

“The Counter Narrative That Binds”
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Jesus is known for telling stories with an unexpected twist. And it's for this reason that we, similar to the disciples, come to expect the unexpected. Today, the lectionary guides us to quite possibly Jesus' most famous, most told parable, the Good Samaritan. We know this story. In fact, most everyone knows this story. The age-old narrative begins with a lawyer, or expert in the laws of Israel, asking this up and coming new Rabbi a few questions to test his prowess.

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The English translation of this question is a bit confusing. The word eternal here does not point to the afterlife but to the quality of the current age. So he is really asking, “What must I do to live a full life?”

Jesus asks the lawyer, “What is written in the law?” The lawyer must be thinking that's an easy one, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus says, “Bravo, you nailed it! So go do it and you will live a full life.” Steeped in the law, the lawyer wants to clarify or justify himself. So he asks “Who is my neighbor?”

In Frederick Buechner words, the lawyer, “wanted a legal definition he could refer to in case the question of loving one ever happened to come up. He presumably wanted something on the order of: ‘A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the

party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever.'"¹

But if that's what he wants, that's not what Jesus provides. We get the story of a man, presumably Jewish, who travels from Jerusalem to Jericho, and is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. A priest walks by, but decides not to stop. A Levite walks by, but moves swiftly along his way. At this point, Jesus' audience is expecting an ordinary, maybe even lowly Jewish man to come along and save the day, perhaps a shepherd or a wood worker. But then a Samaritan comes along, has compassion, and goes above and beyond to help the man in need.

Wait, a Samaritan? The whole time it was a Samaritan, are you kidding me? You don't seem that shocked. Contextually, we are a little removed from the cultural significance of the story. But, Jesus' audience would have been picking their jaws up off the floor.

You see, that didn't match the dominant religious narrative in Israel at the time. Israelites and Samaritans had a long history of not getting along, not understanding one another. The biblical narrative and Jewish history tell us that the Samaritans were Israelites that intermarried during the Assyrian exile, making them no longer "Israelites in good standing" but a racial and religious minority. Also, the Samaritans' primary place of worship was Mt. Gerazim rather than Jerusalem, and for the Israelites, the temple in Jerusalem was where Yahweh resided. As the Samaritans no longer fit in the Israelite's dominant religious narrative, I imagine that not so good descriptions about the Samaritans began to develop like unfaithful, unclean, impure, misled, bad, untrustworthy, misguided, etc. Over the centuries, these negative feelings of fear, distrust, and disdain toward the Samaritans would have trickled into the Israelite consciousness and made a home there. Dominant narratives are the stories of those who hold any sort of power, and Israel held the power of the religious landscape. But the problem that often bubbles

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling In the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 78.

up in dominant narratives is that the human value of “the other” can be tainted, questioned or lost along the way. And let me be clear, this process of dehumanization is not an Israelite trait. Ironically enough, it is a human one born of fear.

So when Jesus says that the Samaritan is the hero, the good one, the compassionate one, the example to follow, and the neighbor, Jesus is offering a counter narrative to hold up against the dominant one. Counter narratives are so transformative because they restore humanity where it has been lost or neglected. In acting in mercy and compassion, the Samaritan goes against the widely accepted expectations of him. He defies the false narrative assigned to him and acts as an example of humanity at its best.

Here, Jesus proclaims that God’s love is more expansive than the human boundaries we construct between ourselves. Jesus asserts that Yahweh is welcoming all to be part of the divine flow of love that is active around us. And Jesus reminds us that God draws near to the holy cries of those who are suffering. Because Christian theology IS a theology of liberation.

Throughout Scripture, God is a God of the counter narrative. When dominant narratives become oppressive, God liberates the outsiders. The most formative story in the Old Testament is the Israelites’ enslavement and exodus from Egypt. During this time, the Egyptian king became threatened by the Israelites because they were multiplying in number. He feared that they would one day overpower him. So he enslaved them and ordered the midwives, Puah & Shiprah, to kill any boy born to a Hebrew woman. The midwives, who were women of God, did otherwise, and let the babies live. Their actions created a counter narrative that honored the inherent worth of the Israelites. Through the grace of the midwives and an Egyptian princess, Moses was born and later guided by God to free the Israelites from slavery, thus redefining their personhood in a way that dramatically opposed their social status at the time.

Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets share God's counter narrative in the face of the dominant one. In today's reading, Amos speaks against the dominant narrative that further oppressed and dehumanized the poor and needy. Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah were all trying to speak such Truth into the dominant narratives of their times. It's no surprise that most of the Old Testament prophets were exhausted and hopeless and felt underappreciated and unheard. They were trying to speak a Truth that defied the message of the most powerful, influential, and pervasive social structures of their time including those of religion, law, race, and gender.

In Jesus, we have the counter narrative made flesh. When the dominant story doesn't value women, Jesus invites women to sit at his feet as disciples. When society pushes away the sick and possessed, Jesus goes to them to restore their full humanity. When the culture says that violence and empire is king, Jesus dies on a cross as a counter narrative. He died on a cross and rose again to overcome the cycle of violence present in the dominant Roman empire and turn power on its head. God's work has always been to bring those on the margins, those who don't fit the dominant narrative into a counter narrative where all are welcomed, all are loved, and all are fully valued.

Going back to the story of the Good Samaritan, when he walks by the man suffering, it says in the text "he was moved with pity." This phrase in the English doesn't fully capture what happened. The Greek word, *splangk-nee-zo-mai* means that he was moved in his bowels with pity and love to act with compassion. It was a guttural reaction that we hear only 2 other times in the gospel of Luke. Once it is used to describe the loving father's reaction when he sees the prodigal son, another counter narrative for its time by the way. The second time it is used when Jesus has compassion on a widow. Each time Luke uses the Greek word, we are able to glimpse the way God feels when he is heartbroken for his creation. So in a sense, the Samaritan, in his act of compassion, IS the counter narrative as well.

It's been less than 200 years since our country enslaved an entire race of people. While slaves were, in fact, valued on a monetary level, in that they helped rich plantation owners turn a profit, the dominant narrative pertaining to the devaluation of black people on a human level pervaded the consciousness and policies and even theology of our country to the extent that slavery existed in our country for over 200 years. And not only that, our country was willing to go to war for four years and at the cost of 620,000 lives. And a primary concern of the Civil War was whether or not the black people of our country should be valued as fully human rather than 3/5 human. While war is never a positive step forward, the ideal that slavery should no longer exist was. Yes, there were Americans who fought for their continued enslavement, but there were Americans fighting for their freedom as well. Somehow, a small light made it's way to the ears of the powerful. Somehow a counter narrative had begun to swirl.

One of the people who resisted the dominant narrative of the time preceding the Civil War was Harriet Tubman, a leader of the Underground Railroad. I recently learned of this particular story in a sermon by Kyndall Rothaus, a fellow Truett alumni. You see, Ripley, Ohio was a station on the underground railroad located on a hill across from the Ohio River and was known to be a precarious point on this difficult journey to freedom. At this juncture, fugitive slaves would wait for helpers to come and guide them as they continued forward. As I'm sure many of us know, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" is the title of an African American spiritual. Some historical accounts say that several slaves changed the words of the song to "Swing Low, Sweet Harriet" in reference to Harriet Tubman. Some writings note that it is possible that slaves sang the song as a way to signal that Harriet or another underground railroad guide would soon be arriving to lead them to freedom. Isn't that beautiful imagery? Similar to crossing the Jordan River to Jesus, they would be crossing the Ohio River to freedom. Even today, the song is sung as a plea for hope, for freedom. "Oh Harriet, let us see the hope. Guide us to freedom. Show us how to be the counter narrative"

We, of course, know the fight didn't end here. The war led to Reconstruction, which was a very dangerous time where lynching increased dramatically. And then the country moved into about 80 years of Jim Crow laws. Not willing to accept these inequalities, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders and participants, both black and white, led the counter narrative known as the Civil Rights movement. Some of us in this room remember and were a part of this counter narrative.

Liberation and freedom have been the striving of every generation and every age, and we are in a time where many African Americans continue to say that their experience in America is not the same as the dominant experience. As social media is the story teller of the 21st century, I have been paying very close attention to the narratives swirling around on the internet. I can't help but notice what seems to be competing hashtags or competing narratives: #blacklivesmatter OR #alllivesmatter. There seems to be a disagreement on the narrative that we should be paying attention to. First, let me be clear that I think that a person can support both blacklivesmatter and support the police that serve and protect our communities. We can advocate for black lives and be grateful for the many police men and women who go to great lengths to protect us. And I know that all of our hearts break for all the needless violence that has occurred this week. True, all lives matter. But it is hard to dispute, that the value of the lives of black people in this country has been and continues to be called into question. Today, many parts of the criminal justice system including unjust sentencing and cases of police brutality do not work toward the valuing black lives. There are explicit and implicit modes of racism that reside in the consciousness of the dominant narrative. So yes, all lives matter – but historically speaking and currently, the value of all lives have not been called into question. The blacklivesmatter movement is creating a counter narrative that says until all blacklivesmatter, the statement alllivesmatter simply isn't true and is misleading. In fact, it keeps us from seeking to live in a country where all lives really do matter. The blacklivesmatter movement is asking us not to make justifications or clarifications, but to listen to the experiences of the black community.

So if God is a God of the counter narrative, his Spirit has drawn close to the cries of the blacklivesmatter movement.

So we his people are called to draw close too. I am saddened that there is such a cultural of either/or around this issue. It's not a liberal or conservative, a Democrat or Republican issue. It is a human one. One of the questions I have heard the most over the past week is what do we do? What action do we take as people of faith? It's a good question, and not a simple one. I recently listened to a talk by Rev. Traci Blackmon, a UCC pastor who was in a church near Ferguson, MO at the time Michael Brown was killed. She spoke on how to be an ally, and she distinguishes that for her ally is a verb, something done in action. She suggested starting by listening and educating ourselves on the forms of racism today. This education should be from a variety of sources and viewpoints to get a broad picture. I think this is a great place for us to start. In the coming weeks, Elizabeth and I will continue sharing some concrete ways that we can be allies.

As people of faith, may we be open to the counter narrative. This church has always been a church that wears the counter narrative role well. May we continue to be a counter narrative people. May we seek understanding and truth. May we seek compassion and change. Just this week alone, only 81 miles up the road, Alton Sterling was shot and killed. Christ have mercy. On the other end of the Mississippi River in Minnesota, Philando Castile was shot and killed. Christ have mercy. In Dallas, police officers Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Lorne Ahrens, and Michael Smith were killed. Christ have mercy. Dear Lord, may we be bold, may we be compassionate to our very gut, may our hearts break for the suffering of our brothers and sisters, may we march, may we be seekers of justice and makers of peace, may we create another way. Amen.

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