

# **“The Forgiveness of Sins – Telling the Truth through Stories” by Billy Amoss**

**9 December 2012**

## **Second Sunday of Advent**

When I was a sophomore in high school I had a chance to visit my oldest brother at Yale University. My brother had always excelled in school. He won admission to Harvard and Yale and later became a Rhodes Scholar. He was and still is a wonderful pianist. He practiced every day from the time my grandfather bought him a piano for his fifth birthday until he went off to college. He was a perfectionist and worked hard at everything that was intellectually challenging. Socially he was awkward, but he compensated for it by being an academic star. This was who he was, in our family and outside of it. I, on the other hand, performed on the low side of average in those early high school years. I found school oppressive and didn't study much. I was certainly not motivated to try very hard. I never thought of myself as stupid, but I wasn't gifted either. I hung out with the so-called jocks because I wanted social acceptance, even though I didn't make a very convincing jock. This was who I was, in my family, and outside of it, too.

And this is who I was when I visited my brother at Yale that fall of 1968. What I remember most from that visit is the evening I spent with my brother at his secret society. His friends engaged in the most intellectually stimulating discussions I had ever witnessed. I don't remember much of the content, but I remember feeling that my brain was on fire with all of the new ideas I had been exposed to. Was it possible that people could relate to each other in this way on a regular basis?

I decided I must go to Yale.

By the time I was a senior in high school I was a straight A student, and I was president of my class. What had happened? The stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what our place is in the world shape our reality. Our stories help us make sense of a bewildering amount of information that assaults our senses on a daily basis – information about ourselves and how we are to live our lives.

To the extent that our stories are based on the best information available to us at any given time – on the truth about ourselves and the world as best we can perceive it – our stories make it possible to weave a tapestry of life-giving meaning, so that our lives can be experienced as authentic, rich and satisfying.

And if we are living truthfully our stories evolve constantly as we take in new information. As our reading of reality shifts our stories change accordingly. But when our stories become set and cannot change, they take on a finality that stops us from growing into the fullness of being. Instead of evolving with the changing times we become crooked and brittle and defensive. All new information is interpreted through the fixed story we carry around with us, making meaningful and life-giving change impossible. Fear takes over, and we succumb to the human tendency to live within our own echo chamber. As a young teenager in high school I was trapped in a fixed story about myself, and it was fear of the unknown, of taking the risk of changing the story about myself that kept me stunted emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually – until I felt brave enough to claim a new story.

“(John) went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Repentance in Christian tradition is associated with feeling guilty about the bad things we have done, of not being as good as we ought to be and wearing a hair shirt to show that we are aware of our sinful nature. This is a circular way of thinking that is familiar to many of us and does little to help us close the wide gap between what we say we believe as Christians and how we actually live. But if we look at how John answers the people’s questions about how they should live, his answers, coming from one who lived in the wilderness on locusts and wild honey and called on people to repent, are

surprisingly “conventional.” We can actually imagine putting them into practice. If you have two coats, share with anyone who has none. To the tax collectors: collect no more than is prescribed. To soldiers: don’t extort money or make threats or false accusations.

But because John was the precursor, the one preparing the way, his ways are only the preparation for the real thing, not the actual way we are to live out our lives. John was the archetypal ascetic. Jesus’s ways were different. While it is true that following his baptism by John Jesus entered the desert and spent 40 days denying his bodily needs and resisting temptation in the manner of an ascetic, he emerged to live a life that lacked the trappings of renunciation. He banqueted, drank, and kept company with women and the disreputable, people known to be impure. He lived among the people as a brother and friend. He healed on the Sabbath and fed the multitudes. He blessed the woman who anointed his feet with costly perfume. He taught through parables that showcased a generosity and love beyond comprehension – the parable of the laborers, the prodigal son. These are not John’s teachings. We can think of John’s call on us as the first step to following Jesus: to be honest and authentic, to tell the truth, to make the crooked in us straight. Love does not enter into John’s teachings. He is only preparing us for love by calling us to become honest and true, because only then can real love find an anchor in our lives.

One of the best ways I know of to examine whether I am living in an honest and authentic way is to pay attention to the stories through which I interpret my life and make choices – and to be willing to change the stories if they fail to be life-giving. I have already given an example from my high school years of how changing the narrative of our lives to fit real needs and yearnings can be healing and radically life-altering.

There are stories we create for ourselves as individuals, but, of course, there are also stories we create collectively – as a family, an institution, a nation, a people – and these collective narratives serve as powerful guides to direct our actions, for good or for dark purposes.

As a child in Germany in the 50s and early 60s, I was steeped

in the collective narrative of a people who had endured terrible deprivation and hardship during the war and who now – with the industriousness and efficiency for which Germans were known – were rebuilding and remaking their truncated and devastated country into the most powerful and dynamic nation on the European continent. The confrontation with and acceptance of responsibility for the crimes committed during the Nazi period, especially the Holocaust, would come later and force a very different narrative onto the German consciousness – one that would give a whole new and unwelcome meaning to their famous efficiency.

Many of you know of Paul Costello's work with young men and women from Israel and Palestine, who are invited to spend 7 weeks during the summer in Washington and – removed from the endless conflict they live with at home – learn to tell their own stories and to hear the stories of the other, the "enemy." The hope and belief is that in this new land of immigrants, and the descendants of immigrants, and slaves and native peoples that we call America, they will learn how to create a new story for themselves that can open up a path to peace. Because the old stories that the Jews and Palestinians are living with are fueling conflict and hopelessness.

Kate and I have had the privilege of leading these young people in InterPlay as a way of helping them to trust one another and build team spirit. The first summer we did this there was one young Israeli named Tomer, who was especially resistant to the InterPlay exercises that Kate and I were offering. At one point I happened to be paired with him for one of the exercises, and I told him, because it struck me in the moment, that he reminded me of my youngest son. I don't know whether that is what shifted things in his mind, but several months later when I was in Jerusalem he wrote me an e-mail out of the blue, which had the tone of a good friend. "Hi Billy, how are you and Kate? Please write back to me. Tomer." Tomer and I have now met on two occasions in Jerusalem, including during my recent visit, and have formed a strong connection. And here is how this relates to the stories we as individuals and as a people carry around with us. Tomer's two grandmothers had to flee Germany as children in the 1930s. So Tomer, like most people in Israel, is a child, or grandchild, of the Holocaust. As part of its long journey of atonement for

the crimes of the Nazi era, Germany granted Tomer and other Israeli descendants of German Jews the right of German citizenship. And he accepted it. And, he told me during our meeting last month, he was about to head to Berlin to learn German. Think about the trajectory of this narrative, of how the old story is getting an entirely new and unexpected chapter: A young Israeli Jew is choosing to become a citizen of the country that planned and carried out the persecution and murder of his relatives and his people. He has gladly accepted that country's offer of citizenship and has now moved there to learn the language and start a new life. And, he told me, most of his Israeli friends were envious of this opportunity. As it turns out, I have a good childhood friend who lives in Berlin. I offered to contact him on Tomer's behalf, and Tomer was delighted. He and my friend have now met in Berlin. I don't know where the story will go from here, but one thing is clear: Tomer has stepped out of the old story of persecution and victimhood and allowed a new story to unfold and shape his life.

But before people can be ready to create a new story the old stories must be told – and heard. This is especially true of people who are in conflict with one another. I believe that one of the biggest obstacles preventing the Palestinians from creating a new story for themselves is that the world has not heard and acknowledged their story of dispossession and displacement. Just as we in the West have spent decades hearing about and grappling with the Holocaust and coming to terms with our complicity, we must also acknowledge – we must hear and admit – that the Palestinian people have been wronged, and that they are still suffering from injustice. It's simply not possible for us as individuals or as a people to move on with our lives and create something new if we have suffered and not had the chance for the suffering to be acknowledged. Not fixed, but acknowledged, for that is the first step to healing, even if the injustice that gave rise to the suffering persists. If people are not heard, if the world denies their right to tell their story, they will become desperate, and some will become violent.

When we confess our sins we are taking the first step to changing our story, to allowing something new to happen. This includes freeing us up to hear the story of others, especially

our enemies. For they too have a story to tell, one that, if we hear it, will allow us to see them as human beings. And that is an essential step on the journey to peace.

May this time of Advent leading to the birth of Jesus be a time of allowing our personal and collective stories to be examined and undergo some serious revision, so that we can move ever closer to the truth of who we are and make the way a bit straighter, a bit smoother for the coming of Christ.

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