

Whose Story Do You Believe?

Luke 15:11-32

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The day after Osama Bin Laden was killed, I heard one of the “experts” interviewed say “Bin Laden is dead, but the narrative is still alive.” The Al Qaeda narrative is the real danger—the story they tell about what has happened and how the world works. Many have said that Al Qaeda is not so much an ideology as a story. Those who have attacked the West over the past two decades believe a story that goes like this:

Once there was a pure Islamic state, a Kaliphate, but it was corrupted by Western influences. Today Islam is under attack everywhere; first the Russians invaded Afghanistan, and Osama fought against them. The Russians were replaced by the Americans and their allies, who are in a war against Islam. All Western powers are Crusaders attempting to retake Islamic lands and pollute our nations with sex, alcohol, materialism, and lack of respect for the Quran and authority. Only Al Qaeda is fighting the Crusaders. Moderate Muslims are infidels. Only those who stand with Al Qaeda in the great war against the Crusaders are true Muslims. If we lose our lives, Allah will receive us as martyrs. But because Allah is with us, we will soon restore the kingdom of God on earth in Islamic states.

You can’t understand what our enemies do if you don’t understand that the narrative shapes their lives. I’m hearing that this narrative is less and less credible in Arab countries, but it still shapes the lives of those who believe it. It’s a commonplace to hear American strategists talk about undermining the narrative—that’s what our soldiers are doing when they play with the children and drink tea with the elders in Afghan villages.

This way of talking about the world in terms of narrative has a wider application. Over the last couple of decades my own field of study has had a lot of talk of narrative theology and narrative preaching. Some have spoken of the “narrative turn” in social sciences during the same period. In the political world we have seen huge battles over history textbooks and the religion of the Founding Fathers as a way of “controlling the American narrative.” The story we tell about ourselves is important.

This is where I’m going with all this: in Jesus’ familiar parable of the prodigal son, there are a several narratives being told. The younger son tells one story about himself, the older son tells a story about himself, and the father tells different stories about each of his sons.

You might think it odd to talk about fathers and sons on Mother’s Day, but Lord knows we learn the stories of our lives from our mothers most of all. Jesus chooses to tell the story this way because in his patriarchal society it was fathers who decided what children received, when they could leave, and who got the farm. Also, Jesus is playing against the stereotype of God as the demanding father and suggesting that God’s love is more like mother love, the

love that the French novelist Balzac described this way: “The heart of a mother is a deep abyss at the bottom of which you will always discover forgiveness.” The heart of God is like that.

The younger son in Jesus’ parable comes to himself in a pigpen and he is filled with shame. He’s wasted his inheritance and made a mess of his life. As he rehearses the speech he plans to give his father, we hear the story he believes: he has sinned, and he is no longer worthy to be called his father’s son. In church we tend to say, “That’s right, boy. About time you woke up!” But when he gets home, his father won’t even let him get the story out of his mouth. Instead he demands that a robe be put on him and a ring placed on his finger and sandals on his feet, so that no one will mistake him for a servant, but everyone will know that he is a son. The prodigal has decided that he can’t be a son anymore; that’s his story. But the father is telling a different story. His story is “This my son was lost but is found, was dead but is alive.”

In Rob Bell’s book *Love Wins*, he says “the younger son has to decide whose version of the story he’s going to trust: his or his father’s....There are two versions of his story: His. And his father’s. He has to choose which one he will live in” [Harper One, 2011, pp.165-6].

That reading of the parable moved me on two levels. First, as a parent. That’s the story I want to tell my own children—especially when they mess up—but it’s not always the one I tell. I want to tell them the story of who they are out of that heart which is a deep abyss at the bottom of which you will always find forgiveness.

I’m interested in a book that came out in the past week called *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth* [Hyperion, 5/3/2011]. The author, Alexandra Robbins, followed the lives of six outsiders in high school. She develops what she calls “quirk theory”—the idea that the very traits that make students outsiders in high school will be beneficial to them as adults. We are far too focused as a society on popularity—and even on our kids being popular. Robbins was interviewed on the *Today* show and was asked what parents can do. The answer was that we can try to help our children see themselves as special rather than weird. In other words, we can tell a different story than the one that high school tells.

But I said I was moved at two levels. The second level is the God level, which is of course what Jesus intends when he tells the story. Most of us get to the point, sooner or later, when we realize we have squandered our inheritance. At the very least, we haven’t become the people we might have been or the ones we were intended to be. At worst, we bottom out in a pig pen with absolutely nothing. And sometimes the church teaches us that the only way to God is to tell a self-abasing story about ourselves: I have sinned and so I am no longer worthy to be called your child. I was shaped enough by that story that I may repeat it to others. But God, Jesus is telling us in this parable, won’t listen to that nonsense. Of course you are my child! You look a mess, but here, put your real clothes on and start living your real life as my child. And let’s have a party!

But as Rob Bell says, we have to decide which story to live by—the father’s or our own.

But maybe you don't have that problem. Maybe you've never felt like a sinner or felt unworthy. You've been good. Church is full of people like that, too. They are, of course, represented by the older brother in the story. Here again, there are two stories.

The older brother believes this story of his life: "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends." We don't have any reason to believe that the father was a slave-driver—we can see that he's generous—but that is the story the older son lives in. That's the story some of us live in: that the Christian life is about slaving for God and obeying all his orders. Besides that, the son says his father never even gave him a goat—a scrawny thing with not much meat on it—much less a fatted calf. He thinks his father is stingy. But the bottom line is that the father is unfair. Like most older siblings, he says that the younger sibling is being allowed to play by a different set of rules. Unfair!

He's saying all this with the party going on in the background, refusing to go in. Listen to the story the father tells: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." That's really something. The father does not scold him, saying "You jerk, aren't you even glad your brother is alive?" He doesn't point out that the son didn't obey *every* command or that he never even asked for a party. Instead, he says, "This is your status. This has always been your status: you are with me and everything I own is yours as well. You never needed to slave for me. You never needed to earn anything. Even the fatted calf was yours, if you had been willing to receive it."

As to fairness, the father says that fairness has nothing to do with it. This is a matter of life and death. This is a matter of what it means to be family. Family has nothing to do with fairness—it's all about love and acceptance and forgiveness. I never set out to be fair, the father suggests. And the story you tell about your brother—that he wasted my money with prostitutes—is irrelevant even if it is true. Because the story I choose about your brother is that he was lost and has been found; he was dead and is alive.

Jesus ends his parable—and his sermon—with the older son still standing outside the party tent. He has to decide which story to believe about his own life: that he has been the victim of unfairness, or that his father has always been with him and given him everything. We church people and good people have to decide that in our relationship with God. Has God been unfair to us? Have we been slaving for God and obeying God and not being rewarded properly? Or is the real story that we are his children, that we have always been with God, and that God has been more generous to us than we ever realized. Life is not a contest between us and the sinners. We have no reason to feel slighted when others are forgiven. Life is a web of relationships which can be broken, but which can also be mended, and you do not have to leave home to have your eyes opened to "the love which from our birth over and around us lies."