

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 23, 2020

ISAIAH 51:1-6 | PSALM 138 | ROMANS 12:1-8 | MATTHEW 16:13-20

When I do pre-marital counseling with couples, I usually start by asking them two questions. The first question is, “Why do you want to marry this other person?” This usually results in an awkward silence and some version of *I don't really know, you know?* After the silence gets too awkward for me, I ask them the second question. “How did you meet?” This one usually results in laughter and happy crying and all-around good feelings. And, most important, an answer to the first question. People who can't say why they want to marry this person in particular when you ask them point blank end up telling you why when you ask how they met.

Why is the second question so much easier? The difference is that the first question is about describing someone else's qualities or characteristics in theory. And the second question is about describing someone else's qualities or characteristics through stories.

Stories matter to us. We live in stories. From a young age, we learn to understand ourselves and the people around us by creating and telling stories that convey a sense of meaning.¹ We construct narratives to help provide order to the chaos of the world. You probably have a story in your head about the kind of person you are and why your life has unfolded the way it has. If you've ever thought to yourself *This always happens to me.* or *Why can't I get over this?* then you know the feeling. We are the narrator in the novel of our life.

We do the same things with institutions, relationships, and communities, too. In her book *Strangers in Their Own Land*, the sociologist Arlie Hochschild uses the term “deep stories” to describe metanarratives about why the world is the way it is.² They're not literally true, but they help make sense of our emotions, our fears, and our desires. They *feel* true. You probably have a deep story about the place you live. You probably have a deep story about our nation.³ You probably have a deep story about this congregation, too. Oftentimes, when we have disagreements with other people, sometimes they're not so much because we want different things or even because we have different opinions but because we have different stories. And you can argue all you want, but unless you have the same story, you're just going to talk past each other.

Stories can be helpful, we need stories⁴, but they can also cause problems. Cognitive behavioral therapy, which you may have used if you're done therapy for anxiety and depression, is all about interrogating the stories we tell about ourselves. The messages we tell ourselves make the world feel coherent, but sometimes they do that by giving us false information. For example, if you made a joke at a dinner party (remember dinner parties?) that no one laughed at, you might tell yourself that you're not engaging and people don't like your company and this sort of thing always

¹ Daniel Seigel has a good discussion of this in *The Developing Mind* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2015), 84.

² Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, First Trade Paper edition (New York: The New Press, 2018).

³ For example, this is how Hochschild describes one possible deep story about America frequently invoked by conservatives: “You are patiently standing in a middle of a long line leading up a hill, as in a pilgrimage. Others beside you seem like you – white, older, Christian, predominantly male. Just over the brow of the hill is the American Dream, the goal of everyone in line. Then, look! Suddenly you see people cutting in line ahead of you! As they cut in, you seem to be being moved back. How can they just do that? Who are they?” The corollary progressive story tends to be about a public good built over generations being stripped of their value. The stories are different, but they both play on emotions people have but don't know how to express outside of narratives.

⁴ See Ed Yong, “The Desirability of Storytellers,” *The Atlantic*, December 5, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/12/the-origins-of-storytelling/547502/> for a good summary of why storytelling might be advantageous in human evolution.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

happens to you so you shouldn't bother going out anymore. The real story might be that people didn't hear your joke because they got distracted by a siren outside. Stories create the world we live in, but sometimes those stories keep us from seeing the world clearly.

So. You're probably wondering what all this stuff about stories has to do with today's readings. Well, today's reading from Romans is all about narratives and stories. I mentioned when we started Romans earlier this summer that everything in Romans is about the question of salvation. What is salvation? How do you achieve or receive salvation? Who is salvation for? And in today's reading, Paul makes a pivot. So far he's been telling God's story, what God has done through Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. But now he pivots and says that God's story is actually your story, too. To be redeemed, to be given new life, to be justified, whatever image you want use, isn't simply to get a check next to your name in the book of life or to get access to some bonus round of life. It is being grafted into a different story that you can draw meaning, coherence, and hope from.

St. Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Let's start with the first half of that. What does it mean to be conformed to this world? Well, to be conformed comes from the Greek *yschematizō*. The root of that word is the same as "schema." When we conform, we change who we are to fit into someone else's model of how the world works. We could take that a step further and say that conforming is about fitting yourself into someone else's story.

We do this sort of thing all the time. Someone tells a story about us, and we believe it to be true. Kids are a good example of this. We have lots of kids who are so smart that they get bored in school and start acting up. And because they misbehave, we tell them that they're not smart. And they start to internalize that narrative that they're not smart enough. Adults do the same thing. To take a very common example, lots of men have internalized this narrative that being a man means you can never be sad, you can never grieve, and you can never be unsure about something. To be a man, you have to be strong, stoic, and have the emotional intelligence of a goldfish. When we become conformed to this world, when we take its stories as gospel, we're not able to live full lives.

But the second part of Paul's message is what makes all the difference. St. Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but," and here's the important part, "be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God." "Mind" here doesn't mean your brain so much as your sense of self and your identity. The things that we create through our stories. When we are brought into relationship with God through Christ, we get a different story for us to build our identities around. That new story is what Paul calls God's mercies.

The world often tells us that we aren't lovable yet, that we aren't enough, and that we need to find our own salvation to attain a sense of worth. But the mercy of God tells us something else. That we are loved more than we know, that we are enough just by our being, and that salvation finds us.

When we celebrate baptisms or remember our own, that new story is what we're inviting people into. Baptisms aren't just an insurance policy in case something bad happens. Baptism is a way of publicly grafting our stories into God's story. If you've been to a baptism recently, you know that you promise to support the newly baptized in their faith. In other words, you help to remind them of God's story and to support them as they seek to live out of that narrative instead of conforming to the world's.

Over the course of this next week, I encourage you to get in your own head a little bit. How often do you find yourself conforming to the world's stories about you? That you haven't earned grace. That you need to exploit others to get ahead. That if people really knew you, they wouldn't love you. And whenever you find yourself telling that story, remember your baptismal story. Remember the story you've been given and you've promised to help others grow in as well. I

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

proclaim Christ through word and deed. I care for other and the world God made. I work for justice and peace. I am empowered by God's spirit.

You could say that baptism is our own "deep story." It's about Jesus's death and resurrection, but it's also about our own. That transformation from death to life is what we're invited into today and every day. A story bigger than our horizons. A story that doesn't conform to our worst instincts. A story that goes deeper than our own experience.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Be transformed by the gift of a better, richer, truer story.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor