

10C 2022

A lawyer questions Jesus.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

It is a manipulative question.

He is not really interested in the answer.

As we say in ministry, the issue is not the issue.

The lawyer is interested in looking superior.

His guiding story is that the most clever person wins.

His god, you see, loves only the keen.

Jesus is uninterested in appearing clever and therefore is not trapped by the rules of the
game established by the lawyer.

Rather than answering him, Jesus turns the question back to him.

“What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

In other words, surely you know the law, lawyer.

The lawyer answers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all
your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor
as yourself.”—the very thing he is failing to do.

Not interested in scoring points, Christ simply tells the lawyer that he has answered well.

This was a bit deflating for the lawyer, who had anticipated the pleasure of making Jesus
look stupid.

To justify himself, to save face, as it were, he asks another question to try to look clever.

“And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus then relates the famous parable of the good Samaritan, and *again* turns the

question back to the lawyer: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

Jesus took control of the story.

The lawyer started with a story about the importance of cleverness and the rabbi he was

going to show up, and Jesus told him a different story, one about compassion.

The stories we tell determine our values and behavior, yet our stories often remain

unconscious, quietly affecting us in ways that we do not realize.

The less aware we are of our stories, the easier it is for others to manipulate us.

The tobacco companies long knew about the addictive effects of cigarettes.

Sarah Milov points out that “one cigarette company research director commented in

1954, ‘It’s fortunate for us that cigarettes are a habit they can’t break.’”

Milov adds that, since the 1960s, companies even “manipulated ammonia levels in

cigarettes to enhance nicotine’s [addictive] effects.”

Publicly, however, the companies always spoke about smoking in terms of a choice of

free, responsible adults.¹

¹ Sarah Milov, “The End of the Illusion that Smoking is a Choice,” NYTimes, July 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/06/opinion/nicotine-smoking-cigarettes.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

“It’s your freedom to smoke,” they asserted, though addiction actually limits one’s freedom.

Even the warning label on cigarettes, notes Milov, placed the responsibility for smoking on the shoulders of adults—you’ve been warned (though not about the addiction)—which shielded the tobacco industry from lawsuits.

It is all how you tell the story.

I point this out not because I want to talk about the tobacco industry, *per se*, but because it provides a clear example of how stories can operate in the background to control our thinking.

These days, we are witnessing the death of a story.

When I was a boy, I was told that happiness was the result of ever increasing consumption.

Each generation, moreover, would be able to consume more, and therefore would be happier.

The United States, the story went (and I believed), was the first country to get this right.

All other countries were lagging behind, somewhat backwards, you know, but might catch up one day.

We now realize that a planet of limited resources cannot provide for 8 billion human inhabitants to live like an upper middle class American, let alone like Jeff Bezos.

Environmental damage to the planet, its effect on the climate, and a sense of political stagnation now conflict with the story and threaten a loss of pride in the nation that was leading the way to a happier society, and a loss of purpose in labor thought to bequeath a better world to our children.

People respond primarily in two different ways when their narrative is challenged.

Imagine, for example, that you grew up in a family whose story was that you should be good always and you would be rewarded.

You then go out into the world and find that psychopaths often rise to the top whereas truly good and capable people usually rise to the middle.

You feel betrayed.

In response, you might acknowledge the loss of the story, or you might deny the falsity of the story and instead argue that those psychopaths were clever cheaters.

Suppose you grew up in a family that told its sons that they had to be a “man,” by which *they* meant denying one’s feelings and preferring action over communication.

You go out into the world and find nerds and geeks doing quite well.

One can either acknowledge and grieve the loss of the story or, again, one can live in denial and argue that others somehow cheated.

The same is true if you grew up with the Horatio Alger, pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps, self-made person story.

When confronted with an entire generation that is economically less advantaged than the prior, one can either acknowledge the loss and grieve or one can claim that others are cheating one out of one's due.

When our stories are proved inaccurate, you see, our choice is either to admit the loss and grieve, or, like Israel when Amos told them they were on a path to destruction, to claim that others are cheating and become filled with hatred.

(By the way, less than a decade after Amos' death, the Assyrians began their conquest of Israel, just as he had warned.)

When I was first ordained, all I had to do was to mention in passing our need to protect the environment in order to make parishioners' veins bulge.

But remember, the issue is not the issue.

When people get this furious, something more is going on than meets the eye.

The bulging veins were about the loss of a story that gave their lives purpose and meaning.

When a person reminded them of environmental degradation, some people heard, "Your story is wrong and your life has no purpose," and they became furious.

We are in the process of grieving, which has many phases.

Many are in angry denial over the loss of the story.

Some are bargaining, trying to find a way to make the story still be true.

Until we reach acceptance, we will not be able to move on to the next story.

There *will* be another one.

We cannot live without stories to guide us.

I am hoping for one that emphasizes our deep connection to God, our fellow human beings, and the natural environment, something like what we already find in Christianity, although not in those forms of Christianity that have been hijacked by people who are trying to salvage the previous story about God anointing the United States to show the other nations how to achieve happiness through consumption.

Rather than seeing life as a blessing and an opportunity to grow granted by a loving God, they see it as a problem to be solved created by a God who might remain angry with us for eternity should we fail, so you better follow the rules that look remarkably like the 1950s story.

They believe, moreover, that the correct interpretation of the Bible provides those rules.

A parishioner gave me an interesting newspaper article written by an evangelical,

Shayne Looper, who was challenging this common story about the Bible.

He wrote that many treat the Bible as instructions for getting into heaven, and then get frustrated because those instructions are not clear.

They wonder, “Does God not want us to figure it out?”

Looper argues that the Bible is instead a biography of God, one might almost say an autobiography, that gives us insight into God.²

I would counter, however, that people who tell this story about the Bible will get frustrated by all the contradictions.

Why is the Bible not clearer about the nature of God?

Is God being coy? Does God not really want to be known?

The Bible is neither an instruction manual nor an autobiography, but a collection of texts written by people in order to share with others their experiences of God.

They are struggling to make clear for us the meaning of what they experienced, and each does so differently.

In fact, they sometimes contradict one another.

Read in this way, we can see the collection of books known as the Bible as inspiring us to have our own experiences of God, our own relationships with God, and then to share those with others.

You can see how our stories determine our feelings, our values, and our behavior.

When reality contradicts our stories, we may acknowledge our loss or we may accuse others of treachery.

² Shayne Looper, "A Closer Look into the Life and Times of God," *Star News*, July 1, 2022, 5C.

It is challenging to mourn, but it is even more challenging when we refuse to admit that we have experienced a loss.

Those who nevertheless prefer to deny the loss become disconnected from reality and are capable of great cruelty to others as they attempt to impose their illusion on others.

This is where we are today.

We have suffered a loss and are grieving.

When we acknowledge the loss, grief is a healthy process.

Of course, we naturally want to know what is next because we think it will jumpstart the healing, but grieving must take its own time.

The process is important.

It prepares us for what is to come, whatever that is.

In the meantime, keep in mind that this is merely the death of a *story*, not of God, not of love, not of purpose.

The death of a story challenges us to tell a better story, one closer to God's own story.

For now, we mourn, we pray, and we hope for a better story.

I pray that the next story will be informed by the existing Christian ideal of love and mutual determination and the preeminence of relationship over all things, but even so, it will still be new.

God is still speaking.

We are still learning.