

# Jeff's Jottings

## *The stories we tell ourselves*

July 13, 2017

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One of the phrases that has shaped me over the past few years, in profound and positive ways, is this five-worder from Brene Brown: "The stories we tell ourselves."

Brown is a research professor who studies and writes about shame, vulnerability, authenticity, courage and worthiness. She's best known for her 2010 Ted Talk on vulnerability (<http://bit.ly/2vhtZre>), which to this day, she says she's never seen, but more than 30 million others of us have. One of her profound insights talks about the way people process what they experience. Far from the logical and rational beings we think we are, Brown says, we instead unconsciously interpret these events to fit some kind of already-established narrative we "know" to be "true." Says Brown, it's these stories we tell ourselves more than actual events that create our anxiety and negative reactions. Here's a simple example she often uses:

*Steve opened the refrigerator and sighed. "We have no groceries. Not even lunch meat."*

*I shot back, "I'm doing the best I can. You can shop, too!"*

*"I know," he said in a measured voice. "I do it every week. What's going on?"*

*I knew exactly what was going on: I had turned his comment into a story about how I'm a disorganized, unreliable partner and mother. I apologized and started my next sentence with the phrase that's become a lifesaver in my marriage, parenting and professional life: "The story I'm*

*making up is that you were blaming me for not having groceries, that I was screwing up."*

*Steve said, "No, I was going to shop yesterday, but I didn't have time. I'm not blaming you. I'm simply hungry."*

So often when I talk to people about their churches, I hear stories. Many are inspirational. But others are stories we tell ourselves; they can sound like this:

- *What we see*: another congregation with a full parking lot. *But what we say (or think), the story we tell, to ourselves or others*: My church is losing members so we're failing; there's something wrong with us. Or, on occasion, the opposite: If they're growing, they're selling out to the culture, and shame on them. Is either story true?
- *What we hear*: a person with a different interpretation of Scripture than ours, who seems quite sure of him or herself. *What we say, to ourselves or others*: I must not be very smart for thinking this way. Or the opposite: S/he must not be very smart for thinking that way. Or dangerous for thinking that way.
- *What we remember*: a story from the past about someone or something (the Presbytery, perhaps?). *What we say, to ourselves or others*: what they were 20 years ago is what they are now.

We all tell ourselves stories to explain what we see and hear and feel. It's human. What we often fail to acknowledge, however, is the enormous power these self-told stories have to define the world around us and shape how we treat people. Sometimes the stories we tell absolve us, and others, of guilt and excuse bad behavior; other times, we use them to shame or belittle others. Sometimes our stories bring us together and build community; at other times, they tear us apart.

Too often, however, the stories we tell ourselves about what we see and think and feel simply pass as unquestioned fact. And that's when we are shaped by stories that just aren't true. I wonder what would happen if we started to think more critically and carefully about these stories we tell, about ourselves and others. Where do they come from and why do we tell them that way? Are

they even right? Or are they simply caricatures and false dichotomies? In other words, lies.

When we can slow down our reaction (one) and identify that we're telling ourselves a story (two), maybe then we can be more open and curious to the world of possibilities that live in that one moment. Instead of being locked into one narrow and restrictive interpretation of what's happening (our church pews aren't full, so we're failing and might as well just quit trying; that person holds a different interpretation of Scripture that is ruining the church), perhaps we can explore where God might be in that story, and what God might be calling us to be in that story. There, we might find true freedom from the habitual thought-patterns that keep us imprisoned.