

*Breaking Bread, Breaking Stories* (Lam. 3.19-26)  
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church  
Sunday, October 7, 2007

Sometimes when a story is wonderful enough or terrible enough, I will get up early to break bread with it. Before anyone else is awake, I rise and walk barefoot across the cool floor to the kitchen where I can start the coffee pot and open a book. Sometimes when the story is wonderful enough or terrible enough I'll lose myself in it almost immediately and find later, long after the coffee is ready, that I'm still leaning against the counter or have wound up sitting on the floor turning one page after another to find out what wonderful or terrible thing will happen next. Sometimes I do remember what I'm doing, though, at least enough to pour the coffee and toast the bagels. And there in the dark of morning turning to daylight, I breakfast on stories told to me by sisters and brothers I have never met but with whom I develop a strange sort of bond. The stories, as one of these sisters or brothers might say, are a kind of medicine. We need the stories to help us understand who we are.

So you're probably wondering what kind of stories I'm talking about.<sup>1</sup> It's a good question. It's a question we could answer in any number of ways. Since it's World Communion Sunday, I could say communion stories, which would be true. Or I could say human stories, which would also be true. Or bittersweet stories, which is probably just another way of saying human stories. Or sacred stories. Is that another way of saying human, too? Let's think about it. Each of the short stories I mean to tell deals in all of these elements: communion, the human, the bittersweet, and the sacred. I think

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<sup>1</sup> The playful, conversational tone of this sermon was deeply influenced by Thomas King. See Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

each of them informs the other and is at least worth getting out of bed early for in order to see how wonderful or terrible it will be.

The first story is a Native American story taken from Leslie Marmon Silko's breathtaking novel, *Ceremony*. I say breathtaking because there were times during her book that I held my breath. There were times during her book that I think the house could have caught fire and I wouldn't have noticed. Or at least the coffee pot could have overflowed. In *Ceremony*, Silko tells so many stories all at once that you really can't pay attention to anything else. Perhaps the central story, the easiest story to catch hold of, is that of Tayo, a Pueblo man who has returned from service in the Second World War. As a veteran, Tayo is suffering the psychic wounds of war and he begins to deal with his own brokenness in the bittersweet context of the Pueblo people's history. No sooner does Silko begin telling her story of one man's troubles than we begin to hear the story of all the people's troubles. Then we hear the story of the ancestors' troubles. Then we hear the story of the earth's troubles. Soon enough none of the troubles can be untangled. And our protagonist is in a jam.

Like all good jams, part of the problem can be attributed to Tayo's own choices. But like all good jams, much of it was simply handed down to him. So in *Ceremony*, Tayo struggles with alcoholism and violent, angry outbursts, but he is also caught in the web of colonial history with its decades of broken promises, segregation, neglect, and dehumanization. The story is profoundly sad, made of forces that seem to be larger than the main character and far outside of his control. Strangely enough, it is within the context of all of these stories that Tayo goes looking for some other stories that might save him. And by save him I mean bring him back into some kind of harmony with

himself, his history, his people, and his world. I can't tell you the whole story, but I can tell you one thing. He goes looking for a medicine man. The medicine man has a bagful of stories that are almost magical.

Philosopher David Abram notes that the shaman, magician, or, in our case, medicine man is so important in indigenous stories because he lives in between two worlds. This character's "intelligence is not encompassed *within*...society; its place is at the edge of the community, mediating *between* the human community and the larger community of beings..."<sup>2</sup> The medicine man, then, belongs to more than one world and moves among them in order to find the things that are out of balance and devise ritual ways of restoring the natural order. Tayo finds his own medicine man on the edge of town, living up in the hills where he can glimpse the city before, the wilderness behind, and the stars above.

And this won't be the kind of sermon where I ruin a good book for you. Out of my own respect for the storyteller, Leslie Marmon Silko, I can't tell you what happens. I can only tell you that when Tayo the Pueblo went to find the medicine man, bearing all the scars of his personal experience, he was also searching for ways to reconcile the many histories of which he was a part. The medicine man performs for him an elaborate ritual, drawing lines in the sand and chanting sacred words, that connects to dozens of stories that will serve him as guides. After that, Tayo is on his own for the rest of the book. The stories are the medicine. He just has to figure out how.

Perhaps you're wondering what this has to do with church. Maybe you remember the reading from the strange Book of Lamentations that we heard a few minutes ago and hoping I'll reach some sort of a point. It might be good if the sermon was more linear,

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<sup>2</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 6.

didn't dally so much with Native Americans and medicine men asking questions and living in between worlds. Actually, the old writer of Lamentations is the second story. There may have been more than one old writer of Lamentations. In fact, there probably was, but let's just think about one of them. Let's think about an old Hebrew who was faced with wounds of his own. According to biblical scholar Kathleen O'Connor, "Lamentations is a poetic response to a national tragedy. Its poems reflect conditions following the invasion and collapse of the nation, particularly of its capital city, and of destruction of the economic and social life among the citizenry."<sup>3</sup> So the Hebrew poet was writing during some very dark days. I'm sure a Native American would understand. But the Hebrew poet does something very interesting that recalls the medicine man drawing lines in the sand.

Many of the poems in the Book of Lamentations are actually acrostics. That is, attention is given to each verse or line "begin[ning] with a sequential letter of the Hebrew alphabet."<sup>4</sup> The poem from which we've drawn this morning is particularly elaborate, ensuring that no less than three words in every verse begin with the same letter. A very careful ritual form is being employed here, and it's enough to make us ask what the old Hebrew was doing. Scholars, of course, have more questions about this than answers, but if we were to imagine that poets, like medicine men, move between worlds, in the former case the worlds of the human and natural, and, in the latter, the realms of the literal and figurative, then perhaps we can envision an old Hebrew on the edge somewhere, drawing

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<sup>3</sup> Kathleen O'Connor, "Introduction to the Book of Lamentations" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* Vol. VI, 1013.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1017.

his letters – *alephs*, *bets*, and *gimels* – in the dust and spelling out a sort of path to reconciliation. Like most paths to reconciliation, it won't be easy. Just listen.

Our verses begin with the poet calling to mind the sad stories that his audience would have already known. “The thought of my affliction and my homelessness,” he writes, is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.” It's a stark allusion to the people's history, not the kind of thing we usually hear in church. Usually we like to gather and tell happy stories, talk about what it is that makes us feel good, or at least mention our suffering only in passing before we move off in search of some sense of a greater good or a reverent place to ground ourselves. It's tough to stick with a sad story too long. Nobody likes a sad story. But perhaps our lectionary reading begins with the sad reference because the truth is that the sad stories are a part of our experience. The sad stories make us who we are just as the happy ones do. In fact, to follow the sacred stories of many traditions, including our own, is to find that the saddest stories are often understood to be the most transformative. I don't know. You tell me. Can you think of any sad stories at the heart of Christianity? So the old Hebrew begins on a sad note. “I remember,” he mourns, “and my soul is downcast.” Then he pulls this sort of medicine man routine and moves right across the border to the other side and makes what sounds like an opposite affirmation.

“But this I call to mind,” say the ancient sacred stories, “and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of [the divine] never ceases, [God's] mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning...” Okay, this sounds like an audacious move. On the one hand, the poet is talking about the bitterness of a broken history, and, on the other, he is invoking a kind of seamless grounding in the divine gift of life that is given over and over

again, every time the sun rises. And he's not just doing it because these are the lines that fit his acrostic pattern. He's doing it because both elements are needed if our stories are going to be any kind of medicine. For if the stories are to contain any healing quality at all, it will be found in the recognition that the world is a place of both suffering and sweetness. We aren't simply meant to live with one of them, but instead to construct our houses of prayer, live our lives, and tell our stories on the border between the seemingly different worlds of our experience, pausing at that place to reflect on where we've come from and where we're going. The old Hebrew writes beautifully of the wonder of being alive, but he is also aware of its challenge. And he advises us that it is good for the soul to "sit alone in silence." Call him a nondualist. Call him a poet. Call him a medicine man. Call him someone who lives in between, looking for ways to restore a kind of harmony. Which brings me to the last story of the day.

I have long been fascinated by a seemingly paradoxical truth: the more I learn from other traditions, the more deeply rooted I become in my own. As I have risen early to read the stories of Native American people and ancient Hebrew people, the more I have come to understand myself as a Christian person. The different stories, in my mind, have never existed as either/or competitors, but simply as representatives of the many deep dimensions of our shared humanity in search of a cure for what ails us. The rabbi Jesus is the primary storyteller in our tradition. His stories were also wonderful and terrible, ending often enough on a question or a challenge, which is enough to invite a slightly different view of him in light of the other stories we've heard. What if our rabbi isn't a sort of medicine man in his own right? What if Jesus isn't the one that we visit when we need help with our own healing? What if he is the giver of words and rituals meant to

empower us for the work of reconciliation in an all too broken world? What would it mean for us to think of him as that old Pueblo visited by the character Tayo, camped in an in between place, only instead of sand drawings and sacred herbs, the rabbi according to our tradition would have on hand a few bagfuls of parables and his own ritual elements: a loaf of bread and a dusty bottle of ordinary table wine? These seem like helpful questions on a Sunday dedicated to World Communion, which is a day that should at least give us time to wonder about our world, our stories, and how we might commune with them differently.

Perhaps you've already read the title and you know how the sermon is going to end. You've already guessed that I'm going to say something about nonduality, about breaking bread and stories together, about finding a larger self in our common humanity and even naming our part in the greater family of all life. You know those are themes that I like. But that's not a very good way of ending a story because it's a bit too neat. Who likes a story that ties up every loose end? Who would get out of bed after that to see how wonderful or terrible it's going to be? Not me. I'd rather just end the story having carried the thread only this far. You're smart listeners. You can do the rest. You probably know something I don't know, anyway. The thread was given to us by that wonderful Pueblo author, Leslie Marmon Silko. Her character stumbled through his story to find that the story of one person is the story of every person, crossing over from one thing into everything in his search to mend the wounds of the past. Then the thread was pulled through the lectionary reading. An old Hebrew poet, ritually writing about both the bitter and the sweet and grounding himself in a sort of ineffable gratitude. "I remember my history," he said, "But I have a lot of hope, anyway. Just sit with me in

silence at sunrise to find out why.” After that we brought the thread to the rabbi himself as a sort of medicine man, dealing in the symbols of bread and wine, offered to all who came to his edgy encampment looking for the way to reconciliation. So you know what he said, right?

He said take this bread and break it. It is my *self* that I give. He said take this wine and water and drink them. They are the cup of salvation this day. Eat and drink. And then, like any good storyteller, like any good medicine man, he simply set down the loose ends for us to pick up...

On this day may it be so with us.