THE DEBT OF LOVE

MATTHEW 18:15-20; ROMANS 13:8-14
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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SEPTEMBER 7, 2014/13TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Earlier this week I came across an article in an online magazine called *Aeon*, which is a British based philosophy, science, and culture website.

The article was written by Will Storr and is called "How a Hero Narrative Can Transform the Self."[1]

Storr looks at numerous examples of radical life changes—people who were going down a usually negative path in life who then had a crisis event of sorts before embracing what was in the author's view an irrational religious narrative about who they were and what they were supposed to be doing.

One example he gave was of a drug dealer who had a crisis experience and turned into a fairly enthusiastic and fiery evangelist in the UK.

According to Storr, the human brain has a constant need to be telling a story *to* ourselves *about* ourselves. And when we make major life changes—when certain paths we find ourselves on prove difficult to sustain or have led to catastrophic results—we simply start telling a different story to make sense of our behaviour and choices.

Here's how Will Storr puts it in his article:

> We live, moment to moment, in an emotional reality of love, hate, feuds, sorrows and dreams. We spin seductive, reductive narratives of heroism and villainy, struggle and victory, to parse reality and give ourselves esteem and our lives meaning… [These narratives] reinforce our tales, making us seem important and our journeys comprehensible. In the chaos of the daily world and our irrational

[1] http://aeon.co/magazine/psychology/how-a-hero-narrative-can-transform-the-

> behaviour within it, our brains conjure the illusion of order; they wrench a plot from the chaos and then place us heroically at its centre.

There is some truth to what Storr is saying.

We *do* tend to give our lives a narrative shape with ourselves in the starring role.

A relatively trivial example: I am a writer. If people like what I write and offer kind and affirming words, it's because they're *obviously* intelligent and sensitive people who have the capacity to be moved by words.

However, if people *don't* like what I write? Well then it's just because it is the writer's cross to bear to be perpetually misunderstood ☺. Or it's because people didn't bother to try to understand what I was saying. Or perhaps there was some other obvious deficiency in the reader.

It couldn't *possibly* be because what I wrote wasn't very good or clear, right?

I spin a tale, even in my own head, which keeps myself in the starring role reinterpreting the actions and reactions of others according to this tale.

We all do this, to varying degrees at various times, I think.

Storr goes on:

> "This story-making has a name. It's called 'confabulation'. In an ordinary, healthy brain, **it tends to make us feel good about ourselves and the reality that we feel we're at the centre of**. ***Religion is a kind of confabulation***."

So, there you have it.

According to Will Storr, the religious impulse is little more than the need that we have to make ourselves feel better and our stories seem more important than they really are.

But is "confabulation" the *whole* truth?

Is this the *fullest* or *best* explanation for why we see our lives the way we do and why we seek God in the first place?

I think that our two texts this morning offer a challenge to this interpretation of who we are and why we understand ourselves the way that we do.

Our gospel text is not a particularly pleasant one.

Jesus is talking about sin. In what has come to be known as the "Rule of Christ," Jesus instructs us to first approach someone who has sinned against us individually, then, if that doesn't work, to bring along a few others as witnesses, and then, finally to bring it to the wider church.

If the offender *still* does not listen, Jesus says to "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Christians have proven very adept, throughout history, at taking the things that Jesus says about how we are to live together and turning them into weapons or iron-clad pieces of legislation that are rigidly applied, often paying little attention to the spirit or intent of Jesus words.

This passage, in particular, has been used to justify shunning and excommunicating "sinners."

Often, people have been only too eager to get to the last stage of the process where we get to "treat people as Gentiles and tax collectors"—in other words, to have little more to do with them… To judge and dispose of them.

I'm not a Mennonite historian, but I've talked to a few of them and I've read enough and heard enough stories to know that Mennonites have, at times, been guilty of turning the Rule of Christ into a harsh and punitive means of enforcing social control.

It has been applied mechanically and without mercy. It has torn apart families and churches. Many of you know of this far better than I do.

Tim Geddert, a Mennonite Brethren scholar, first opened my eyes to a different, better approach to this text in his book called *Double Take*.[2]

Geddert asks the obvious question: *How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?!*

[2] Timothy J. Geddert, *Double Take: New Meanings from Old Stories* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 2007), 45-54.

Matthew—the disciple who recorded this teaching of Jesus—just happened to be a tax collector, so he knew the answer to this question very well.

How did Jesus treat *him*?

He honoured him by choosing him, dignified him by calling and inviting him, and won him over by loving him.

And what about "Gentiles?" Well, one of Jesus' most famous parables puts a Gentile Samaritan in the starring role, showing "insiders" what genuine love looks like (Luke 10:29-37).

Or we could look to Matthew 15 which records the story of Jesus saying that he had never found faith in all of Israel that was greater than that of a Canaanite woman who cried out to Jesus on behalf of her daughter and believed that she could be healed.

We could add more stories from throughout the gospels, but even these brief references are enough to make the obvious point.

We know very well how Jesus treated and understood tax collectors and Gentiles. He loved them, he gave himself freely to them, and he invited them to follow him.

For Tim Geddert, the question this passage asks of us is not, as it has so often been interpreted,

When do we get to cut someone off from our narrative as a holy people in the starring role of the story?

But rather,

Does the love of Jesus now require us to love this person as an ***outsider*** *to try to win back or to love them in a relationship of mutual accountability as an* ***insider****?*

Either way, our response is simple: we are to love.

To read this text as a step-by-step manual for the eventual exclusion of "sinners" is, I think, to quite badly misinterpret both the words of Scripture and the spirit and example of Jesus himself.

But “shunning” and “banning” seem like words from a long time ago. I don’t think many of us are eager to dish out “church discipline” these days. Historically, this may have been a problem, but this does not seem to be ours in the twenty-first century.

Perhaps our error is in the opposite direction.

Perhaps our problem is that we don’t care *enough* about the behaviour of our neighbour. Perhaps we are, like the rest of our culture, convinced that our business is our business and nobody else’s.

We swim in supremely individualistic cultural waters, after all, and it is difficult to swim upstream.

Perhaps we need to be reminded that, to borrow Paul’s words in our second text today, we owe a debt of love to one another.

His words are stark in the simplicity:

> Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:10).

Love does no wrong to a neighour…

What might history have looked like if the church that names Jesus as Lord and Teacher had consistently followed these words?!

To love someone is to desire what is best for them. Sometimes this will involve correction, for it is not loving to allow someone to destroy themselves and others with their behaviour.

Sometimes it will involve compassion, sometimes it will involve concrete acts of self-giving service.

But *always*, it will involve an investment in others.

Jesus does not give us the option of pursuing spiritual fulfillment and meaning in isolation from each other.

This simply is not an option in the Christian life, for Jesus has bound us to one another.

Will Storr would have us believe that the religious impulse is at its root an individualistic one. And he's partly right.

We *do* have always have our own interests in mind. We *do* want to be right with God and to have hope for the future. We *do* want to know the best way to live for ourselves. We can never fully escape ourselves.

But as we see in Matthew, as we see in Romans, in the Christian narrative, we are always pushed further, *beyond* ourselves, to the other in love.

Indeed, the entire Christian narrative could be read as the story of how human beings have tried to displace God from the centre, and to make themselves the centre of the story.

What was the first sin, after all, but the human desire to reach beyond what God has created us to be—to become *like God*?

And what has the rest of the story been about but the long, patient, effort of God trying to reorient his people away from selfishness and toward God and one another?

What is the story of the cross other than the heroic determination of God to conquer the selfishness and pride of human beings with self-giving, other-focused love and sacrifice?

There is only one hero in this narrative and it is not you and it is not me.

So much of the Christian life is about helping us to realize this and to continually drive us outward, away from ourselves, and toward love of the other in all its forms.

Whether this is to "insiders" or "outsider" or whatever the case might be. Our call as followers of Jesus does not change, nor does the debt that we owe.

We are to owe nothing but the debt of love as a response of gratitude to the one who loved us to the end on a Roman cross, and the one who loves us still.

Amen.