

Seven Stories: Appreciating Our Baptism. Pastor Fritz Wiese. 14 January 2024. Credit for this story to Brian McLaren.

First, for a little fun, after Pastor Miriam preached on the magi last week, I just had to show this picture from our June trip to the Holy Land, where we had a chance to take a mini-ride on the probable mode of transport by that wise tribe of travelers. And some of those camels liked to kiss at the end of the date. ☺ Hope you can join us in June of 2025 or our trip to the Footsteps of St. Paul).

Everyone loves a good story. The Golden Globes distributed awards last Sunday evening for some of the most highly appreciated stories and storytellers this past year. The Emmy's are tomorrow. NFL playoffs, our sharing on Facebook, the books we read—all are unfolding a story. Today, I'd like to tell you a story about seven stories. Seven stories at the heart of much of human history.

I thank Brian McLaren for his thinking on this, which I've tweaked just a bit. For each of these stories, I can think of examples and I hope you will too. Examples from human history at the national and local level, even in marriages and families. The 7 can be found all throughout scripture. Each of the first 6 stories, unfortunately, I must confess, have held some sway at points throughout throughout my life. And still today can influence my decision-making and attitude. See what you think about the 7 stories .

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Once upon a time, there was a people. Let's call them "the people." The people used stories to interpret their lives, stories of where they came from, stories of where they were going, stories that told them how to be happy, stories that told them who they were.

One day, a long time ago, one of the people saw another one of the people holding something shiny. "I want it," said one of the people, so he took it. When he got back home that night, the rest of the people were amazed. "Because I have a shiny object," he proclaimed, "You should to listen to me." He told them a story about what he had learned about happiness, how to have security, and how to keep the shiny thing that he had found. His power grew. The first story said that the way to be happy is to rule over others. (Quick interruption: If the people of Jesus' day heard this description, who would they think of immediately? The Romans, right.

Rome was occupying them to take control of Israel's trade routes, just as Rome had seized something from all sorts of regions around its empire. You might have examples that pop to your mind. Now back to the narrative . . .)

But every time that story was attempted, people were unhappy because the rulers oppressed them. So, a second story was invented. Let's overthrow the rulers. But this second story didn't work either because it just turned the tables putting new people under oppression. (To interrupt, Cuba and Nicaragua are examples coming to my mind. Revolutionaries like Castro and Ortega begin their lives trying to throw off forces of oppression just to have thousands soon after complain that they themselves have morphed into a new oppressor).

A third story began in which some of the people withdrew into their own isolated spaces and spent energy judging the world. With the purity of their integrity, they would thrive. But nothing changed. These island communities eventually permeated with the same old stories to run themselves, competing to be in charge, building shiny object factories that blew ugly smoke into the air, making everyone cough, and dominating each other.

Meanwhile, the domination story and the isolation story had a business merger, which resulted in an experiment. If they could get rid of the people they didn't like, who looked or sounded different, or whose customs weren't like their own, surely that would fix things. Of course, that story just led to more suffering of those who were blamed and targeted and now who felt unsafe and restricted. And even though minorities were separated and punished, those who thought they were in charge still were very restless. Contentment still eluded them.

So eventually, some launched a fifth story. These people tried to convince themselves that they would find satisfaction by accumulating. For some it was clothing, others titles, others toys or money. Eventually the principalities of some pursued satisfaction by accumulating other principalities. It was all the same to them.

The people kept hurting and hurting each other.

So, a sixth story was created that said, if we couldn't find peace, security, and happiness by ruling the world or overthrowing the rulers or withdrawing into isolation or getting rid of a minority or by accumulating things, then maybe we can make sure that the world never forgets our lack, this pain that others have caused us and the suffering we have experienced. The people would make sure that no one would ever forget that they were the victims, that their suffering was their very identity and that no one had suffered as much as them. If you try to tell them that others have suffered too, they fight against you vehemently.

Then something new. A poet came to town, a storyteller who knew that the domination story, the revolution story, the isolation story, the purification story, the accumulation story and the victimization story were all destined to fail. They were destined to fail because they invited every human being who is already interdependent with every other human being and even with the earth itself, to pretend instead that we are in a competition.

The poet knew how to build things like tables where we could all sit and eat together. He taught that the people most oppressed by the six stories should be the most honored. He taught that the differences among the people others shamed or used as an excuse for punishment were actually marks of what make us most lovable. He invited the people to join him in forming a new community where status would depend on service, where domination would be replaced by equitable community, where the revolution of the heart would lead us to share power with not power over transforming the process by which we lead and learn.

Where deadening isolation would be replaced by rejuvenating silences, where we would learn from people who seemed different than us, where we would stress sharing not accumulating possessions. We would seek to heal each other's wounds in a new story, striving for not victimhood or power over, but of forgiving each other. Co-conspiring only beauty.

The poet had a radical idea, the seed of a seventh story that will heal the world. The earlier six stories all claimed that the path to peace, security, and happiness was about winning. Us over them, or us overthrowing them, or us staying apart from them, or us cleansing ourselves of them, or us having things that they don't, or us being more important than them because of our competitive suffering.

In the seventh story, the story of reconciliation, we still get to win just not at anybody else's expense. In the seventh story, human beings are not the protagonists of the world. Love is.

In the seventh story, humans are participants in something far bigger than being reduced to dominating others for one group's gain, or the pursuit of happiness through revolutions that replace one dominance with another, or isolation, or purity, or being a victim, or gaining possessions. In the seventh story, humans are participants in the biggest thing that has ever happened in the evolution of the good, of the expansion of consciousness to include the restoration and healing of all things. The story of love. It's a story in which some of us know that our purpose is not merely ourselves, but all of us. Some of us, for all of us.

They killed the poet, of course. The seventh story was too much to take for people with visions limited to the narrow circle of the self. But the poetry was too wonderful to be bound by death. The poet's story is alive right now. The story lives wherever someone reveals the other stories as failures. The story lives every time someone lives for all of us or offers a glass of cold water to a thirsty stranger, or a blanket for a naked person, or engages in sacred practices of friendship, lament and hope. The story lives wherever there are exchanges of power and gifts between the strong and the vulnerable, creating community. The story lives wherever there are artistic endeavors that show us we're not alone, and tell us where to go next. And reminds some of us are called to live for all of us.

Because there is no them. Just us.

Thank you again to Brian McLaren for this concept of 7 Stories. I feel it would be fruitful to do a weekend retreat or a multi-week series to hear your opinions on each of these stories. For every single Sunday as we gather for worship, we corporately ask God's strength to reject the lure of the first 6 stories. "Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil." Amen? Each Sunday, instead, we celebrate that we are children and citizens of the 7th story. Of Jesus' story. A story in which people of all nations, as Jesus' specifies in the Great Commission, are to be baptized into the script, dialogue, and plot of the Story of Life and Love. (Show Great Commission quote).

We're so delighted that at our 11 o'clock service, Stefani Spruill, a mother who grew up in the faith, will see her husband Justin, three daughters (Jordan, Harper and Riley) and son Wally, be washed into the waters and promises of the 7th story. A story in which, being connected to Jesus' death and resurrection, all of them have won, and will continue to win, with Jesus and all of God's children. Where they don't compete with, but complement, all of you already living out your roles in Jesus' baptismal story.

Last June, it was so powerful for our tour group to stand in the Jordan River and re-affirm our baptism. How ironic that today's war in the Holy Land reminds us that not many miles from where we stood that day in the holy water--remembering Jesus' baptism and our own--the extremely real dangers and pain of the first 6 stories raged around us. The dead-end claims that certain people are less than or need to be purged, or dominated. The serpent story that we can isolate or separate ourselves into happiness and leave others behind. The delusion of thinking purity of race or religion is the answer, or that the drumbeat of victimization will ultimately win the day.

Immediately after Jesus' baptism, he was driven to the desert to be tested for 40 days. But in the wilderness and throughout his ministry, Jesus kept rejecting the dangerous temptations of the sick six stories. People gave him grief for not joining their stories. They even killed him. But you can't kill love. And when Jesus, the Poet, rose from the dead after 3 days, he did not exact revenge, or isolate, or accumulate accolades. Instead, Jesus proclaimed, hey, let's keep God's story of love rolling forward!

I take heart in the concluding line of McLaren's story is important. "Some of us live for all of us." Not all will join or be convinced of Jesus' story. Even our family and friends. And that's OK. "Let not your hearts be troubled," Jesus says. For our baptismal call is not to convince or convict but to compassionately contribute LOVE into our surroundings. It's OK that in Jesus' movement "some of us (you people of faith) live for all of us (the whole community and earth). Because in God's story, there is no "them." After all, we give the newly baptized a lit candle and declare Scripture's charge, "let you light so shine before others, that they might see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven."

And so, my friends, as I put a pin in this sermon, make sure you put a pin in the Baptismal Board, marking where you were baptized. Rejoice and reclaim that beginning. For YOU, my friends, have been washed, called, and equipped to be dynamic characters in the seventh story, the best story of all! In Jesus' name, Amen.