

Sharing Our Stories

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

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"There's no one in this whole wide world that isn't carrying a story," says Martin Shaw. "You could be president, a yoga teacher, a junkie and you have this one completely unique thing in your pocket. Your story. It maybe be crumpled like a bus ticket or writ large on tablets of stone, but it's yours. And God almighty you need to tell it, to rest in it, to find some peace with it." Shaw's question is this: Why do we throw our stories away?

We probably throw them away for different reasons. They may contain too much pain, too much trauma. Why would anyone want to return to that chapter of their life? Especially if you're in a happier one now? Or maybe our stories seem too bland. Too privileged. Maybe there's too little hardship in our story to make for an interesting plot?

Most summers in my youth, I attended camp at a place called New Life Ranch, in the middle of nowhere Oklahoma. It was there that I began to believe two very different things about myself. The first is that I didn't have much of what we called a "testimony," because I hadn't sinned in any very interesting ways yet. The best chapel speakers were the ones with the worst pasts. They'd done all the things we knew we shouldn't. Drugs. Sex. I don't recall any actual rock and roll musicians preaching to us, but it was a pretty bold move just to listen to the Devil's music turned up loud in that world. The preachers had come to camp to tell us how Jesus changed all that for them. They'd found a new life and we could too.

Unfortunately, the sins I had racked up ... you know, by the time I was seven ... they were just too timid. Too boring. Did anyone want to hear that Jesus had delivered me from the ordinary boyhood meanness and naughty thoughts I had from time to time? The naughty thoughts that I started having all over again once I thought about having naughty thoughts, so maybe Jesus hadn't actually saved me from them quite yet. Now there's some really bad news. I don't have a story interesting enough to make into a proper testimony, and I can't even turn over my boring little sins to the Lord. I was doomed.

Some of us don't think our stories are worth telling because they're too awful. For others, it's because they're not awful enough. Unfortunately, in both cases, we may end up covering up or throwing away the only stories that are really ours to tell. But what if we were to, as our new friend Martin Shaw puts it, "take a breath and dare to entertain the thought that in the

debris of your life would be stories worth examining”? That they are even a kind of buried treasure.

On its surface, the parable of the sower strikes me as one of Jesus’s least interesting stories. If only because he does it the disservice of explaining it. Here’s what the hard path stands for. This is what I meant by thorns and rocky soil.

But in the middle of this scene, in the verses our lectionary left out, Jesus’s disciples ask him directly why he speaks to people in parables at all. And he says, “The reason is that seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand...” He then quotes Isaiah: “For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes, so that they might not look with their eyes, and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.”

Healing, it seems, even from God, comes through truthful encounter with what’s really real. So the guiding question seems to be What will it take to open our eyes and ears and hearts to the truth of our story? This what I’m curious about today. Rather than elaborate further on soil types, let’s sit with the disciples’ question. How might parables and sacred stories help us see and even tell the truth about ourselves in ways that straight talk and platitudes never quite will?

Jesus uses agricultural metaphors a lot. A chapter earlier he tells people you can judge the health of a tree by its fruit. In today’s gospel we hear about the kind of soil our lives need to be for the seeds of the kingdom to take root. This sounds a little like prosperity gospel. If your life is full of abundance and health and wealth, the seeds planted in you are flourishing. God is clearly smiling on you. And if you’re kind of withering on the vine, or if there’s not even a sprout pushing up through your soil ... well ... not so much.

What disrupts the prosperity interpretation is pretty much everything else Jesus says and does. When somebody shows him a coin with Caesar’s head on it he shrugs and says, “He can keep it.” He gets in trouble for hanging out with people whose lives seem sick and morally fruitless messes by the standards of the day. He searches out to the desperate, the unwell, the exiles, the unclean. You never hear Jesus say, “Hey, look at that guy whose life is blossoming and going great. Just be like him!” I probably don’t need to add that his own story ends not only with crucifixion, but abandonment by his closest friends. Is that what a flourishing, fruitful human life is supposed to look like?

Where Jesus’s story begins to come alive for me is when the images of fruitfulness and barrenness pull us into what’s really real. And everything about his life and teaching tells us not

to trust the shallow, one dimensional images of flourishing that apparently were in circulation even in ancient times. You know, even before Facebook.

Jesus said sometimes a flourishing human life looks like laying that life down for a friend. Sometimes love looks like a joyful banquet and sometimes it looks like bone-racking grief. If you feel like an outcast or a misfit or any other form of failure, that means you're the first kind of life Jesus runs toward. At least if you're not pretending otherwise. He's got this thing for the last and for the least. He's smitten by anybody who believes they're unlovable. So, when Jesus says he teaches in parables to confuse people and to confound our understandings, don't you think what he's trying to take down are the falsehoods and half truths we live in because we think they look more like a life blessed by God, and more like a life the people around us might find interesting?

There's a wonderful image of Thomas Merton's that I return to often. He says we each have a false or illusory person that we wind around us "...like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface." If you don't have any idea what he's talking about feel free to scroll through Instagram for the rest of this sermon. We may not be members of the same species.

But Merton says something more. He says the problem with the false self is that God can't even see it. The false self is the person "... I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy."

Martin Shaw puts this in terms of our stories. He tells plenty of them about lives scarred by trauma and lack. He also tells of Julia, who lived on a big pot of family money that would never run out. She got an elite education, took holidays that lasted for months, not weeks. She even had a fling with a Scandinavian prince. But her privileged life embarrassed her. She had become an expert in concealment, Shaw says. Her healing began when she realized that "... the only job in town that's truly ours is to be conscious of our own story. When you can speak of it honestly, it can become useful to others. If it remains co-opted by shame, others sense it and we become hard to trust."

You see, the false self we wrap ourselves in like bandages, the self God can't even see, is also a barrier to connection with other people. People sense our performance. A falsehood is not just harder to trust. It shouldn't be trusted.

But, whether you're a Julia or a Merton or anyone in between, it's your story, honestly lived and truthfully told, that will be useful to others. And isn't that sacred moment of connection,

that interlocking of stories, that moment in which we make our life, whatever it contains, of use to another soul ... isn't that what it really must mean for the seed God planted in you to bear its fruit, whether a hundredfold, or sixty, or thirty? God, you see, doesn't even care about the quantities. One last reminder that there's no need for you to put your thumb on the scale. You're enough. Your life. Your story, as it is. It's enough.

I won't pretend that Calvary is a place where we've all slipped free of our false and illusory selves. In fact, when a preacher stands up here and wonders whether he's told that Thomas Merton story too many times, exposing himself once and for all as the imposter he knows deep down that he is, well ... there it is again.

We don't have perfection to offer. We do have a few ancient technologies that, rightly deployed, can still help turn us in the direction of truthful story. Week after week, we confess within a choir of other sinners, that we've failed to bear some of the fruit that God gave us each to bear. But we also hear that God can bear the truth about us, even when it's bad news. We hear that God makes that space in our future called forgiveness, into which even more of the truth of our story can be told.

Imagine what's been confessed, imagine what's been entrusted to the mercy of God in this old room over the years. Imagine what stories it's held. Don't you think it can hold the truth of yours? It's meant to. It was made to. Because your story, crumpled bus ticket or tablet of stone that it seems to be, your story is the seed God has planted in you to bear fruit in other lives. Would it help you entrust us with that story if we told you it's the reason we come here? And that, in the end, our true stories are all we really have to give each other at all?