

My mother held on to many stories that hindered her ability to live fully. I recall the agony with which she approached the 'return desk' at the department store. Uncomfortable at trying on garments when purchasing them Mom would bring them home only to discover that the colour didn't match her slacks or that they weren't the right fit or that, upon second thought, she simply didn't like the clothing. She would agonize for a couple of days before approaching the return counter believing that the clerk would judge her for having made a bad choice or suspect her of somehow trying to deceive the store. I watched her a few times and observed that her anxiety made her look arrogant and her fear of being challenged made her speak curtly to the clerk. To my knowledge she never had a single instance of trouble at the return desk but the stories she told herself caused her many hours of worry.

It is my belief that below her story of "being under suspicion by the return clerk" were deeper more complex stories about being unacceptable. I don't fully know the origins of these stories but I think they were connected to a gruff and angry father, to an instance of inappropriate touching by a stranger, and to her society's views that women were only as valuable as their beauty or their connection to men.

On my first Sunday at McClure I advanced the idea that God might be a verb, might be an activity, an encounter, an experience: more than a noun, more than a 'Being' or puppet master. I have to confess that I have not completely ruled out the idea that God is a noun, someone I can speak to, some "one" who loves me. Still, the idea that God is a verb, that God is known in those relational moments when we extend love, justice, peace, compassion and courage makes sense to me. On that morning a few weeks ago I highlighted a piece of scripture that has become increasingly important to me. In the Letter of John it is written, "No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another God lives in us and God's love is made manifest through us." To name God as Love with a capital 'L' has become a liberating idea for me, yet it remains only an idea until I actually engage in loving.

I am distressed by the absence of love in our world. Of course people still fall in love; of course we still love our children and grandchildren (especially when they are young and vulnerable). Yet, the love that I associate with the God-power is a different kind of love, grittier than that generated by hormones or engendered by family ties. Every starry-eyed young couple will learn that after twenty or thirty years of marriage (and sometimes after even one or two) that hormones begin to recede and love

requires intentionality and courage. Jesus knew this when he was challenged by a religious leader to name the greatest commandment. He replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and love your neighbour as yourself.” In the coming weeks we shall explore how Jesus defines “neighbour” by pushing love to the edges of grittiness suggesting that it must be enacted amidst vulnerability, danger and even suffering. But, that’s for the coming weeks.

This week I am intrigued by how easily we gloss over the final words of Jesus’ commandment to love. Love God and love your neighbour as yourself – that is, as you love yourself. Love yourself – wow, that sounds like a strange commandment in a world which seems obsessed with self-gratification. But self-gratification isn’t love. Even when my mother found the perfect blouse to compliment her slacks the old stories, the self-defeating stories remained. Love of self can require as much grittiness, as much vulnerability and courage, as love of neighbour.

There are those in the helping community known as narrative therapists and I’ve had opportunity to learn from them. I will attempt to simplify their theory. Stories come into our lives from many places – from the media, from the culture, from our friends and peer groups, from our families and the generations before them and even from the church.

Unfortunately some of those stories are negative stories, and for whatever reason (perhaps evolution trying to keep us alert to danger) those negative stories get stuck in our heads and we tend to repeat them over and over, especially when we are feeling afraid, lonely or confused. Allow me to give you a very condensed version of a negative story that I have lived with.

I grew up in a home where my mother viewed the world as threatening and so I adopted that view. It proved to be true when the neighbourhood kids threw sand in my face and the schoolyard bully occasionally chose me as a target. As I worried about these 'dangers' I paid less and less attention in the classroom. As a result I became an average student at best, with no study habits and frequent escapes into daydreams. In my mind a story emerged that I was not smart, in fact likely the opposite. "I don't know anything" became the title of my negative story. I had to go to summer school to raise my marks enough to get into university because 'I didn't know anything'. When I got to St. Andrew's College I noticed that I couldn't match Lorne Calvert's ability to get an 'A' from Dr. Schnell which confirmed for me that, 'I didn't know anything'. Years later when I was asked to assume a term position as Professor of Pastoral Theology at St. Andrew's I was petrified because, "I didn't know anything." When the president suggested I might stay on in a more

permanent faculty role, I quickly retreated because I knew that 'I didn't know anything'. During the years I taught chaplaincy skills at St. Paul's Hospital I worried with every incoming group of students that they would discover my inadequacies and the fact that 'I didn't know anything'. This is how a negative story behaves when it comes into your psyche and your soul. Negative stories hang around the sidelines of our lives obscuring a clearer view and threatening our ability to love ourselves.

Narrative therapists remind us that we do not live one-dimensional lives. We are not comprised of only one-story, even though negative stories seem to demand our attention. Too bad these stories are so loud because when we learn to quiet them other stories appear. I am the only person in my family of origin to have attained a university degree. Over the years I collected three such degrees including a post-graduate degree in pastoral counselling. I have loved, and been loved, in the churches where I have worked. I was honoured to be elected, for a term, as President of the Canadian Association for Spiritual Care. People have appreciated my work, my family loves me and I can even 'measure up' against the world's criteria of how much stuff a person should have accumulated.

I include these stories not to be boastful, but to illustrate how positive stories can so easily get drowned out when we allow negative stories to

demand our attention. When Jesus commands us to love ourselves he is calling us to rise above the default of negative stories by noticing and embracing the ways in which we have lived with love, justice and courage in the world. Narrative therapists sometimes ask their clients an interesting question, “What story would you be paying attention to, if you weren’t paying attention to the negative story?” Is it possible that I might hear a story of courage and accomplishment if I wasn’t paying attention to the story “I don’t know anything.” If I tune down the volume of the negative story, the stories of success, accomplishment, and blessing grow louder.

Jesus was all about shifting his view away from the negative definitions imposed by others and noticing instead the stories that empowered people. The culture saw a near-destitute woman at the temple treasury; Jesus saw the most generous person in the room. The culture saw an infected and socially quarantined leper; Jesus saw a person who lived with gratefulness. The culture saw a tax collector who acted like an extortionist; Jesus saw an individual courageous enough to correct past mistakes. The early church saw Peter as a faulty coward; Jesus saw him as the ‘rock’ upon which the church could be built. Jesus looked through a different window and invites us to see ourselves as he chooses to see us. We could see Jesus as an impotent and impoverished Galilean whose

mission failed miserably and ended in death. Yet, we have chosen to see him as a wisdom teacher and as a revelation of all that is holy. If we can be so generous in our view of him, is it not possible to look through a different window into our own lives?

The work is partly our own to do and it is the work of a life time – to catch the negative stories that so easily occupy our consciousness and to quiet them so that we might pay attention to our stories of effort, courage and success. I suggest that this work is only partly our own, for the followers of Jesus are called into a community of love where we have the opportunity – perhaps the requirement – to affirm one another. If the God-power is a verb than we must share in deconstructing each other's negative stories. We must be willing to challenge the negative stories that weigh others down and to champion the positive stories of resilience and courage.

Narrative therapists sometimes employ a technique known as a letter writing campaign. Stephen Madigan, an outstanding Canadian therapist tells of working with a young racialized boy around whom a negative story developed. The school and justice system grew a negative story about this boy complete with expulsions and court appearances. Madigan recognized that this negative story grew, in part, as a product of racism, so he started a letter writing campaign to so that the positive story of this boy could be

heard. He recruited neighbours, coaches, grandparents and the boy's pastor to tell the alternate story, the kind of story that Jesus would tell of a boy with potential and a tender heart.

Jesus blessed those he met by giving them the opportunity to "reauthor" their lives and he invites he of us to follow in this way. Might we be bold enough to challenge our own negative stories and committed enough to challenge the stories that weigh down others. Just imagine if we filled our days with honest affirmations of ourselves and of those we encounter. Jesus said that he came to bring life in abundance and I believe this is the abundance he was speaking of. Status and material wealth have their place but truly abundant life grows from the inside out as we affirm the God-power that dwells within each of us. Praise and thanks to the power that calls us to abundant life. Amen.