

Matt 7:15-20; Galatians 5:22-25 Story shaping Story June 21, 2020

In earlier sermons I have spoken on soil, seeds, the Good Gardener, and most recently compost. I am finally at the point of addressing fruit even as we begin to eat our first spinach and lettuce from the garden. I desire to bear good fruit, and I suspect you share that sentiment with me. Collectively as a congregation we wish to grow in virtue and character. With this in mind I will reflect on a habit which fosters the production of good fruit: story telling.

In his most recent book on the cultivation of a noble character, David Brooks wrote the following: “Since Plutarch, moralists have tried to communicate certain standards by holding up exemplars. You can not [cultivate the fruits of the Spirit] simply by reading sermons or following abstract rules. Example is the best teacher. Moral improvement occurs most reliably when the heart is warmed, when we come into contact with people we admire and love and we consciously and unconsciously bend our lives to mimic theirs”.¹ In a children’s book Barry Lopez puts it another way: “The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other’s memory.”² The stories we tell and tell about ourselves shape the fruit we ultimately will bear. Stories shaping stories.

We begin, then, with a narrative I have previously shared from the pulpit; and like all good stories this one bears hearing again. One of the great reformers of the 16th century was not Lutheran or Anabaptist, but was born into a Catholic Basque family and was given the name of Inigo Lopez de Loyola. Ignatius was the youngest of 13 children and spent his young adult years enjoying the benefits of a court life, and fighting. “In 1521 he took part in the unsuccessful defence of Pamplona against the French. During the battle he was struck in the leg by a cannonball” doing serious damage. Back in the family castle, “he underwent excruciating operations, followed by a prolonged convalescence. To pass the idle time he requested something to read—preferably the romance novels of which he was fond. Instead he had to settle for a collection of pious lives of the saints”—all they could scrounge up—to ease the boredom. “Gradually, however, he began to find them fascinating. In the long months of his recovery he started imagining what a great honor it must be to serve the glory of God. As zeal for such a life began to take hold, he resolved, upon his recovery, to reform his conduct and to imitate the example of the saints in dedication to God’s service.

When he was at last well enough to walk, he set off on a pilgrimage to the Catalonian shrine of Our Lady at Monserrat. After an all-night vigil at the shrine

¹ David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), introduction page xv.

² Barry Lopez, *Crow and Weasel*.

he exchanged his rich clothes with a beggar and, in a final gesture of courtly valor, laid his sword and dagger on the altar of our Lady.”³ So began the Society of Jesus of whom our current pope is one. He continues the Jesuit tradition of meeting beggars as his peer, of laying down the sword, of seeking justice.

It is truly remarkable the way in which important stories, the lives of saintly souls who have gone before us, can empower us to bear of virtuous fruit. Who would have thought biographies like “a book of saint” might contribute to our spiritual formation and service in the world? Certainly not Ignatius, at least at first. The stream of theology by which this model has come to be known is “narrative theology”. In his book on storytelling, William Bausch quotes two theologians convicted of the power of story and myth. John Driver is quoted as saying:

“A number of theologians recently have become interested in the importance of stories. They sense that all our logical, scientific, and the theological discourse is secondary. I share this belief...I find myself not only agreeing that theology originates in stories (and should itself tell more of them), but also thinking that all knowledge comes from a mode of understanding that is dramatic”. Sallie McFague adds her voice: “Where theology becomes overly abstract, conceptual and systematic, it separates thought and life, belief and practice, words and their embodiment, making it more difficult, if not impossible, for us to believe in our hearts what we confess with our lips.”⁴ Maybe it is time for another short story.

In First Nations “lore the division between people and things is far less absolute than for [settler communities]. In their myths, all of reality springs from one source. All—[people], beasts, or stars—figure as actors in a single ceremony...Sr. Maria Jose Hobday, a Franciscan nun of Seneca Iroquois heritage, remembers her mother telling her as a little girl to “feel the earth. Your feet are trying to teach you about the land. Some of your toes will not be walking in this warm dirt, but your feet will remember the road, and this will make you happy”.⁵

This brought to mind recent studies which detail the curative affects of walking in natural landscapes (forests, gardens, along rivers, wilderness).⁶ Lower blood pressure, a greater capacity for dealing with depression, and an enhanced ability to sort through “internal noise” are some of the positive results to walking in nature. Nothing against the studies, but Sr. Hobday said the same thing through story. In both cases these illustrations point to the healing properties of nature and

³ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company: 1997), pp. 327-328.

⁴ William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1984), p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid*, 32.

⁶ See chapter two of Dan Rubinstein’s, *Born to Walk: the Transformative Power of a Pedestrian Act* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2018).

the invitation God extends us to allow our spiritual fruit to be watered by none other than creation itself. What are the stories we tell about nature??

Hildegard of Bingen – 12th century Abbess, gifted preacher, herbal healer, mystic, and ultimately saint, draws upon vivid imagery to communicate a profound ecological theology. One of her books chronicles a series of visions concerning the relation between God, humanity, and the cosmos. Humans and the cosmos are emanations of God’s love, “living sparks, or rays of [God’s] splendor, just as the rays of the sun proceed from the sun itself”. She describes the effects of sin in rupturing creation, and the drama of redemption that ultimately restores the world to its intended state, purified of its infirmities and reconciled with the Divine energy of its origins. She described God as “living light” which infuses us and all creation with “greenness”, shining forth in all living things.⁷ Amazing images are tied together in a story of creation, sinfulness and redemption. It is a healing and directive story that she tells and one which conforms to our biblical narrative.

Before one last story I return to our scripture reading from Galatians. “In Galatians the language of the “fruit of the spirit” (Galatians 5:22) is used. “Fruit” is spoken of as qualities which habitually are expressed by those who “walk by the spirit” (Galatians 5:16). This is another way of speaking about virtues. These virtues are the characteristics that set the Christian apart from others. They are the fruit—the product of—being in open relationship with the living God”.⁸ And this is not a solitary endeavor. The scriptures we read together, the music we make together, the mutual support present in prayer and friendship, the bread we break together are essential for nurturing the personal and communal fruit growing on our vines. Character and virtues are a collective endeavor; we need each other.⁹ And ironically, life among the people of God will offer us opportunities to expand our reservoir of patience, love, kindness, mercy and that other stuff to which Galatians 5 and Matthew 7 point. Community life will refine our patience, our love, our goodness, our steadfastness. It has been a new endeavour to undergird our community in these last months of physical distancing. We hope and pray we have adequately, not perfectly, equipped this congregation for the faithful living of these days.

Before I offer my concluding thoughts, I would like to share a story I find rather compelling given the social unrest in North America these days. It is the story of Pierre Tossaint. A longer clip of Tossaint’s life story is include in a link to an on-line video which lasts about six minutes.

⁷ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company: 1997), pp. 405-406.

⁸ Harry Huebner, “A community of virtues” in *Church As Parable: Whatever Happened to Ethics* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1993), p. 182.

⁹ See multiple chapters in *Church as Parable* as well as *Community of Character* by Stanley Hauerwas.

Venerable Pierre Toussaint (1766--1853) was born a black slave in Haiti and died a freeman in New York City. He is credited by many with being the father of Catholic Charities in New York. Pierre was a very successful entrepreneur opening a hair salon which did fabulously well on account of his hair dressing skills. This provided him the source of his philanthropy, and there was a lot of it. Pierre was instrumental in raising funds for the first Catholic orphanages and began the city's first school for black children. He also helped to provide funds for the Oblate Sisters of Providence, a religious community of black nuns founded in Baltimore, and played a vital role in providing resources to erect Old Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Lower Manhattan. He personally bought the freedom of numerous slaves. During a Yellow Fever epidemic when many of the city's political leaders fled the city in search of healthier rural climates, Pierre Toussaint cared for the sick and the dying. In recognition of Pierre Toussaint's virtuous life...the late Cardinal O'Conner had the remains of Toussaint transferred from Lower Manhattan to St. Patrick's Cathedral in midtown Manhattan where he is buried as the only lay person alongside former Cardinals and Archbishops of NYC. On Dec, 17, 1997, Pope John Paul II declared Pierre Toussaint Venerable, thus placing him firmly on the road to becoming North America's first black saint. Venerable Pierre Toussaint was a man who was proud of his faith, proud of his culture and committed to serving others.¹⁰

In these days I think we need to diligently share stories which might inspire us to greater understanding, greater compassion, greater virtue, greater yields of the fruits of the Spirit. There is social unrest between races and cultures-- in the U.S., in Canada, throughout the world. There is tension among the classes exacerbated by the economic challenges connected to COVID-19. There are significant ecological disagreements among people convicted of climate change and those who question the veracity of such reporting. There are models within our Christian tradition of those who have faithfully sought to reconcile some of these divides. More than ever, I believe, we need these positive stories to strengthen our resolve in the ministry of reconciliation to which Christ invites us. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

¹⁰ <https://obmny.org/venerable-pierre-toussaint>