

# Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology, Ministry, and Faith Formation

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## Workshop Description:

*Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology, Ministry, and Faith Formation*

Culture: a familiar word that rolls off the tongue rather easily, perhaps casually, as though it needs no explication. How do we move beyond popular definitions to a deeper understanding of the notion of culture for today? Three assertions:

- The Christian gospel and culture(s) cannot be separated;
- We live within a pluriverse of cultures;
- Congregations are one of those cultures.

This workshop will help participants better understand the reality of culture(s) today for the sake of faithful, truthful, and effective ministry in a missional age.

## **Beginning:**

***Preface/Notes for the Leader:*** You know this, but creating a trustworthy and hospitable space to learn together is important so use your best practices to establish the learning environment. Throughout the script that follows I will provide you with occasional prompts (e.g., “Say...”). Although this might be a bit pedantic, the point is not to insult you, but rather to indicate what is teaching or presenting material for the audience as opposed to commentary for you as the leader. By all means, feel free to modify, edit, or otherwise make it your own.

***Getting Started:*** Obviously, you will want to introduce yourself, welcome the participants to the workshop setting, and remind people about the focus for the session (workshop topic/description). If you’re funny, tell a joke; if not, tell someone else’s joke. Depending on the size of the gathering/workshop, you may want to have participants introduce themselves to one another.

## **General Introduction and Thesis for the Session:**

**Say:** This workshop in the *Practice Discipleship Project* is intended to be a “theoretical” session—so I hope you are ready to get to work and think! In order to pursue the above description, we actually need to consider, explore and discuss three (3) big realities that are central to our lives as human beings and for our life together in Christian community: **culture, context, and narrative, or story**. This is especially important in light of what many scholars call the “cultural turn” from text to context. “Scholars of religion have turned more and more to the interactions and relationships between religion and culture, and to do that requires embedding religion in its contexts.” ([Religion and Culture](#), p. xii) In other words, if one wants to understand specific religious beliefs and practices (e.g., Christianity), then one must “descend into detail” (Geertz) and observe, participate in, reflect on, and discuss the specific beliefs and practices in their specific cultural contexts (e.g., congregations).

## **I. CULTURE \*(for supplemental material see appendices A & B)\***

### **Interactive Question/Conversation #1:**

This is the first of three opportunities for you as workshop engage your audience and get them talking. Have them pair up, or form groups of three (3) or four (4), depending on the overall size of your group. Ask them to define culture. **Say:** “I’m going to give you a topic—culture. Discuss.” If you get puzzled looks, tell them that the question is, “*What is culture?*” Engage. Begin. Discuss. Be intentionally vague of you need to be, but get them to give it a try, and give them 5—10 minutes.

Get some feedback, hear what they have to say, but the point is—this should be difficult and perhaps even frustrating. Why? Because “culture” as a notion or a concept is inherently abstract and nebulous. Here is the “dictionary definition”:

**Webster:** *culture* 5 a : the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thought, speech, action, and artifacts and depends on man’s (sic) capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations b : the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.

**Say:** But does the “dictionary definition” really help us? Asking someone to describe culture in a generalized, decontextualized manner is like asking a fish to describe water. In fact, it reflects a basic premise of systems thinking: when you’re in it, it’s hard to see it. So in order to “see,” let alone describe and understand something like culture, one needs to get more specific, to “descend into detail,” which is why we will soon focus our reflection and conversation on context—specific cultural contexts like congregations.

Nancy Ammerman writes, “Culture includes all the things a group does together...Culture is who we are and the world we have created to live in. It is the predictable patterns of who does what and habitual strategies for telling the world about the things held most dear.” (*Studying Congregations*, p. 15; pp. 78-79)

**Say:** It’s difficult (nigh impossible) and certainly not very helpful to try and understand culture in any generalized manner, save textbook definitions. Although culture is certainly a human universal, any road to truly understanding a culture runs through the particular. Like ogres and onions (Shrek, 2001, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LO76yRO8HVE>), cultures have layers, and understanding a culture begins with the outer layer—observable behavior and customs, rituals, symbols, patterns of work and play, etc. So this workshop is not about any generalized notions of culture, and certainly not intended to engage in the so-called “culture wars.” The purpose is to help us better understand specific, particular **cultural contexts** (including our own) for the sake of faithful, truthful, effective ministry in a missional age. It is to the importance of specific cultural contexts (congregations) that we now turn.

**Perhaps this from the general introduction and thesis section bears repeating:** *This is especially important in light of what many scholars call the “cultural turn” from text to context. “Scholars of religion have turned more and more to the interactions and relationships between religion and culture,*

*and to do that requires embedding religion in its contexts.” (Religion and Culture, p. xii) In other words, if one wants to understand specific religious beliefs and practices (e.g., Christianity), then one must “descend into detail” (Geertz) and observe, participate in, reflect on, and discuss the specific beliefs and practices in their specific cultural contexts (e.g., congregations).]*

## **II. CONTEXT**

### **Interactive Question/Conversation #2:**

Once again, have them pair up, or form groups of three (3) or four (4), depending on the overall size of your group. This time the process should be less mind numbing and more productive. **Say:** “I’m going to give you another topic—context. Describe your ministry context—the social context of the congregation (e.g., the larger community setting, neighborhood(s), etc.) as well as the congregation itself. Be specific. What is most important for people to know about your congregation and its setting? Each person should take a few minutes to share while others listen carefully—story hearing must accompany story telling. Give them 5—10 minutes (or more or less, depending on the size of the group and your time constraints).

Invite feedback from the group and hear what they have to say. **Say:** How did your conversations go this time? Talk a little bit about describing your ministry contexts.” In general, this should have been easier for participants to engage, not to mention more interesting. Why? Because contexts are more specific—we know them because we live them—and typically describing them is more like telling a story. Cultural contexts like congregations are stories we know because they are stories we live. And they are stories that we live together, in Christian community, in the presence of God, with the promises of Christ, in the power of the Holy spirit—which is why no one voice can adequately describe a cultural context like a congregation.

**Webster:** *context 2 the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs; environment, setting.*

In Studying Congregations, Nancy Eiesland and Stephen Warner write, “Each congregation sees it self as a community of God, dedicated to sacred things. Yet congregations are also social institutions...they are places where people interact, working with one another and serving constituents...the congregation is analyzed as a unite, and as a unit interacting with other units in society: people, organizations, and cultures...Even as it is dedicated to God, your congregation is a human institution located in history (the date of its founding to the present), in a specific place in geography (your community), and in the lives of its members (the network “maps” of their lives).” (Studying Congregations, pp. 40—43)

**Teach this:** Paying close attention to our ministry setting—to our context—allows us to descend into detail in order to see (paying attention, observing) and hear (listening to the story and the Story) clearly. When we able to see and hear clearly it is easier (but by no means easy!) to detect the radically indigenous nature of the congregation’s story and the theology that is embedded in a place. This kind of deliberate, specific contextual focus means at least two (2) things for our leadership in ministry:

1. It means moving beyond a “theology as projectile” view of congregational context. In other words we must move beyond seeing context as merely a “field” for implanting what theology launches. In this approach, we already have the theology figured out, and the primary objective is to aim accurately so we can hit the target—the context. This approach leaves context passive, blank, and basically non-theological. Needless to say, I don’t agree with or care for this approach. We need a mutual, reciprocal understanding of the relationship between theology and context. In this approach, context is a generative locus for theology. Theology is embedded in a context (particularly in its communal story) and the primary objective is to unearth the theology that is present so it can be discussed, examined, and challenged (if necessary) in the community (with open, honest, direct dialogue). This is the preferred approach for faithful, truthful, and effective ministry in community.
2. In order to follow the preferred approach described above, however, we need to learn how to carefully attend to the context without rushing to impose a theology on it—whether it be my theology (as the leader) or someone else’s theology (e.g., an influential religious voice, a powerful cultural voice like popular religious media, or a “bigger, better” church we want to be like). So careful attending to context requires social research tools that allow us to do the analysis of the situation in fact—the congregational context. What situational analysis usually means is some kind of quick fix—the latest ill-conceived anecdotes or popularized social studies (e.g., generational analysis or church-size studies or congregational character types). What I mean here are serious, classic sociological tools like ethnography (specifically, participant observation), interviews, or a congregational timeline.

**Say:** It’s beyond the scope of this workshop to really get into these various sociological approaches. In this regard, the Studying Congregations book is an excellent resource in this area and has an entire chapter on methods for congregational study (chapter 7). As an example, ethnography is a focused, disciplined attentiveness to a particular context towards the end of understanding it better. What it requires is that one cultivates a disposition of receptivity (rather than assessment or judgment) and to notice that which is often and easily taken for granted. This kind of “research” done well is like holy listening. This kind of listening increases our capacity for empathy and can deepen one’s sense of pastoral presence: we are here to hear a story that is grounded in the Story. This, in turn, reflects the ongoing revelation of God’s presence and activity in the world in specific, cultural, congregational contexts. In order to do this, however, we need to pay attention to the power of narrative and storied living. This is the final reality for ministry that we will consider in this workshop session.

### **III. NARRATIVE & STORIED LIVING**

#### **Interactive Question/Conversation #3:**

For the final time, have them pair up, or form groups of three (3) or four (4), depending on the overall size of your group. **Say:** “I’m going to give you a final topic for today—story. Tell your congregation’s story. Or tell a story about the congregation where you serve. Or tell a story about a significant ministry experience connected to the congregation where you serve. You choose—just tell a story about what

God is up to in and through the congregation where you serve.” Each person should take a few minutes to share while others listen carefully—story hearing must accompany story telling. Give them 5—10 minutes (or more or less, depending on the size of the group and your time constraints).

You can entertain some feedback if you wish, but this final question/discussion is intended to set up the focus on “practices of story” that follows and finishes the workshop. We want to conclude the workshop with a focus on practices that empowers leadership for faithful, truthful, and effective ministry in a missional age. Familiarize yourself with this material so you can “make it your own” and present it more naturally.

### **Three practices of story**

At the core of story-hearing and storytelling is a relationship. The hearing and telling of stories inevitably involves attending to a relationship, again, in Martin Buber’s words, as an “I-thou” rather than an “I-it” relationship. There can be no privileging of a particular person’s story over another—nor any group or church or nation—as more important or more significant or even more interesting. We want to conclude by proposing some practices of story that can help us unearth signs of God’s presence and activity in specific, cultural, congregational contexts to help us better love God and neighbor, serve God and neighbor, as the people of God.

1. Simply put, we are called to dwell in God’s Story; to read and study, pray and ponder the Scriptures. As the people of God our lives are set within a different Story that calls out an alternative vision for the life and future of the world. As the people of God we are a people on a mission journey that calls us far beyond ourselves. The practice of dwelling in God’s Story locates and centers us in response to the question, “Who are we?”
2. Secondly, the practice of story hearing, that is, serving as listener and observer, paying attention to and listening to the stories of others. Listening is important, profoundly important. It is increasingly significant at a time when so many people suffer from perpetual information overload. Pastoral leaders understand the practice of listening as a way to meet another, to honor and respect another person and her story, to foster a healthy and genuine relationship. They also understand the importance of listening in order to help others discover and begin to use their gifts and passion in ministry. Finally, they recognize that an essential skill of an effective pastoral leader is the ability to help others interpret their own experiences and stories within the context of the overarching story of God’s redemptive history. Pastoral leaders are able to tell God’s grand Story because they listen and are then able to make the connection between God’s story and the stories of others.
3. Finally, the practice of story-telling and telling the Story. Telling the Story is best accomplished through the use of stories, but they are not the same thing. An effective pastoral leader is a teller of the Story, the great biblical Genesis to Revelation Story, not merely a good storyteller. This means that communication happens in light of the whole story of what God has promised to do, has done, and is doing.

- stories invite participation: A story almost always involves exploring life from the perspective of a person in a predicament. And that becomes a mirror for all of us who spend the majority of our lives in one predicament or another—that we often call the human predicament.
- stories are sneaky: A story doesn't grab you by the lapels and bring you close so that you can smell the garlic and coffee and Altoids on the breath. What a story does is sneak up behind you and whisper something in your ear. And when you turn around to see what it is, it kicks you in the butt and runs and hides behind a bush. And in so doing, a story does something that no abstract proposition can ever do. It stops you in your tracks and makes you think. It catches your attention and won't let go. You can't help it. A story can't be argued with or dismissed like a proposition. A story is just sneaky. It doesn't teach by induction or deduction. It teaches by abduction. It abducts your attention and it won't let you go until you have done some thinking for yourself. (Quote belongs to Brian McLaren.)
- The story is the point: Who is reincarnating the Word of God in stories today? I suppose that the best African-American preachers do it a lot. When they preach narrative passages from the Bible, they are not doing it to illustrate a point. The story is the point. They believe in the story's magic. They don't want to drain it of its blood, skin it, stuff it, mount it, and present it as an outline of abstractions and limp moralisms the way I fear I often have done. C.S. Lewis understood this, which is why so many of us love him. Narnia can teach you more about hope and Heaven and Jesus than a boxed set of my best sermons...were said sermons to exist.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion:

The challenge for pastoral leaders communicating in the emerging culture is to use the wonderful benefits of storytelling to tell God's grand story. But telling story begins with listening and hearing stories. One way to understand culture is to understand a cultural context, and one durable, effective approach to understanding a cultural context is a focus on narrative—which begins with the reciprocal relationship between hearing story and telling story. Culture, context, and story—these are three essential elements for faithful, truthful, and effective ministry in a missional age. You are all smart people—you can figure out how to finish and conclude the workshop.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian McLaren, "Story," *NEXT* Special Edition (Tyler, Texas: Leadership Network, 1999): 6.

## **APPENDIX A:**

Theories of Culture, Kathryn Tanner

Part 1: The Notion of Culture (chps. 2 & 3)

The “Modern” (Anthropological) Meaning of Culture//Criticism and Reconstruction

**Webster:** *culture* 5 a : the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thought, speech, action, and artifacts and depends on man’s (sic) capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations b : the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group

**Basic Elements** (a loose congerie of ideas)

1. Culture is understood as a human universal (human beings have culture; it is the defining mark of human life; cf. Geertz pp. 45-6).
2. Though a universal reality, the anthropological use of the term culture highlights human diversity (all people have culture, just not the same one; “the fact of ‘culture’ is common to all; the particular pattern of culture differs among all; thus culture always comes in the plural).
3. Culture varies with social group (if cultures differ from one another, it is because they are cultures of different societies; “ ‘A Culture’: the specific pattern of behaviors which distinguishes any society from all others.”; thus culture is an attribute of a particular social group—a society [an African tribe or a European nation] has a culture; though individuals may differ, differences are typically not differences of culture unless associated with membership in different networks of social interaction; thus there can be a society with a “larger culture” yet comprised of many more particular cultures).
4. A culture tends to be conceived as the entire way of life of a group of people (culture as that which is particular to a people, everything that distinguishes that group from others (e.g., social habits, institutions, rituals, artifacts, beliefs, values, language).
5. Cultures are associated with social consensus because they are group-specific (If it is in fact the culture of a group, then a culture is evidently what every member of the group more or less shares; a culture spreads itself equally over all the members of the group to which it is ascribed; see ex. p. 27).
6. Culture is understood to constitute or construct human nature (culture makes human life from the first; human beings are formed and shaped in and by a culture).
7. Cultures are conventions in the sense that they are human constructions (in other words, human beings may be shaped by culture but they also make it; human beings are responsible for what culture amounts to in a particular place and time, that is, for the particular shapes cultures take).
8. Cultures are contingent, provisional (a particular culture can never claim inevitability; it might never have been in the first place).
9. The notion of culture suggests social determinism; society decisively shapes the character of its members (although individuals eventually may influence their culture through their activities, initially, at least, one is shaped and formed by the way of life into which one is born or placed).

**In sum:** this modern (anthropological) notion of culture would presume that cultures are self-contained and clearly bounded units, internally consistent and unified wholes of beliefs and values simply transmitted to every member of their respective groups as principles of social order, an understanding of which comes only through viewing a culture in its own “space” (geographical or otherwise).

**A Postmodern Critique**, or refiguring of the notion of culture based on converging challenges to the modern notion of culture

1. **The Charge of Inattention to Historical Process:** The modern anthropologist does affirm that human beings produce culture in and through their social interactions; every culture is a human construction. But he or she fails to give sufficient attention to this activity of production itself.
2. **Against Cultures as Internally Consistent Wholes:** In reality, culture never appears as a whole for the participants in it. No one is likely to know it all and the whole of it is never mobilized on any particular occasion (cf. Bourdieu, pp. 37-8). Only bits of culture appear at any one time according to the dictates of a situation and the various interests of the actors in it.
3. **Against Consensus:** If a culture is not a consistently unified whole it is difficult to see what sense it can make to say that it is upheld by every member of a social group. When so understood, culture does not seem a possible focus for common agreement.
4. **Against Culture as a Principle of Social Order:** If participants in the same culture do not hold genuinely common beliefs and sentiments, the idea of culture as a principle of social order becomes tenuous.
5. **Against the Primacy of Cultural Stability:** In a new accounting of culture and social action, change is no secondary matter, as the modern understanding of culture would have it. Historical processes that bring with them the constant possibility of change are the baseline against which stable, established cultural forms are measured, and not the reverse.
6. **Against Cultures as Sharply Bounded, Self-Contained Units:** Because change, conflict, and contradiction are now admitted within cultures, the anthropologist has no reason to insist on a culture's sharp boundaries. Sharp boundaries are no longer needed to protect a homogenous, stable, and unified whole from outside dissension and disruption.

### **What notion of culture, then?**

In light of the postmodern critique, then, what remains of the modern (anthropological) notion of culture? Very few of the "basic elements" from the modern understanding have actually been discarded. Rather, the postmodern refiguring involves more vigorous accents in certain areas:

- More primary attention is devoted to historical processes, to the historical struggles that give ongoing meaning and organization to a culture.
- There is a need to fess up to the fact that if cultures are wholes, they are contradictory and internally fissured wholes;
- Culture as a consensus-building feature of group living can build a consensus that forms the basis for conflict as well as shared beliefs and sentiments. So, whether or not culture is a common focus of agreement, culture binds people together as a common focus for engagement;
- The account of cultural differences is modified substantially. Differences are not marked by boundaries separating self-contained cultures. Cultural elements may cross such boundaries without jeopardizing the distinctiveness of different cultures.
- An emphasis on the self-critical function is retained, but expanded, so that the focus is on differences within a given culture and not simply between cultures. The complexity and diversity that exist within any one culture, especially one's own, is thus exposed. This helps to mitigate against an "us vs. them" mentality.

### **So what do we learn about congregations and pastoral ministry?**

1. The road to any general lies through a concern with the particular.
2. "Understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity."  
(Geertz)
3. One is called continually to descend into detail in order to see and hear clearly.



## **APPENDIX B:**

### **Reading notes from Leslie Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (primarily chp. 2):**

Culture—e.g. in the form of towns, neighborhoods, schools, economic systems, etc.—is the work of humans, the “created co-creators”. It shows humans to be created (therefore not self-created, but actually limited as creatures) and yet creative (therefore capable of generating what is genuinely new, and thus not limited to the repetitiveness of instinct). Transforming culture is possible.

Culture also is marked by human brokenness and sin as humanity’s tragic misuse of the “imago dei.” Sin is the misuse of the image of God in humanity, not the absence of that image. Human creativity can produce nothing so good that it cannot be used for sinful purposes; not does it produce anything so bad that it is the total absence of the good. Even at its worst the human venture is worth redeeming.

### The Gospel and the Cultures (Newbigin)

The plurality of human cultures

Religion is part of culture and no religious belief is without implications for culture

Religions may be multicultural (Christianity, enormous cultural variations)

The question about the relation between the gospel and human cultures is a live one in contemporary missiology—one extreme is the church growth school (McGavran), which asserts that “God accepts culture (Lausanne Congress, 1974). Tendency is to absolutize culture and minimize cultural changes which conversion ought to imply.

The most fundamental element in culture is language; Pentecost is our biblical warrant for saying that God accepts languages.

Does God accept all the elements of human culture? Culture is simply the way in which human societies order their corporate life and as such is corrupted by sin.

Cannot accept a total relativism about culture, and there is no such thing as a gospel which is not already culturally shaped. (Missionary history is replete with examples.)

The question of the relation of gospel to culture is one of the most vigorously debated subjects in contemporary missiology. Culture is simply the social aspect of human living (dictionary=the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another). Culture is human behavior in its corporate aspect, the primary vehicle of which is language, which is then embodied in community (Church).

The gospel cannot be reduced to a matter of individual belief and conduct as though this could be separated from the shared life of society. The gospel needs to be seen from the beginning as something that affects the entire life of a community and all of the customs and traditions therein.

There is not and cannot be a gospel which is not culturally embodied; the gospel is historical; it is about events which happened at a particular time and place in history. Thus the gospel is preached in the language of a particular culture; a community tries to live out the gospel as a part of a particular human culture(s).

## APPENDIX C:

This is background material for better understanding a narrative approach (a conceptual, theoretical, and theological framework).

**Read:** Matthew 13:31—35 (or you can have someone else read these verses)

**Teach this:** Jesus' teaching reflected his embodiment of the unexpected presence of God's grace. This is what is happening, for instance, in the parables and the various "Kingdom" sayings. (cf. Luke 14:15- 24) With regard to Jesus' teaching in stories, John Dominic Crossan offers this:

Parables--give God room. They are stories, which shatter the deep structures of our accepted world and thereby render clear and evident to us the relativity of story itself. They remove our defenses and make us vulnerable to God. It is only in such experiences that God can touch us, and only in such moments does the Kingdom of God arrive." (The Dark Interval, p. 99-100)

Jesus the parabler is the One who became the ultimate parable of God.

### Human beings are storied creatures

"Dad, will you tell me a story?" "Want to hear a good story?" One of the things we have in common as human beings is story. Or rather stories. Each of us has a history, which can be seen, from one perspective, as a bricolage (a collection, mosaic, weaving together of diverse elements) of stories. People everywhere tell stories. People of all ages listen to stories. Individuals, families, congregations, nations all have stories. These stories are passed on from generation to generation.

The telling and hearing of stories happens constantly in congregations. I expect you have shared many new and different stories in the congregation where you serve...or have you? We just paid particular attention to the story of another person as we sat and listened. It is indeed a privilege to be able to hear the story of another.

Our focus for the remainder of our time together is the texture of narrative, the reality of storied living, the art of storytelling and story-hearing, the mystery of the Story, God's grand Story. In the midst of what Jean-Francois Lyotard has called "the disintegration of all meta-narratives"; what Michel de Certeau calls "an endless journeying into exile," we cannot cede to the postmodern critique that the day of the (all, any) grand Story has passed.

### What story? Whose story? The practice of deception

Every child, every person, is and will be shaped by some story, inherent to which are values and beliefs. A home, a family cannot *not* teach/pass on values and beliefs about life and the world and other people. It simply, well, not simply, but it happens. What/whose stories/values are passed on? From whence do they come? What is their source? Human beings are shaped by some story--a family story, cultural stories, societal or national stories (e.g., the Western progress myth, the North American story of "rags to riches," aka, in common parlance, the "American dream").

Stories are what give expression to peoples experiences of life in the world. Stories express what human beings experience--stories people tell, stories people paint/draw, stories people act out. Here is Michael White:

The lives and relationships of persons are shaped by: the knowledges and stories that communities of persons negotiate and engage in to give meaning to their experience: and certain practices of self and of relationship that make up ways of life associated with these knowledges and stories.

As human beings we make meanings of our experiences by constructing and living narratives or stories. [We play these tapes back quite naturally.] Not only do we story our lives, but we also live within these stories, "performing" them. In other words, our stories inform what we do, and what we do informs our stories. Our knowledge of the world, of others, and of our selves is premised within our story. For instance, I cannot escape the reality that my parents were divorced when I was five years old and that I spent a great majority of my childhood/youth/young adulthood searching for my "idealized" father (the father that was never present to me). *\*Each presenter will need to insert his or her own example here.*

Furthermore, the shape of a narrative will be determined by the beliefs one brings to it. Our personal narratives have multiple plots; our stories are context dependent. Narratives, human stories, are constructed within the context of groups or communities of persons, in time and in history. (They are socially and historically conditioned.) Stories draw on the resources of a particular person's community, in the context of the social structures and institutions of which one is a part.

Can you begin to see where this is leading us? As human beings we use what is available to us in constructing narratives, in the telling of our stories. For instance, our stories will be influenced by gender and, within Western, industrialized cultures, influenced by individualism and consumerism. Our narratives reflect the way we are positioned in society. Different communities will privilege different discourses or narratives. There is a certain kind of discourse privileged in a place like a seminary, for example, namely, *academese* or *semanese*. Likewise, this is how various forms of slang become accepted and widely used--talking the right language leads to privilege. Human beings "perform," we do what we know and say. Narratives, our stories can themselves become a covert, and overt form of social control.

Human beings are storied people; we live storied lives. We are also masters of deception, including self-deception, which creates the illusion that one is in control, not only of oneself, but of others as well. We do this individually and collectively, socially. Illusory attempts to control others quickly leads to what Martin Buber calls "I-it" rather than "I-thou" relationships. An "I-it" relationship marginalizes and objectifies another person or group or culture.<sup>2</sup> An "I-thou" relationship affirms the value, worth, and dignity of the other. Human beings are easily deceived into believing that one story is privileged over another--more important or more significant or even more interesting. This sense of privilege and the power differential it creates divides, marginalizes, and oppresses others. This is the story of sin. This is our story.

### **Storied waters: The Judeo-Christian heritage and the Jesus story**

Human beings are ensnared within self-justifying impulses, self-love run amuck, trusting what is not worthy of trust—all that the Christian faith calls "sin." Every person (human being) is called out of this egocentric lifestyle and toward a different vision of human being by God's forgiving and liberating Word.

Baptism is "storied water." (This beautiful image belongs to Dan Erlander.)<sup>3</sup> It ushers a person into the story of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. To be baptized is to be plunged into God's grand story—the entire biblical story and, in particular, the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The waters of baptism are "storied waters." At the center of this radical, alternative story is the new reality which Jesus ushered in—the Reign of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Touchstone, 1971). This book is a classic and well worth a look sometime.

<sup>3</sup> This beautiful image comes from Dan Erlander, *Baptized We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life* (published by Dan Erlander, 1981; 1995)

The Reign of God is a reality where:

- All is gift
- God alone is God
- There is forgiveness for all
- All people are precious
- Enemies are loved and strangers and outcasts are welcomed
- There is hope for the future
- God's food is for all
- The last are first and the first are last
- All people and all creation have dignity
- Sin, death, and evil are defeated
- Jesus is with us always
- There is promise of resurrection the Holy Spirit is teacher and guide
- And all human distinctions and divisions have ended because...
- "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28)"<sup>4</sup>

It is this Story that we have heard as gospel; it is this Story that we are called to speak; it is this Story that we seek to live. As pastoral leaders we are called to be a servant of God's Story, the story of the Triune God of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the "story of Israel and its Jesus, told as a message of final destiny." This is not only the "God who raised Israel's Jesus from the dead," but also God as the One who in the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus bears death into God's very being. (Quotes from Robert Jenson, Story and Promise.)<sup>5</sup>

In the baptismal newness of each new day we have the foundation from which to constantly examine our own practices of storied living. The central Christian practices of Eucharist and confession/absolution foster such ongoing examination. The Holy Spirit invites us, opens us, and challenges us to deconstruct narratives (stories) that privilege our use of power or place over against others. The Story of God, at the heart of which is the inbreaking of the Reign of God in Jesus Christ, convicts our collusion with institutional/societal oppression. The Church, the gathered community of God, the body of Christ, is itself subject to distortions. Through the *viva vox evangellii* (the living voice of the gospel) the Holy Spirit exposes our collective attempts to establish new idols or dividing practices. The story of the inbreaking of God's Reign is a convicting and liberating story in the midst of all human attempts to dominate, domesticate, and divide.

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<sup>4</sup> The bulleted section comes from Erlander, *Baptized We Live*.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Jenson, *Story and Promise* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973) 23.

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