

“Our World in Stories: The Medicinal Power of Stories”

Galatians 6:1-6

One of the key practices of our faith is being able to let others in when life is difficult. Yet, it is one of the hardest things to do as we tend to hide our pain deep inside of ourselves.

“Sharing our stories is a fundamental practice of healing” writes Mark Yaconelli. He discovered the power of such telling in his own life. He grew up in a difficult household with a mom who suffered from mental illness and a father who ran away with his secretary, but it was not until much later in life that Mark was able to share his pain with others.

When he was fourteen years old at a summer camp, he was given the opportunity to share his story as a testimony of faith. The dean of the camp encouraged him to tell his story as honestly as he could, “including any doubts, struggles, or questions [he] had about the Christian faith.” He remembered thinking about what to share, “It had been a very painful year. My father, in what amounted to a public scandal for our small town, had left the church where he was a volunteer pastor, divorced my mother, and moved in with his secretary. My mother, in the throes of mental illness, had recently been hospitalized after spending weeks driving haphazardly across the United States, believing that she was being pursued by the FBI...The night of my testimony we met on a rocky outcropping that looked over the treed mountains...I stood in front of the great orange bonfire...and tried to put my life into story. But I had no words, no understanding, no story to tell. I stood suffering in silence and then, finally lowered my head and wept.” It took Mark years before he finally found the words and the courage to share his story, but when he did, it brought incredible relief and healing to his soul. Here is a part of his story as a teenager, “I was fifteen years old, living in my father’s house. Six months earlier my mother had been placed in the mental ward of a local hospital and diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder...One night, sometime around three o’clock in the morning, the phone began to ring in my bedroom. When I finally heard the ringing, I quickly got up, leaned over my brother’s bed, and answered it. ‘Mark? I need to meet you. Can I come pick you up?’ It was my mother in a voice that sounded frightened, secretive, and crazy. I stayed quiet for a moment to think. I was the eldest son. She was no longer my father’s responsibility. There was no choice. While my brother slept, I quietly dressed, made my way upstairs, and waited by the front window, my mind disoriented by the strange house. In a few minutes I saw the headlights bend in front of the house and my mother’s car pull beside the curb. I waited, hoping my father would hear the engine noise, come out from his room, and rescue me -but the house stayed still. I undid the lock and scurried across the lawn and drove away.” The car was a mess and Mark’s mother’s state of mind was all over the place. “She drove without destination, the car drifting from left to right...From time to time I grabbed the wheel to keep us from crashing, causing her to laugh and smirk, saying ‘Geez, you’re jumpy!’ I both hoped and feared we’d be stopped by the police. Then she began to speak. ‘We are in a war. It’s everywhere....I think you understand what I am talking about.’ I continued to look forward, nervously trying to anticipate an accident. I replied as lightly as I could, ‘No, I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ ‘Really? Come on! You don’t notice what’s going on with the police, the government, the streetlights flickering on and off, your father?’ She chuckled and shook her head at the mention of my

father. 'I really don't know what you're talking about.' I spoke in steady, calm notes, the way you may speak to a gunman. 'You seem tired, Mom. It's late. Why don't you get some sleep.'" His mom exploded at that suggestion. He continued, "I sat shocked and shaking from the violence in her voice, when abruptly, eerily her emotion suddenly switched. Her body went slack, her face turned uncertain and vulnerable. 'I don't know what to do, Mark.' For the next couple of hours my mother drove us up and down the streets of our town, describing the dark conspiracies that gathered around us.. My silence had no effect...Although I did not possess a driver's license, eventually I convinced her to give me the wheel. Sometime early dawn, I drove us to a truck stop diner where I had just enough money to buy two cups of coffee and a side of pancakes...We sat and ate while my mother made contorted faces, whispering to herself and to imaginary figures...I pushed through the guilt and fear and broke her trance. 'I need to get ready for school, Mom.' She sobered for a moment and then looked at me with disappointment, 'Fine, I don't know if you'll be safe. But if that's what you want...'We drove up to the house, and I exited without saying goodbye. With everyone still sleeping, I sneaked in through the back door, showered, dressed, made my lunch, placed a note on the counter, and then quietly left for school hours early, afraid my mother would call again. I went to my classes, hung out with my girlfriend, joked with friends, attended track practice, and for twenty years said nothing to anyone about what had happened."

So painful to go through all these years holding on to that time of terror and trauma while pretending that everything is okay. Telling our stories of struggle has the power for others and for God to help us through them.

This is the wisdom which Paul was telling the congregation in Galatia as they were going through a time of discord. Galatia was a Roman province in the highlands of central Anatolia (modern day Turkey). There were some agitators among those followers of Jesus. Paul was trying to counsel the Galatians on how to be faithful to Christ in the midst of a church conflict. But what was the nature of the conflict?

In order to answer the question, it may be helpful for us to go to Berlin first, to a museum called the Pergamon Museum. This museum contains a reconstructed sculpture of the Pergamon altar which was originally in Galatia. The altar was first constructed in the second century BCE by the Greeks and then inherited by the Romans. It depicts a battle scene between the Greek gods and the gods of the local residents of the area, the Gauls, or as they may also be known "barbarians." What is clear in the construction of this altar is the worldview of those who constructed it. The Greek gods were higher than the Gaul giants who were attacking from below and who are clearly inferior in their way of fighting and in the result of the battle. What this scene presents is a worldview that saw that the Greeks and the Romans after them were a civilizing force for the barbarians of that area. The Gauls were considered the terrorists of their time. The Greeks and the Romans believed that they brought the people of that region civility, order, and progress. That is why it was important for all the citizens of that area to take part in the imperial cult which promoted this worldview, where the emperor is seen as the son of God who brings order out of chaos. Those who refused to participate were punished.

With this worldview in mind, the conflict among the followers of Jesus in Galatia becomes very serious. The so-called agitators were telling the Galatian believers that they needed

to be circumcised. It was not enough for them to just follow Jesus. They needed to become culturally and religiously Jewish in order to be protected from the wrath of the Roman Empire. The Jews had an exemption from the emperor for not participating in the worship celebrations of the imperial cult. The Jewish communities were a recognized entity for Rome and who participated in the imperial cult by having honorable inscriptions of the emperor in their synagogues and by participating in festivals, but they did not have to worship the emperor or participate in the imperial cult. The followers of Jesus who were Gentiles were not included in that special protection. So, the big issue here was safety from the Empire. But what the Apostle Paul did was ask the Galatians to not participate in the imperial cult and to not succumb to the temptation of safety and security by becoming circumcised. That was the wrong motivation for circumcision. He wanted the Galatians to live in the freedom of Christ without fear from the empire. The old worldview which Paul himself held at one point was that power and domination were the tools for bringing order out of chaos. But after his encounter with the living Christ on the way to Damascus, Paul saw things very differently. He no longer looked at life as a way to live comfortably, find personal satisfaction, and be happy. He saw life as a mission for Jesus. He saw life as a calling to commit to the greater good of all people. His own personal security and pleasure were no longer the measures of a good and successful life. Faithfulness to Christ and living in the gentleness and love of the Spirit of Christ were his guides. The key was to share each other's burdens instead of what the culture was teaching about competition and domination. He believed that the healing of the community depended on that kind of sharing.

Let's listen to Galatians 6:1-6

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. ²Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. ³For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. ⁴All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. ⁵For all must carry their own loads.

⁶Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.

Fulfilling the law of Christ is about being present to one another to carry each other's burdens, including our stories of pain where we provide the space that is hospitable to our souls.

One of the ways that I personally find helpful sharing our stories of struggle in a spiritual community is helping each other to see God in our stories. One of the spiritual practices of our faith is the Examen. When we practice it with each other, we share our stories while paying special attention to God's presence in them. Imagine if we were listening to Mark Yaconelli's story to help him find where God was and is in his stories of suffering. This is not to tell others that their suffering does not matter, but it is to hold the space for them to pay attention to God's presence in their experiences, especially in the painful times.

We will end with a practice of sharing a story. I invite you to turn to a neighbor or two and share with them where you have really connected recently with someone. This could be

someone you have known for a long time or someone you have met recently. Decide who is going to be the listener and who is going to be the teller. The role of the listener is just to listen. No comments or responses or questions. Just listen and at the end say, "Thank You."

What do you observe? How did it feel to listen? How did it feel to tell?

We will end with these words from Mark Yaconelli:

"Our culture is awash with stories –the vast majority of which contain no medicinal properties. We spend our days and nights gorging on stories, our eyes filled with streaming television shows, our ears crowded with podcasts, our minds flung left and right from online news. We stare at screens flooding our bodies with stories that distort our longings. Stories that sow fear and malice. Stories that divide and diminish. Stories that label one group 'good guys' and the other 'not fully human.'... storytelling is being human together. We tell stories to savor the pleasures of living. We share stories to help one another remember who we are and what matters. We tell stories to weave our lives together. We tell stories to keep our souls intact when suffering overtakes us. This is story as medicine. This is how story can save us." Amen.