

Peacemaking as truth-telling: the unseen violence in our story

Lenten Peace Workshop Session 2

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Romans 5:1-5

What is your story?

Where did you come from? Who were your parents? Where did you go to school? Do you have siblings? Answers to these questions contribute to the origin story each of us has; a story about how we came to be who we are. Of course like all stories, our origin story is one in which we piece together a narrative using only some of the available source material. We remember a small selection of events and facts, mostly based on attitudes we have towards ourselves. Are you the kind of person that thinks of yourself as a winner, a success, a leader? Then you probably piece together your origin story from parts of your life that contribute to this picture. Do you feel like the world has got it in for you, that you are the kind of person that just isn't appreciated? Probably when you have a new negative experience you recall another one from your past that reminds you of this pattern in your life. One of the strange things about our origin stories and how they are constructed is this chicken-and-egg relationship between the experiences in our lives and our perspective of ourselves that decides how (and what) things are remembered. Our attitudes are derived from our experiences, which are remembered and interpreted according to our attitudes. So what comes first, the experience or the interpretation? And how do we make sure that we have the most accurate origin story? Or maybe more importantly, does accuracy matter? While it is certainly important to have a truthful origin story, it is probably not the case that 'accuracy' is a very useful criterion for evaluating our stories. More important than accuracy is health. We can tell a story using no false information but fail to create a narrative that provides a healthy view of who we are and who we can be.

There are many people who have had devastatingly painful experiences early in life, and it can sometimes feel as if these parts of their origin story are toxic and immutable. For those who have been abused or abandoned it can feel like there is no alternative but to live every new event in the light of those stories. For these people, but also for those of us without trauma, it is important to know that while certain parts of our life story will always be part of who we are, we can actually choose to reinterpret our life story with a focus on other events, facts and people. This can be very hard, and may require the help of supportive individuals or professional counsellors, but it is possible and can be very freeing. The important thing to know about our origin story and the 'accuracy' of its creation is that there is no such thing as a perfectly accurate version. By definition an origin story is a selection of information that holds a particular arc, not all possible ones, and that different versions of a story can be constructed from the same set of life experiences. Relegating some experiences to a more minor role, while elevating others, can drastically change the sense of what our lives are about, what our purpose is, and who we are.

Of course, in the same way that we might be better off de-centralizing some experiences in favour of focus on others, we might also need to focus our attention on more hidden parts of our

origin story that we would rather not emphasize. Some parts of our origin story often play a minor or unmentioned role in giving us a sense of who we are, but are still important nonetheless. These are the parts of the story that are usually found in the backdrop, the context in which we find ourselves. For example, when we tell the story of our early life we may mention some geographical details - our place of birth, where we went to school - in order to provide some 'colour', some flavour of the context of our experiences. When I tell people I am from a certain part of Canada, or went to a private Christian elementary school, people use these snippets to fill out my story using their associations with those things. But despite the fact that these little bits are often relegated to the background, both when we tell others our story and when we tell it to ourselves, the stuff of our situated context plays a significant role in the nature and kind of many of our experiences. To be born a black person in America in 2016 is to live a life that will be very different than a life lived by a black person born in America in 1916, or 1816. The same is true for aboriginal people in British Columbia; a child born in a first nation today would not be forced to abandon her culture as she would have in 1916 in a mandatory, Government enforced, residential school. Context matters. But for many of us the significance of our context is often unexamined. Or at least for those of us for whom our context plays a 'positive' role, contributing to a more privileged and comfortable life. So what are the hidden bits of our stories that we should bring to the forefront? The issue is that while it can be psychologically damaging to have traumatic events at the forefront of our internal narrative, it can also be harmful to ignore things that can inform us about poor decisions we have made or destructive events we have participated in.

There is violence hidden in all our stories. This is one of the uncomfortable truths that is necessary to acknowledge in the pursuit of peace. Even though as pacifists we may reject warfare as a means of resolving conflict between countries, we still live in a country that has been shaped by war. Certainly there are many people who not only believe our country has been shaped by war, but that we have benefitted from war; that by fighting the Germans, or the Japanese, or the Boers, or the French or the natives, we have produced the 'peaceful' land in which we live. While it might be debatable if we have always bettered our country by going off to war - as opposed to doing the equally difficult work of removing the pre-conditions of war - it is certainly not debatable that we have benefitted by not having much in the way of large scale warfare here in Canada. What is also not debatable is that all of us who are not descended from the first peoples of this land have benefitted from the violence done to them, either directly by occupying their unceded land or indirectly by benefiting from their more silent elimination and dissolution.

- The unseen violence in our story is this: *we directly benefit from the actions others have taken in exploiting the land and resources of First Nations people.*
- The unseen violence in our story is this: *we directly benefit from the actions others have taken using military force against other nations and people, including civilians.*
- The unseen violence in our story is this: *we directly benefit from the modern slavery created by the exploitation of people in the developing world who produce our cheap products.*
- The unseen violence in our story is this: *we directly benefit from the wanton destruction of the world created by God to be our home.*

So what do we do about this? The first thing to do is to stop telling the story of how we came to be who we are, as a country, as communities, as churches, without mentioning these parts of our story. How could we be at peace with ourselves and with our neighbours if we do not tell ourselves a truthful story of how we got here? And for those who think that all this talk about re-telling our story is just psychobabble that takes up time better spent on action, I would say that it is no small feat to begin by challenge the dominant stories of our culture, the myth of 'Canada

the good', a country of fertile fields, snow-capped peaks and welcoming diverse people (who never ever are racist or evil, etc.) It is no small feat to learn how to tell our story anew by listening to those who have been abused and ignored in the creation of our origin. I honestly don't know how you can get to truthful action that restores relationships through repentance and forgiveness if there is not first a re-making of our identity as people that are complicit in unhealthy forms of conflict resolution.

One of the benefits of bringing our hidden violence to the foreground is that it then becomes possible to talk about some of these things in more open ways that may then lead us to new ways of addressing unhealthy conflict. For example, by acknowledging that we live, as the comfortable classes of people in North America, off the sweat of people in the developing world, acknowledging that this is a hidden part of our story, we might be able to admit to each other that we like our lifestyle, that we don't want to give it up, and that even if we wanted to, we don't know how. This gives us a place to start to think about what we might have to do to make a more peaceful economic world. Likewise for the issue of settlement on unceded land. Perhaps some of us think that because there have been treaties or a truth and reconciliation process, there is no longer any need to worry about our relationship as settlers, particularly as Christian settlers, with the first nations people. And as for the distant violence of our nation's armed forces, perhaps we might also admit, once we acknowledge our complicity, that we think it maybe does make our country and communities less likely to see warfare here. Maybe we do like its distant role in our lives.

Jesus is perhaps the best example we have of someone who is able to re-tell stories in truthful ways, drawing attention to those parts hidden in the back, or removing things from the foreground. In Matthew 21 we read about Jesus being confronted by the priests and elders of the temple. When they challenged him regarding his authority to teach the people, he began to speak to them in parables. Beginning in verse 33 Jesus tells his audience the parable of a vineyard, its owner and his tenants. To those hearing this story, it was clear how they were meant to understand the major images. The people of Israel, God's people, are the faithful branch - the vine - of the vineyard. God is the planter, the grower, the protector, the establisher of the vineyard. So much so good. These are well-known motifs of the origin story of the Hebrew people, which is why Jesus used them. But then there are the tenants, the stewards of the vineyard, who could only be understood as the priests and elders listening to the story. And Jesus tells them in no uncertain terms how he sees the story of their leadership. Far from being responsible stewards of their charge, working with the people to bear fruit for the landowner, they have abused everyone who has come along to remind them of God's vision for his people. They are such obviously wicked stewards that even the son is not safe from their greed and blindness. It is likely that the priests and elders saw themselves as playing a different role in the history of the people, but Jesus chose to use the language of their own origin story to challenge the common version of their story.

And in a completely opposite way you see Jesus meeting with Zaccheus, a traitor to his own people, a collaborator with the Romans collecting taxes for the empire. Certainly this is how he would have been seen by his fellow Jews; these are the dominant parts of his story. But what else do we know about him? Why did he collaborate with the Romans? Was his family destitute? Had he previously been ostracized from the Jewish community? We don't know. (Why do we collaborate with the empire?) Jesus doesn't seem to care. All those parts of his story are able to move into the background in an instant, as long as he opens himself to hear what Jesus has to say. Zaccheus knew how he was seen in the Jewish community, but he would rather respond to Jesus, not knowing anything about what that will mean, than to remain in the comfortable story he lived in. And that was all it took for him to feel the freedom to begin to work to restore all that he had damaged, giving back to all he had harmed.

The hidden violence of our stories mentioned above is not all that hidden and most of us are probably aware of these things as threads running through the fabric of our lives. Why then do we not admit to each other that we know these things are part of who we are? Why do we not admit that we have mixed feelings about our connection to the violence that contributes to our comforts? Two of the most important reasons are: 1) We feel guilty about the fact that we know better but still do nothing to change. 2) We don't know what to do and are scared about our limited ability to fix these things. These are big problems, but we believe in a big God, and in a God that does not abandon us to our weaknesses. If we can believe that He is enough, then perhaps we can begin to be honest with ourselves about who we are.