

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS: PARABLES FROM THE LAND; LUKE 15:1-3, 11-32; MARCH 14, 2010; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC

One of the great things about visiting Israel in January was connecting the biblical stories to the places where they occurred. Every stop on our tour had at least one story. So we were constantly listening to stories. And who doesn't like a story.

On our first day we visited Simon the Tanner's house in Joppa where Peter had a dream of a sheet being lowered from heaven with all kinds of non-kosher animals in it. This was the famous dream that led Peter to the Roman centurion Cornelius and the realization that the story of Jesus was not confined to any boundaries.

As our group of Christians and Jews stood in the narrow cobblestone passage leading to Simon the Tanner's house which overlooked the Mediterranean I read, as Rabbi Harry or I did at most stops, the biblical story associated with the place. It was a gorgeous day: blue sky, expansive sea- coast, Tel Aviv in the distance. And I thought to myself: 'this is where our faith was inspired to reach beyond itself. If Peter didn't have that dream our little group from Buffalo might not be standing here together.'

We had little epiphanies like that everywhere we went – discovering new meanings to the old stories. One thing we discovered was that whether the story was historically true or not had little affect on its power to re-direct life.

On a hill at the center of Joppa, we told the story of Jonah and the whale because Joppa is where the ancient myth says the whale spewed Jonah out of its mouth.

You remember the story – God told Jonah to go and preach to the Ninevites but instead he took a slow boat to Tarshish which is in the opposite direction. Joppa is a seaport and from there, after the whale deposited him, Jonah got on another boat and headed straight for the dreaded Ninevah realizing it would be easier to preach to the enemy than arm-wrestle God. How many times I've taken that slow boat away from God's direction.

What happened for many of us, as I knew it would, is that the bible came to life. It was transformed from a dusty old tome into a living document with wisdom and relevance.

Literary critics talk about meta-narratives – big stories that shape civilizations and generations of people. One of the meta-narratives of the bible is the search for a new land, a Promised Land where there is peace and justice; where there's enough for all people – a land without want and misery.

Of course, one of the other great meta-narratives is the account of the forces of darkness that oppose our seeking such a homeland.

Both of these themes are present in the story of the prodigal son. It is really a story about the love and forgiveness of the father as much as it is about either of the sons.

Some call it the parable of the prodigal father, prodigal meaning wasteful, the father's love so wasteful, so unconditional that there's more than enough for all.

But like the older brother we often object to such no-strings-attached love. You can hear the older boy thinking, 'he didn't earn it, he doesn't deserve it'. But what he's really saying is "What about me! Where's my reward?"

And did you notice the end of the story? The father is talking to his angry elder son and says, “this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

We might have expected the story to end with the phrase ‘was dead and has come to life’ on the assumption that no condition is worse than death and none better than life. But this is not the climax of the parable. Rather the final words of the parable convey an important message for any age: there is a condition worse than death – to be lost, and there is a condition better than life – to be found.ⁱ

Ask any recovering alcoholic, ask any couple who’ve rediscovered their marriage or partnership; ask any parent whose child has come back to his or her senses after being lost to drugs or despair.

For most of us, discovering the road back starts by hearing a story in which we recognize, like the prodigal son, the difference between our false selves and our true selves. And this is the key to turning us around because in addition to making us realize how lost we have been the new story lets us throw away the old story because the old story, to put a point on it, is a lie.

Psychologists call this “re-framing” but for the spiritually inclined “re-mapping” may be a better term because it conveys the sense of journey toward truer destinations.ⁱⁱ

And here’s the key to the parable and sermon today: it is hearing stories in which we recognize ourselves then learning to tell our own stories about embracing our true selves that we discover how to use our new map.

So the challenge is for us, for you and me, to identify stories in which we recognize ourselves and then tell our own versions of these stories as occasions present themselves.

This is the essence of excellent parenting, mentoring, teaching, supporting anyone in need or crisis.

But the thing that makes our part not just advice-giving, is talking about our own turn around, our own self-discovery, our own embracing of our true selves and letting go of our old selves.

I was struck this past week once again by the power of stories of transformation when a member of the congregation told me he was listening to NPR and heard the remarkable account of how villages in Sierra Leone are forgiving the unforgivable atrocities of their recent civil war.

Villages gather to give perpetrators a chance to confess and ask forgiveness and victims a chance to forgive because African wisdom holds that a crime against any one person is a crime against the entire community.ⁱⁱⁱ

The impact on Sierra Leone, much like South Africa and Bosnia and other places where this process of communal listening to confession and forgiveness is practiced is deep healing and recovery. The church member who shared this account with me and gave me the link to the audio file so I could hear it myself was inspired by the deep resources for healing and recovery that are to be found within everyday people. I would call these resources for life the “image of God” within each one of us.

The old map we are tempted to follow is that someone else or somewhere else has the answer; or that government policies and programs, institutions and experts have all the answers for the survival of the human species and planet.

But the story from Sierra Leone, the new map, that could reframe our world here in America, here in Buffalo is the simple fact that people, you and I, have the answers for our own wellbeing; answers like a community coming together to practice an ancient ritual to reconnect human beings to one another.

The western film crew who recorded this story was skeptical at first that the victim could really forgive the man who killed her seven year old daughter. And when the interviewer asked her if someone had put her up to it the woman looked at the interviewer in disbelief and said, “We can think for ourselves on these things.” And that is a word of hope for places like Western New York for righting old wrongs, re-framing our reality, re-building our community. We can think for ourselves on these things.

Imagine the rich storehouse of stories right in this room; stories of being lost and found; stories of confession and forgiveness that could make a real difference to real lives.

What it boils down to is recognizing that we are all beggars and some of us have found the source of bread and some of us haven't. The only thing that will convince another beggar where to find bread is when someone just like himself – a poor and broken beggar – tells him where the bread of life is to be found.

You might say being lost and found is the process of life and so, if we are growing spiritually, we'll always have some fresh account of how we've been found again. When members of a congregation start sharing like that is when a congregation becomes self-sustaining and starts to grow spiritually and numerically. I know, it's not easy, especially for people of the white, Anglo-Saxon tribe. But the alternative is a shriveled spirit.

Websites, brochures and marketing techniques are important, but telling the story of how we were lost and found again like that boy in Jesus' parable is what will drive our mission and extend our influence in this community.

So from one beggar to another; I was lost to fear and insecurity, to self-condemnation and guilt but then as the poet said, “Love bade me welcome and said come and eat.”^{iv} And against all my excuses and delay, love set the table and I did eat.

If you are feeling lost today, if there is some unquenchable thirst or insatiable longing, someone sitting near you has a story just like yours. My hunch is you and I will have an opportunity soon, maybe even today, to listen to someone's story or tell our own of being a prodigal son or daughter which is the story of finding our way home again to a loving God. A God who stands at this table waiting to receive each of his wayward children and serve a feast. Amen.

ⁱ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: A Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 186.

ⁱⁱ Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1992) 115.

ⁱⁱⁱ “A World of Possibilities” website

^{iv} George Herbert, “Love (3),” *The Complete English Poems*, (New York: Penguin, 1991)178.