

Introduction

The Stories We Tell Each Other

I tend to leave my car radio set to just one station, which happens to be the local affiliate of National Public Radio. Since my short daily commute is pretty regular, the timing of my drive home often coincides with the national broadcast of *Marketplace*, a business program that reports on the economic ramifications of all the day's news. In those few minutes spent in my car, I hear about how a conflict in one corner of the globe or a drought in another affects a supply chain, flusters investors, or paradoxically increases both optimism and panic in the global market. Though the amount of time I spend listening on any given day is never long, hearing short segments from this show over the span of a number of years has trained me not only to become a more attuned audience member but also to reflexively think about the economic implications of major world events whenever I hear about them, whether during this show or otherwise. Regularly listening to stories crafted from this certain perspective and for this certain purpose subtly but surely changes the way I perceive and think about what is happening in the world.

Of course, this show is neither the only nor even a major means by which I perceive and think about the world, and I am not attempting to critique what this show does or how it does it. What I do want to confess is that I have come to recognize how the stories we tell each other influence our views of the world around us. In this case, I sometimes find myself thinking first of all in terms of what is good for the global economy and measuring the positive or negative aspects of the news against this standard. If this were the one and only show I ever listened to, and if I listened to it all the time, it would be exceedingly difficult for me to conceive of world

events in any manner other than through the economic causes and consequences of these events or to measure “good” and “bad” news in any other way. While I am not at all in danger of becoming a full-time, nonstop listener of this radio broadcast or of financial news in general, I am prompted to wonder about how the stories we tell each other train us to perceive and think.

It turns out that I am not alone in wondering about this. One of Max Lucado’s best-known books is on this very subject, a children’s book titled *You Are Special*. A race of wooden people spends all day, every day, giving each other star stickers and dot stickers to measure each person’s perceived value in the community. If you can do something powerfully, confidently, or boisterously, you get a star, just as you would if your wooden skin were smooth or well polished or just the right shade. If you are clumsy or unsure of yourself or if you are in any way unpleasing to others, you get a dot. Most of the wooden people have both stars and dots, while a few are covered with just stars and an even more sizable minority are covered with only dots. Unsurprisingly, those with more stars than dots become more self-assured and accrue even more praise from the community, while those whose dots outnumber their stars tend to perpetually lose esteem not only in the eyes of others but also in terms of how they see themselves. In very explicit terms, *You Are Special* acknowledges that the standards we use to measure things—especially people!—matter, as do the stories we tell each other that communicate those values and give them currency. The underlying concern in this simple children’s tale is the question about what counts as an accurate view of the world.

Following this logic, C. S. Lewis, in *The Silver Chair*, pits disparate views of the world in opposition to one another, with each claiming to provide the accurate picture. Toward the end of the tale, a couple of children and a creature native to the land of Narnia finally find the kidnapped prince for whom they have been

searching throughout the story. The queen of the Underworld is holding him captive underground, where she has cast a spell over him to make him forget that he ever lived above ground. In order to free him, the members of the search party must not only help the prince to remember that there is a world beyond the small, dark cave in which he has been held captive but also keep themselves open to the larger world from which they came but cannot at present see. The queen's tactic is to lull them into agreeing with the interpretation of the world that she provides, where everything is contained in what they presently see. The queen offers one explanation after another about how everything they think they remember from the outside is merely a fanciful elaboration on what they see in the place where they currently abide. The queen's effort is in fact to make her audience into full-time, nonstop listeners who lose the ability to conceive of the world in any terms other than her own. Their liberation hangs upon being able to remember and trust in other stories besides the one the queen spins in her spell.

A similar kind of drama takes place but from the other direction in another famous children's story: *The Velveteen Rabbit*. The rabbit begins in a sort of existence where being unreal appears by most manners of reckoning totally closed to other possibilities. In short order, though, the rabbit hears a story from the Skin Horse that points toward the all-but-unbelievable possibility of inanimate playthings becoming real through the love of a child. Whereas the queen of the Underworld seeks to take the open possibilities of the "overworld" and confine them to the small measurements of the "underworld" where she alone reigns, the Skin Horse implants the seed of hope within the Velveteen Rabbit that the possibility of an open future exists beyond the closed fate of an unreal object destined ultimately for being discarded. In either case, the underlying logic is consistent: the stories we tell each other have power—for good or

for ill—and the way in which we measure good and ill hangs in the balance with the what, how, and why of these stories.

From the simple wisdom of children's book authors and the sophisticated analyses of financial experts, I have learned the importance of the kind of stories we tell each other. While it is true that the world is what the world is and we are what we are, it is also true that the ways in which we tell the stories of the world and of ourselves is much more an open question than a settled issue. If all the news of the events of the day may be told from a primarily economic perspective, they may also be told from the perspective ecological causes and consequences or the perspective of human dignity measured in some manner or other. The exchange of star stickers and dot stickers only makes sense if we either consciously or subconsciously assent to the whole system of measuring value upon which that particular economy exists. In the starkest terms, the world either squashes or invites our wonder, but whichever one we think is accurate depends very much on the way in which we are willing to see the world. What interests me is learning to see the world in God's light, specifically through the practice of crafting and telling what I will call "stories of grace."

This book emerges from both a sense of gratitude and a sense of mission. I am grateful that for more than a decade stories of grace have surrounded me on a regular basis, primarily through my work with the Notre Dame Vision program. In my role as director of this program, I have guided hundreds of college students as they crafted stories of grace from their own lives to share with the high school participants of our annual summer conferences. These stories—offered in trust and as acts of faith—have helped me, along with countless others, to see the world, other people, and myself first and foremost in the light of God's mercy. My gratitude for all of the Notre Dame Vision Mentors-in-Faith is immense, and so it is to them that I dedicate this book.

Several of those former mentors generously agreed to share pieces of their stories of grace in chapter 3, so I owe a special debt of gratitude to Ashley Scott, Emma Fleming, Vincent David, Sarah Ruskowski, Renée Roden, Geoffrey Burdell, Victoria Kay, Katlyn Patterson, and Dr. Timothy O'Malley as well as Stephanie DePrez, who allowed me to represent two of her stories in chapter 4. I am likewise filled with gratitude for the following colleagues in Notre Dame Vision with whom I have had the privilege of working to guide our mentors in crafting their stories of grace year after year: Megan Shepherd; Scott Boyle; Aimee Shelide Mayer; Mary Kate Radelet; Dave Ballintyn; Luke Slonkosky; Father Dan Parrish, C.S.C.; Father Pete McCormick, C.S.C.; and Father Pat Reidy, C.S.C.

I know the importance of good mentoring and faithful guidance in crafting stories of grace because when I myself was a Vision Mentor, my predecessors on the leadership team of Notre Dame Vision helped me craft a story of grace to share with the high school participants of yesteryear. My gratitude thus extends to the founding director of Notre Dame Vision, Steve Camilleri; the first two assistant directors, Sheila Provencher Abdallah and Dr. Nicole Shirilla, MD; the program's original designer and theological educator, Dr. Jan Poorman; and last but certainly not least, my boss and the leader of the McGrath Institute for Church Life, without whom, for so many reasons, none of this work would be possible: Dr. John Cavadini.

The sense of mission that gives rise to this book follows from the recognition that crafting and sharing stories of grace is a practice in learning to see all things not only as they should be but also as they truly are. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14, RSV) to reveal the truth of who God is, who we are, and how the mercy of Jesus Christ forges the bonds of communion across all forms of separation, isolation, and fear. To tell our stories of grace is to allow *the* Word to use our words to heal wounds and inspire hope. Stories of grace bring good news in excess of the capacities held

by clichés, platitudes, and general assumptions. As a practice, this form of storytelling—specific and limited as it is—responds to the needs of persons growing in faith, wavering in faith, and searching for faith alike, presenting a vision of the world in which God draws near to redeem and save. In the prevalent modern culture, we have become more comfortable with status updates, witty quips, quick chats, tweets, and retweets than with the basic human practice of storytelling; the time has come to reclaim our gift for storytelling and to reclaim it as a means of evangelization. This book arises from the mission of the new evangelization in seeking to identify the faith-formation issues of our times, propose a strategic response to these issues, and then provide substantive resources for instituting this strategic response through more regular practice.

With the energy of gratitude become mission, I hope that what follows will help strengthen disciples and those who form disciples in boldly announcing the wonder of the Lord's mercy from every nook and cranny of our lives. As we will see, stories of grace always deal with concrete particularities because the personal nature and intensity of God's love in Jesus Christ deems no one too small, no experience too peculiar, for becoming a beacon of light for the world. In response to God's confidence in us, let us never tire of wrapping ourselves in the stories of his love and entrusting ourselves to him who is worthy of all praise:

Praise the LORD!
Praise, O servants of the LORD,
 praise the name of the LORD!
Blessed be the name of the LORD
 from this time forth and for evermore!
From the rising of the sun to its setting
 the name of the LORD is to be praised!
The LORD is high above all nations,
 and his glory above the heavens!

Who is like the LORD our God,
 who is seated on high,
who looks far down
 upon the heavens and the earth?
He raises the poor from the dust,
 and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes,
 with the princes of his people.
He gives the barren woman a home,
 making her the joyous mother of children.
Praise the LORD!

—Psalm 113 (RSV)

Chapter 1

The Light by Which We See

The Problem and Promise of Identity

If someone were to call you by name and ask, “Who are you?” how would you respond? It is an unsettling question because having to say one thing about the whole of your existence is daunting. Each of us knows a lot about ourselves, while at the same time, most of us also know that there is a lot about ourselves that we do not understand. To define yourself in one way comes at the expense of defining yourself in other ways, and no one likes to be limited. Even more disturbing is the occasional realization that “I may not really know myself at all.” This problem of identity exists for each of us, no less for those who claim to be disciples. And it was precisely this question that an interviewer asked Jorge Mario Bergoglio shortly after he took the name Francis. After a period of thinking and searching for the right words and the right image, the new pope responded in the manner of a disciple: “I am one who is looked upon by the Lord.”¹

The disciple sees himself as one who is first of all seen; the disciple knows himself first of all as one who is known. This is a fascinating little paradox: that the way a disciple identifies himself is, first and foremost, to recognize that he is identified by another—namely, the Lord. Not unlike the rest of us, Pope Francis was aware of the various traits he possessed and the different things he knew about himself—such as that he is “a bit astute” and “really, really

undisciplined”—but he also knew that not one of these things or even the whole collection of them could account for who he is. All these other things abide within the one truly necessary thing: the Lord looks upon him in love. He knows himself as one seen in this way, and the whole story of who he is exists within the project of coming to believe, ever more fully, that this is true. A disciple sees in response to being seen and knows in response to being known.

In the pope’s imagination, Caravaggio’s painting of *The Calling of Saint Matthew* expresses the paradox of the disciple’s identity. The moment the artist portrays is one in which all of the agency belongs to Jesus. On his initiative alone, Jesus looks upon Levi, who will become Matthew, in the midst of his typical crowd and engaged in his typical tax-collecting activities. Levi is stunned, awestruck even, as he raises his own finger to himself as if to confirm that Jesus is in fact pointing toward him. The rest of the scene is held in suspended animation—for this decisive moment, there is no movement. Two of Levi’s companions remain engaged in their previous endeavors, while the other two look up to observe this interruption. Connecting the two sides of the canvas is the beam of light running along Jesus’ outstretched hand and following his gaze onto Levi. In the dawn of this new light, Levi is called forth into Matthew and his identity is established: Matthew is the one whom the Lord looks upon. The story of Matthew begins here, and from this moment all the stories he had previously lived are recast in light of the Lord looking upon him. In the light of the Lord’s mercy, Matthew begins to see himself and all things new. Contemplating this image helped Francis to see himself accordingly.

Francis could have just as easily invoked the subject of another one of Caravaggio’s paintings: Saint Thomas the Apostle. In this painting, Caravaggio ponders the scene in the twentieth chapter of John’s gospel, where the Lord shows his wounds to Thomas, who is coming to believe in the Resurrection as he sees. The evangelist

brings the episode to a close with Jesus' words: "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed" (Jn 20:29). Because of the Lord's words, we might suppose there is some easier route to belief that comes by way of seeing directly but that most of us, like Pope Francis and unlike Saint Thomas and Saint Matthew, are destined to struggle along the more difficult path of coming to believe without seeing. It seems that the goal is to believe whether or not one sees, whether by easier or harder means. But if we are too quick in assuming we know why Saint Thomas passed over from seeing to believing when the risen Christ came to him bodily, then we miss what and how Thomas actually saw. Thomas doesn't just see wounds, a body, and a person—he sees "my Lord and my God" (20:28). In that shift from seeing a stranger to seeing who this really is standing before him, Thomas sees *himself* as the one to whom the Risen One has offered peace. He had been looking for verification to placate his mind, but he ends up seeing himself as known, loved, and desired. *His* way of seeing yielded to *God's* way of seeing in Christ. In that sense, Thomas didn't stop seeing but rather started seeing by the light of God. In short, he believed.²

In his book on the theology of transformation, Bishop Robert Barron declares from the outset that "Christianity is, above all, a way of seeing."³ This is inarguably true, but only in the sense that the Christian way of seeing is born of and responds to God's way of seeing us. Of course, it would be delightful if one could all of a sudden pass over into seeing oneself according to the mercy of the Lord. The fact is, however, that a mark of our fallen nature is our inability or unwillingness to see ourselves in this way. In response to this blindness, the Lord lends us his sight: when the Lord looks upon us in mercy, the redemption from our blindness begins, and as we learn to see in this light, we become who we are called to be. Initiating, educating, and guiding others into this belief and response is the work of Christian formation. The fruits

of the long work of formation become evident when, in response to the question, “Who are you?” one is able to respond, “I am one who is looked upon by the Lord.” This is the starting point for the story of a Christian life.

Enabling others to shape their life as a Christian story is the aim of Christian formation, and so this book is about Christian formation, but it isn't about *all* of Christian formation. More specifically, I am interested in highlighting a singular and demanding practice that promotes integrated faith formation in a way that is at once timeless and specially suited to the present day. The practice we will explore together is that of crafting and sharing “stories of grace.” In naming “grace” as central to the kind of storytelling I will propose, I am interested in the ways in which one learns to translate one's own stories according to the presence of grace, which one must first learn to see. When I speak of “stories,” then, I do not have in mind the more or less definitive conversion stories that are especially revered within certain Christian communions. Instead, I am talking about something much humbler: those shorter, oftentimes simple, intentionally contained stories of particular experiences, relationships, obstacles, sufferings, joys, and even epiphanies by which those whom the Lord has looked upon have begun learning to see themselves—and, in some way, the world—in *God's* light.

Learning to craft and tell these more particular kinds of stories is ordered to the lifelong task of learning how to tell one's whole story as a response to the Lord's look of love. The wisdom of the Christian formation germane to Catholicism in particular is that we can trust smaller practices in more ordinary things to lead, in the end, to the holistic transformation God intends for us. Over time and with practice, we learn how to cooperate with the work the Lord has already begun in us (see Phil 1:6).