

“The Stories We Tell Ourselves”

Genesis 3:7b-10, Psalm 23:6, 1 Peter 2:9

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The way we interpret comments, actions and stories have a significant impact on our health and our relationships. Leslie said to me, “The carpet on the front step of our house is old, dirty and ugly.” I heard, you do not love me. You are a loser husband for not taking care of the house. My love language is acts of service. I show Leslie, Spencer, and Abigail that I love them by keeping the house in excellent repair, keeping the bathrooms clean, and doing every item of laundry every Friday. If I don’t have those three things done, I struggle to rest, listen, or do something fun as a family. I should get my identity from being God’s beloved child; however, I feel inadequate if I sense Leslie is not happy with the house, bathrooms, or laundry. Leslie, Spencer, and Abigail all know that if they want to make my day all they need to do is thank me for one of my acts of service. Thankfully after about 15 years of marriage, Leslie and I became more self-aware. My initial thought is still negative when Leslie says something about the house; however, now I realize it is my stuff, my reactivity, that is distorted, so I am usually able to recalibrate my reaction. Leslie also knows that it is best to share house comments when I am well-rested and in a gentle way.

We all inaccurately interpret comments, actions, and stories. Even the best communication between two people, who know each other well, still falls woefully short of conveying each other’s perspective.

Professor Brene Brown through research has discovered that the way we interpret things significantly affects our lives. Her *Ted Talk*, with over 34 million views, “The Power of Vulnerability” summarizes a few of her key findings. Our expanding perception changes how we live and love. Our relationships and the way we interpret comments, actions, and stories give purpose and meaning to our lives. In your evaluation you may receive 37 positive comments and one opportunity for growth. Our tendency is to dwell on only the one opportunity for growth. Brene found that when she asked people about love, they told her about heartbreak. When she asked about belonging, they told her about times when they were excluded. When she asked people about connection, they told her about times when they felt disconnected. Our relationships, our connections, are unraveled by shame, the fear that I am not good enough. After humanity sinned, **Genesis 3:7b-10 NLT “They suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. When the cool evening breezes were blowing, Adam and Eve heard the Lord God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the Lord God among the trees. Then the Lord God called to Adam, “Where are you?” Adam replied, “I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked.”** From that point on we have struggled with shame. We are afraid. We feel unworthy of love, so we try to earn love. We hid from God. We blame others to try and mitigate our shame, but blame is never beneficial. When God asked Adam about his shame, he blamed Eve who immediately blamed the serpent. No one wants to talk about shame. The less you talk about shame the more you have shame.

Brene’s research revealed that one thing that separated those who had a strong sense of love and belonging from those who struggled for love and belong was an inability to cope with their shame. That one thing was a belief that they were worthy of love and belonging. I perceive God saying to every person you are loved, you belong to my family, in every story in the Bible. There are ugly, messed up, tragic stories throughout the Bible yet in every one of them God is somehow revealing God’s love for us, God’s grace for us, assuring us that we belong. **Psalm 23:6 NLT “Surely God’s goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.”** God is saying to you let go of your shame for you are worthy, good, and wonderful. You are God’s masterpiece. **1 Peter 2:9 NRSV “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.”** God helps us out of the darkness of shame and fear into love, joy, and peace.

Brene found that those who overcame their shame with belief that they are worthy of love and belong embraced vulnerability. They have courage to honestly tell the story of who they are with their whole heart, warts and all. They have vulnerable courage to be imperfect. They have vulnerable courage to have compassion and kindness to one's self. They came to believe that what made them vulnerable made them wonderful.

It is almost impossible to love another, to be compassionate to another, or kind to another, if you do not first love yourself, are kind to yourself and are compassionate to yourself. Embracing vulnerability enables you to say, "I love you" first, to invest in a relationship that may not work, to stop controlling and be grateful, to stop predicting and celebrate. Brene found that vulnerability is the birthplace of joy, creativity, belonging, and love. God became vulnerable in giving us free will. A killer of joy, creativity, belonging, and love is making the uncertain, certain. I am right. You are wrong. I don't need to listen to your story. I know you. I know your intentions. I know what you are trying to communicate. This leads to communication being replaced by assumptions fueling blame. A killer of joy, creativity, belonging, and love is removing the mystery from God and life. Vulnerability enables one to love with their whole heart even though there are not guarantees, to take risks, to dream. Vulnerability acknowledges grace, that we are imperfect yet worthy of love and belonging. Vulnerability acknowledges that I am enough which enables us to stop screaming and listen, to listen for the feelings and intentions behind our words, actions, and stories. Vulnerability enables us to let ourselves be truly and deeply seen which enables us to see other.

The stories we tell ourselves are of upmost importance. Walter Bergmann has written books about this. Are you telling yourself stories of God's abundance or are you telling yourself stories of scarcity. In Walter's books he takes people on a journey through the Bible and our current life revealing the ongoing story of God's abundance and our tendency to tell stories of scarcity. Overflowing goodness pours from God's creative spirit. God's overflowing grace forgives, heals, and renews us. God desires that we immerse ourselves in God's abundant love and joy. Walter explains how the contest between the reality of God's abundance and the myth of scarcity tears us apart. Walter writes, "We must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity—a belief that makes us greedy, mean, and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity. What we know about our beginnings and our endings, then, creates a different kind of present tense for us. We can live according to an ethic whereby we are not driven, controlled, anxious, frantic, or greedy, precisely because we are sufficiently at home and at peace to care about others as we have been cared for." The scarcity story ends in death. God's abundance story ends in glorious eternal life. Walter explains that the great question facing us, facing the church, is will we choose the story of death or life. Walter believes all of creation is infused with the Creator's generosity and we can find practices, procedures, and institutions that allow God's generosity to work.

John Milton wrote, "The mind is its own place and in itself can make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven." The world is more safe, peaceful, and inclusive today than ever. War death is at all time low. Disease, homicides, crime, all at an all-time low. There are fewer poor than ever. Yet the stories we tell and share are more negative than ever. The human brain is like Velcro for the negative and Teflon for the positive. Richard Rohr wrote, "Peace of mind is actually an oxymoron. When you're in your mind, you're hardly ever at peace and when you're at peace you're never only in your mind." We need to go beyond the false world of our assumptions, beyond the false world of the way we interpret comments, actions, and stories to reality.

Our Presbytery Executive Presbyter, Jeff Japinga wrote, "One of the phrases that has shaped me over the past few years, in profound and positive ways, is this five-worder from Brene Brown: "The stories we tell ourselves." One of her profound insights talks about the way people process what they experience. Far from the logical and rational beings we think we are, Brown says, we instead unconsciously interpret these events to fit some kind of already-established narrative we "know" to be "true." Says Brown, it's these stories we tell ourselves more than actual events that create our anxiety and negative reactions. Here's a simple example: Her husband, Steve opened the refrigerator and sighed. "We have no groceries. Not even lunch meat." I shot back, "I'm doing the best I can. You can shop, too!" "I know," he said in a measured voice. "I do it every week. What's going on?" I knew exactly what was going on: I had turned his comment into a story about how I'm a disorganized, unreliable partner and mother. I apologized and started my next sentence with the phrase that's become a lifesaver in my marriage, parenting and professional life: "The story I'm making up is that you were

blaming me for not having groceries, that I was screwing up.” Steve said, “No, I was going to shop yesterday, but I didn’t have time. I’m not blaming you. I’m simply hungry.”

Jeff continues, “So often when I talk to people about their churches, I hear stories. Many are inspirational. But others are stories we tell ourselves; they can sound like this:

- What we see: another congregation with a full parking lot. But what we say (or think), the story we tell, to ourselves or others: My church is losing members so we’re failing; there’s something wrong with us. Or, on occasion, the opposite: If they’re growing, they’re selling out to the culture, and shame on them. Is either story true?
- What we hear: a person with a different interpretation of Scripture than ours, who seems quite sure of themselves. What we say, to ourselves or others: I must not be very smart for thinking this way. Or the opposite: They must not be very smart for thinking that way. Or dangerous for thinking that way.
- What we remember: a story from the past about someone or something. What we say, to ourselves or others: what they were 20 years ago is what they are now.

We all tell ourselves stories to explain what we see and hear and feel. It’s human. What we often fail to acknowledge, however, is the enormous power these self-told stories have to define the world around us and shape how we treat people. Sometimes the stories we tell absolve us and others of guilt and excuse bad behavior; other times, we use them to shame or belittle others. Sometimes our stories bring us together and build community; at other times, they tear us apart.”

Jeff continues, “Too often, however, the stories we tell ourselves about what we see and think and feel simply pass as unquestioned fact. And that’s when we are shaped by stories that just aren’t true. I wonder what would happen if we started to think more critically and carefully about these stories we tell, about ourselves and others. Where do they come from and why do we tell them that way? Are they even right? Or are they simply caricatures and false dichotomies? In other words, lies.

When we can slow down our reaction (one) and identify that we’re telling ourselves a story (two), maybe then we can be more open and curious to the world of possibilities that live in that one moment. Instead of being locked into one narrow and restrictive interpretation of what’s happening (our church pews aren’t full, so we’re failing and might as well just quit trying; that person holds a different interpretation of Scripture that is ruining the church), perhaps we can explore where God might be in that story, and what God might be calling us to be in that story. There, we might find true freedom from the habitual thought-patterns that keep us imprisoned.”

Today we receive our annual report which is full of stories. Today we will launch a campaign to renovate this building. Which stories will you tell yourself: stories of scarcity, arrogance, and division? Or stories of abundance, love, and belonging? Which stories will you tell yourself: stories of shame filled with fear and blame? Or will you tell yourself that as an individual, and as a church, we are enough, we are imperfect yet worthy of love and belonging? Will you embrace vulnerability to love, share, dream and give? Will you listen for God in every story, even the messed up, awful stories, listening for God saying my grace is forgiving, healing and revitalizing all, you are loved, you belong, you are wonderful. What stories will you tell yourself?
Amen