God, we will miss the joy that life and God have to offer.

The Rev. John Buchanan, former moderator of the PCUSA, and retired pastor from Fourth Presbyterian Church, has commented about this text that “...the greatest risk we face is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently.”

He goes on to say, “Now for most of us, religion, our personal faith, has not seemed like a high-risk venture. In fact, it has seemed to be something like the opposite. Faith has seemed to be a personal comfort zone. Faith, many of us think, is about personal security, here and in the hereafter. Faith, we think, is no more risky than believing ideas in our heads about God and Jesus, a list of beliefs to which we more or less subscribe intellectually. Faith, we think, because that is what we have been taught, is getting our personal theology right and then living a good life by avoiding bad things. Religion, we think, is a pretty timid, nonrisky venture.

“Here Jesus invites us to be his disciples, to live our lives as fully as possible by investing them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities. To be his man or woman, he says, is not so much believing ideas about him as it is following him. It is to experience renewed responsibility for the use and investment of these precious lives of ours. It is to be bold and brave, to reach high and care deeply.”

Yes, the life of discipleship is one of investing ourselves fully, and sometimes that kind of investment can feel risky. But if the stories we tell ourselves teach us that we need to be afraid of the world, and of God, then we will be creating for ourselves nests instead of launch pads. The story from Deuteronomy is teaching us to be generous with our stuff. The story from Matthew is about being generous with our lives. Both stories are teaching that neither our lives nor our achievements nor our rest nor our stuff really belong to us. And that reminder always sounds sort of scoldy and threatening, but the more important truth here is that the life of freedom and joy is not to be found in holding on tightly to life or stuff, but in holding both loosely, willing to invest them in the kingdom as we hold tightly to God.

And this is true for us as a church too – joy and abundance are not to be found in holding on tightly to our building or our money, but in being wise and generous, remembering that in God’s Kingdom, flow is the pattern: love flows, kindness flows, abundance flows – abundance of grace, of freedom, of justice as we align ourselves with God’s purposes. And as we begin to pay attention to some of the messages from Jesus, we can see a pattern: do not worry about anything; I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly; seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you [Matthew 6:25-34, John 10:10, Matthew 6:33]... as we participate in God’s flow we find ourselves abundantly blessed. Or to quote Jesus: “...give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” [Luke 6:38]

These are the stories that Jesus tells about the world – stories that are not merely information but have the capacity to transform our understanding, our experience of the world, and ultimately who and how we are in the world. These are the stories that remind us that we are the cherished children of a generous and loving God, a God who welcomes our participation in the greatest story ever told. Amen.