

Narrative Theology #1

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A
St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos CA
May 14th, 2017

I have two concrete early memories of church from my childhood, one fairly happy, and one much less so. The happy memory is of attending services at my grandmother's small Presbyterian church in LaSalle, Michigan. To a child, church isn't necessarily the most interesting way to spend an hour on a Sunday morning, but I was a reasonably compliant and well-behaved kid, and I liked to please my grandmother. So, we went. I can still remember the smell of that church, the candles, the music.

The second memory, from some years later, is of attending services at my father's church. Although only a few miles away from that church in LaSalle, Luna Pier Full Gospel Church could not have been more different. The pastor was expounding on his regular theme of the list of people who were destined to burn in Hell, and I recognized that I was on the list. I knew that if I were to reveal why (that I was gay), that the people there, and certainly my father, would reject me. As a 14-year old boy this was a heavy and painful realization, and combined with the accidental death of a close friend later that summer, I never returned to that church, and my relationship with my father disintegrated. This story, of course, is far from unique.

We create our lives through story: the stories we are told as children, the stories we tell ourselves and each other, stories about what the world is, who God is, what events mean, what our own lives mean, our strengths, our limitations, our worth.

Sometimes we get stuck in our own stories. Sometimes those stories are traumatic, such as a deep loss or a profound grief, and sometimes those stories are more ordinary. Sometimes those stories aren't even real. I believe, for example, that I'm not good at organized sports. As a child I wasn't, often because I was awkward and afraid. But as a mature adult, I've never actually tried.

Pádraig Ó Tuama is an Irish poet and theologian, and has also navigated the complicated territory of faith and sexuality. He says this in his short poem "The Beginning of Wisdom":

The Beginning of Wisdomⁱ

was when I learnt the difference
between believing in the truth
and telling the truth
about
belief.

Our Epistle reading today is from the first of two letters attributed to St. Peter, and the letter is addressed to the scattered Christian communities in what is now modern-day Turkey. The letter addresses two major themes: the gift and call of God in Baptism, and practical advice and encouragement for living out the Christian faith in a sometimes-hostile world. It is this second theme

that I find particularly fascinating, both from the perspective of exploring the roots of our Christian faith, but also as a gay man, and a member of a sometimes-persecuted minority.

Peter says something quite amazing:

9 But you are a *chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, **God's own people***, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

10 Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

Peter is helping the people of these scattered communities *believe* themselves to be part of a greater whole: indeed, as an integral part of God's own people, that is, the Israel of God, marked by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and participants in the story of sacrifice and salvation revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They are no longer disconnected communities in a remote corner of the Roman Empire, but participants in the redemption of the entire world.

In other words, Peter is offering a new *story* to tell about the purpose and meaning of their lives. And it is this story which continues to be told, preached, shared, believed, and lived in millions and billions of ways throughout the last two millennia. And it is our story, each one of us, without condition, if we choose to claim it.

Many of us struggle with the language of belief when we encounter the stories of the Bible. Peter's Epistle today quotes Isaiah presaging Jesus, saying:

⁶For it stands in scripture:

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

'The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner',

⁸and

'A stone that makes them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall.'

This word, *belief*, can itself feel like a stumbling-block. Does believing in Jesus mean I need to accept as true the literal fact of the Bible's account of the virgin birth, the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus, or the many miracles Jesus and the Apostles performed? If one ventures into the Bible, how does one reconcile the often contradictory and even competing accounts of the same events, and very differing visions of what God is like? Are these questions valuable, interesting, and important? Yes.

But if this prevents us from opening the door to a new relationship with God, to be open to the message of Jesus, His example, the Way of life that He showed us, to be willing to listen to His story, then maybe we need to move beyond belief.

Let us use instead a different word: *trust*. Belief, to our ears, implies intellectual assent, a stating or acceptance of facts, an act of the head. Trust, on the other hand, is a heart word. And it is in the heart where we encounter the Christ and the loving God He revealed.

I have a third key memory of church that was, for me, a moment when I moved from belief to trust in God. I attended in August of 2000 an event called “Witness Our Welcome”, a national ecumenical conference sponsored by the many LGBT-welcoming programs across the US. 27 denominations and a dozen countries were represented, and over 1,000 people attendedⁱⁱ. The culmination of the conference was a Sunday morning worship with amazing music and teaching from leaders across the Welcoming Church movement.

Sara Herwig is a transgender woman from the Boston area. She had completed seminary in the early 1980s and had clear and demonstrated gifts for ministry. However, after she came out she was not permitted to move forward in her ordination process, and after she transitioned was told she that she had “mutilated her body”, and would never be fit to serve. Sometimes we let the untrue stories that people tell about us become our stories. And, despite a strong sense of call, by 1997 she had given up on church, her faith, and even God.

That morning, we recommissioned Sara, collectively laying hands on her and blessing her ministry. Imagine over 1,000 people, hands on Sara in the front of the room, hands on each other’s shoulders, touching and connecting all the way to the back and sides of a large auditorium. In this act, we proclaimed that Sara wasn’t broken or sinful or mutilated, but a beautiful and beloved child of God. Together we performed an act of healing, of liberation, of reconciliation. I understood for the first time what *trusting* in God felt like, because I could *see and feel* a powerful and visible manifestation of what the church can and should be. We could, through trusting in God, reclaim our stories.

Chris Glaser, a Presbyterian activist, writer and minister in the Metropolitan Community Church, wrote about the event in this way, alluding to the Pentecost story in Acts:

“When the days of the WOW 2000 Conference were come, all the Welcoming Programs were together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there was the sound of the rush of non-violent wind, and it filled the entire Student Center [...] where they were meeting. Fired up with diverse perspectives, opinions, and strategies, God’s spirit rested on each of them.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Following the example we read in 1 Peter today, the Welcoming Movement wrote a *new story* about the place for LGBT persons in the church. Instead of a bunch of “misfits, liberals and troublemakers” (according to one commentator), we found ourselves to be a powerful movement proclaiming God’s message of love, justice, and reconciliation to the entire church. And that movement has transformed and continues to transform our churches and culture today.

So why does this story, this history, matter now, almost 17 years later? While the question of LGBT inclusion and justice may be an increasingly settled matter in the Episcopal Church, that cannot be said of the wider Church, and of our larger culture. While the right of equal marriage is available in all 50 states today, so-called “religious freedom” legislation at the state and federal level threatens to enshrine discrimination in new ways. And undergirding this is a story, based in a narrow, literalist reading of Scripture that says that LGBT persons are not truly fully children of God, are sinful either in their being or in acts of loving and intimacy, and not welcome as their authentic selves.

We need to have the strength of imagination, of belief, and of trust to create a new story.

When 49 people were killed and 53 others injured at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in 2016, the deadliest incidence of violence against LGBT people in US history, we need to create a new story.

When gay men today are being rounded up, hunted by their own families, imprisoned in secret locations, tortured, and killed in Chechnya, we need to create a new story.

When up to half a million LGBT youth in the United States are homeless on any given night, we need to create a new story.

When 62% of LGBT homeless youth attempt suicide, and are 6 times more likely to harm themselves or succeed, we need to create a new story.^{iv}

When 40% of transgender persons have attempted suicide at least once, and 92% of those before age 25, we need to create a new story.^v

In John’s gospel today, Jesus articulates clearly for us how we are to create this new story. He says:

¹⁰Do you not *trust* that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹*Trust* me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then *trust* me because of the works themselves. ¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who *trusts* in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

If we trust in Jesus, we can find the strength, the courage, the imagination to “do the works Jesus does” and even “greater works than these”. Trusting in Jesus means following Jesus. Trusting in Jesus means taking risks, speaking boldly, challenging the powerful, speaking out for the marginalized, the poor, shaking off the stories other tell about us. Trusting in Jesus means being willing to tell and re-tell our own stories as part of the redemption and reconciliation of the world.

I want to close with this poem, also from Pádraig Ó Tuama, titled “Narrative theology #1”:

Narrative theology #1^{vi}

And I said to him
Are there answers to all of this?
And he said
The answer is in a story
and the story is being told.

And I said
But there is so much pain
And she answered, plainly,
Pain will happen.

Then I said
Will I ever find meaning?
And they said
You will find meaning
Where you give meaning.

The answer is in the story
And the story isn’t finished.

Let us go forth as a people, God’s own people, forgiven and forgiving, healed and healing, renewed and renewing, telling and retelling our stories, to love and serve God and the world. Amen.



ⁱ Ó Tuama, Pádraig. *Readings from the Book of Exile*. Norwich: Canterbury Press. 2012. p.26

ⁱⁱ Holmen, R. W. *Queer Clergy: A History of Gay and Lesbian Ministry in American Protestantism*. BookBaby. 2014. p.254

ⁱⁱⁱ Holmen, R. W.

^{iv} CDC. (2016). Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Risk Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9-12: Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

^v James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality.

^{vi} Ó Tuama, Pádraig. p.4