

I am an assistant professor of theology at a church affiliated liberal arts in the heart of Texas. Every student who earns a degree with us has taken two theology courses. Some do this willingly, some begrudgingly. As my title indicates, we have a theology department, not a religion department. What this means is that the professors do not feign objectivity when discussing beliefs and practices related to Christian faith, but teach those areas as people passionately committed to a particular faith. Yet, as part of a liberal arts education, we do examine the faith critically. Each of these dynamics put us at odds with several of the students who enter our courses. At the extremes are two groups. In the South where fundamentalism runs deep, some students who came to Texas Lutheran University because it claims to be Christian appreciate the explicitly Christian nature of the courses, but have profound issues with the critical approach to theology, especially when this approach addresses and critiques biblical material or familiar interpretations of the same. A second group of students enters a classroom that will deal with topics they either know little about or that they feel deeply antagonistic toward. These students have chosen TLU because of its location or its academic program in an area distinct from theology. We were left somewhere between laughter and tears a couple of years ago when 2% of *our* students responded to a survey saying that they would never consider attending a church related college. These students take the theology courses as part of the hoops they are required to jump through in order to graduate. Some of them are ignorant of basic Christian assumptions. They simply lack the experience of Christianity. Others, however, have been deeply burned by a church that has rejected them or treated them in a decisively ungracious manner.

Teaching these two groups in the same classroom can make for interesting educational experiences. Teaching in a way that engages all these students and the crowd in between them is a major challenge. Of all the teaching tools in my pedagogical belt, the one that has been most productive has been biblical storytelling. In the five years I have taught here without exception, this particular technique of exploring Christian faith has ranked highest on student evaluations of most helped them learn in the class. Typically, 40 to 50% of the students name the storytelling explicitly as the element they most appreciated. I would like to explore the particular kinds of resistance offered by the two groups I have highlighted and then speak of why storytelling facilitates each of their learning.

### The Challenge of Fundamentalists

One of my students described for me an event that she went to sponsored by area churches to prepare Christian students who were college bound. She went filled with the excitement that the years of exploration ahead of her promised. The first speaker got up and said to the high school seniors something like this, “You are about to head off for college. At some point in the first week you will find yourself sitting with all the other freshmen as you listen to a speech by someone, probably the academic dean. He will welcome you to the exciting world of learning and invite to explore a world of ideas. He will tell you this will not be easy since it will involve a transformation of your mind. Things that now appear black and white to you will take on shades of gray, he will promise. Truths that you have held onto for more than a decade, will be called into question. He will smile at you and welcome you into the gray shades. DO NOT

BELIEVE HIM! He is lying. Hold tight to the truth that God has given you. Do not give in to Satan's no-commitment world. Be true to your God!"

If such presentations raise general suspicions about university education, the first week in an Introduction to Theology class is likely to confirm them. Questions about the nature of the stories in the opening chapters of Genesis are fast coming and truths held for over a decade are called into question. What is more, the actual experience of watching a professor operate as an interpreter of the Bible feels like watching an autopsy on a loved one. The cherished living Word of eternal life is carved into little pieces, each of which are held up to the gallery of students and discussed in cold tones. And in the end, the pieces never come back together. They lay disjointed among the scattered notes of the professor. This, incidentally, seems to be an experience of many who hold the Biblical texts sacred from even a non-fundamentalist perspective.

#### The Challenge of non-Christians

The other group of students may have little knowledge of Christianity. Basic terms like stewardship, atonement, homage and sin are not part of their regular vocabulary. They do not know who Moses was or what Passover is. They get lost sometimes in the pedagogical leaps that the professor seems to be making. Who are the Samaritans? Are they different than the Judeans? Am I supposed to like them? Hate them? They also ask questions like, why would someone spend a half hour talking about the meaning of five verses? Others come with an even more negative experience of the Bible. I recall Stephen Dunn's character in the poem *At the Smithville Methodist Church* who thinks of the Bible as "a great book certain people use to make you feel bad". These students have experienced dogmatic portrayals of biblical contents and may have to

struggle to hear a message in the Bible beyond condemnation. Interestingly, these students prove a lesser challenge than the fundamentalists. Once they see another way of thinking about these texts and are shown that their critical questions are valid, they often come on board and describe the course as one of the most interesting classes of their semester.

### Engagement Through Storytelling

Given this scenario, why does standing up in front of a classroom full of diverse students and telling an old, old story engage so many of them? For the fundamentalists, common ground is laid at the outset of the conversation through a shared story. They recognize the story, the characters and the conversation. Even more importantly, they see the professor as someone who cares enough about the story— their story—to take it seriously. They correctly assume that anyone who would spend the hours required to learn this story must revere it profoundly. This creates grounds for trust, a necessary foundation for any successful pedagogy. Even when students disagree with the interpretation presented, they have seen how it might work with the actual words that they believe to be inspired by God and they can raise questions about the professor's interpretation in a genuine manner. When seeing a presentation of the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7, they may question a portrayal of Jesus that they find out of character, but then they are invited to show how they would say the same words in a way that would support their interpretation. This opens them up to seeing that there are a number of ways that a given text can be interpreted and presented. When openness is shown for their interpretation, then they are generally more open to listen to other options. Since this course shares with the general liberal arts education the goal of seeing things in their

complexity, this moves students directly toward their goal. Finally, interacting with the story itself is challenging. Some fundamentalists have an annoying habit of stressing the inspiration of every word of the Biblical text, but ignoring the details of the actual texts in consideration. Biblical storytelling is one of the ways that those students, as well as this professor, can be confronted with the text and its claims in their stubborn particularities.

The stories engage our other students for a different reason, although a professor who demonstrates a passionate about her subject is always more interesting than one who is not. For the student who comes without a store of biblical awareness, a storyteller provides enough clues about how to perceive cryptic festivals, places and people to allow him to stick with the story and understand its basic outlines. Though the story itself may not explain what a Samaritan is and how a Samaritan might be perceived by the faithful in Jesus' day, the facial expressions and body language of the storyteller can cue the student that this is an unlikely hero. Then subsequent conversation can expand the emotional message in the direction of actual historical content. But in the meantime, the learning gradient was not so steep as to lose the uninitiated student. Also, while this student might become overwhelming trying to visualize the scene he is reading in a book, the storyteller indicates to him several clues about a valid way of understanding the story. Such a student will also be likely to see things that those who are too familiar with the story simply do not see. He is able to ask wonderfully odd questions that break open the stories in stimulating ways.

For the one who has been burned by a dogmatic approach to Christianity, stories offer a more mutual way that one may enter the household of faith and look around. Stories told tend to invite the hearer to reflection rather than dictate propositions to be

accepted. Kathleen Norris notes that the dogmatic slant to theology came about as a movement occurred away from the stories original orality. She writes: "It does not surprise me to discover that the Christian prejudice in favor of 'correct doctrine' took hold as literacy increased and oral traditions faded. Theology moved from the mouth, ear, and breath onto the page."<sup>1</sup> Storytelling restores the non-dogmatic primacy of the breath or Spirit. The respect implied in this return to story allows for a better interchange of reflections. It also demands that the student engage herself beyond the level of mere recipient. She must be actively asking herself what this story means to her. Jesus' parables functioned in this way for his hearers so that the dynamics of hearing the story, participating in its understanding and undergoing transformation as a result mirrored the content of the kingdom of God that the parables carried. Again, trusting of the student to make valid and astute judgments in turn creates the necessary trust in the professor that is required for successful learning to take place.

The shape of the stories themselves also invites the appreciation of the student who has been burned by the church. The stereotyped portrayal of religious leaders and their subsequent judging, whether in the Old or New Testament, whether Pharisees or Markan disciples, matches the stereotypes the wounded student has formed of contemporary judgmental religious leaders. They recognize in the prophets' or Jesus' criticism of those in power, a validation of their own criticism of organized religion. Finally, Jesus himself and the God whom he proclaims comes across not as petty and legalistic, but as graciously inviting them to think about who he is and what he is about. All of this alters the climate in which their learning can take place.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 210.

Beyond these specific reasons that storytelling engages each of the particular groups that I have discussed, there are other elements that make storytelling engaging to students of all sorts of persuasions. Storytelling addresses many senses of the hearer, not the eyes or ears alone. Although I have not found a way to bring the sense of smell into the hearers' experience, I have found that using my own memory of this sense increases the effectiveness of learning the text. Taste also is difficult to convey. But the other emotions respond vividly. Visually, the audience sees the location of the various characters in relation to each other. They see the body language of one group in relation to another. They see the size of the vessels holding water about to become wine. They see the size the crowd that fills the story and that surrounds them so that they become a part of that crowd. They see again and again those who are down low being raised up. They connect these visual elements from one story to the next. They hear a full range of volumes and a vast breadth of emotions in the course of the stories. Frightened disciples scream when they see Jesus walking on the water. Or Jesus cracks a joke. A woman whispers to herself about touching Jesus' cloak. A father speaks with agony of his son's demon possession. A person passing by mocks the dying man. This experience stands in stark contrast to the experience of either reading the text silently or having it read to you in a flat tone. Finally, even when my hand touches noone, our bodies respond to each other physically. We are, as the saying goes, touched by stories. This is more than a metaphor, it describes a bodily experience. With all these dynamics together, Storytelling is more likely to result in a richer engagement of the students as whole people. They hear the whole of their own vocal inflections in the inflections that fill the story. The "church tones" that sound in their heads when reading sacred writ are replaced with speech much

more like the tones of day to day life. As a result of this lively hearing of the story, they remember it. I have had five years old repeat back to me almost the entirety of a story that they had experience only one time. While older students may not be quite as adept as hearing the fullness of the story, they nonetheless retain much more than they would from a simple reading.

As a systematic theologian one of the objectives I have for my students is to get them to relate the ancient texts to their contemporary lives. All of life becomes a resource for interpreting these stories. The biblical stories comprehend our universe, and our universe expands the biblical stories. A scholarly nun once said about her *lectio* of the Scriptures, “Anything I can learn from anywhere can be helpful...”<sup>2</sup> And since all students have learned something somewhere, they bring to bear a bevy of perspectives to make the text into a mansion with many, many dwelling places. Their own experiences expand the meaning of the story. My son made this clear to me when he was learning the story of Jesus blessing the children. He ended it in this way, “And he laid his hands on them and blessed them all ... Duck, duck, duck, goose.” The subdividing of life into disparate parts give way to a new coming together where to be goosed by Jesus is a great a blessing as one could hope to receive. Less playfully but utterly profoundly, a student approached me after hearing the passion according to Mark. She came with tears in her eyes and told me of how she was raped when she was a young girl. “I never thought God understood what I went through. But when I heard Jesus cry out on the cross, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ I knew that cry; it was my own. And for the first time I knew that God did know my struggles!” Two stories met and became one. Other

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Norris, 281.

traditions have been better at this bringing of the whole of life to the text than my own European traditions have. Pete Pero notes:

Whereas [white denominations] struggle to make worship “relevant” to the rest of the week’s work and play, the black experience is to make the week’s work and play and struggle the stuff of worship.<sup>3</sup>

Put another way, my own traditions have tried to give me a bit of wisdom to take into the world with me during the coming week. African Americans have brought all of their world with them into the sanctuary filling the place, and then the stories, chuck full of their life’s tragedies, struggles and triumphs.

A voice from another community, Justo González, also outlined a shift that he felt needed to occur in biblical interpretation. Although he does not specifically mention biblical storytelling, his goals in what he calls “reading the Bible in Spanish”<sup>4</sup> are facilitated through the practice of biblical storytelling. Here he argues that biblical interpretation needs to return to the dynamics within which the original audiences of these stories encountered them. These dynamics have been diminished in the trek through literacy. His “grammar” for this interpretive approach outlines four points.<sup>5</sup>

First of all, “the Bible is a political book” that “deals with issues of power and powerlessness”. Hearing the story makes it plain who is powerful and who is not. The individuals lose their generic qualities and are presented again as a clear conflict between those with power and those without. Secondly, the Bible is addressed not to isolated individuals but to whole communities. The very shift from silently reading the text to

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Pero, “Worship and Theology in the Black Context” in *Theology and the Black Experience* eds Albert Pero and Ambrose Moyo (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 242.

<sup>4</sup> Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 75.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 85-87.

performing it in the presence of a group reenacts this dynamic. The hearers feel it in their guts that this is a Word addressed to a community. They know that they each individually are not the light of the world, but that this Word is addressed to a community of followers. Thirdly, the Bible can be explored in great complexity, but the “little ones” may be better at cutting through all the other issues and seeing what is most basic.<sup>6</sup> This form of biblical interpretation takes hermeneutics out of the sphere of professionals only and returns it to those who stand in a social place not unlike the place where Jesus’ original followers stood. Those of us who love complexity are reminded (in the words of the Indigo Girls) that “the hardest to learn is the least complicated.” Finally, “we must learn to read the Scripture in the vocative.” By this González means that the stories do not seek so much to inform us as they do to form us. As González states, “In the Hispanic community, the biblical interpretation that is most appreciated is not the one that helps us understand difficult passages in the text but rather the one that helps us understand our own difficult passages in the pilgrimage of obedience.” Something about the art of storytelling makes it easier to invite students on this transformative journey. Contemplating what the rhetorical impact of these stories might have been in their original communities invites reflection on what they might mean for us today. A rich understanding of truth as a power that does something to us results; truth makes us live more truly. The whole story meets our whole lives and in this encounter all things may be made new. Both those who are far off and those who are near are engaged; autopsies end and that which had been declared dead, lives and breathes in our presence.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 85-86.