



An Open Letter to Youth Ministers – Michal Beth Dinkler

Michal Beth Dinkler, Associate Professor of New Testament at Yale Divinity School writes an open letter to youth ministers.



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DEAR YOUTH MINISTERS,

We love stories. We tell them, we read them, we watch them on television and in the theaters. Toddlers demand that the same story be read over and over again before bed. As we grow, we tell the same stories over and over again in our heads about ourselves, about others, about life. And as everyone who works with teenagers knows, those stories take on a special kind of self-conscious intensity during adolescence. Who am I? Who do my parents say that I am? How do my friends see me? Why am I here? We answer such questions with identity-forming stories.

Thomas King puts the matter more provocatively: “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.”^[1] So, we must be intentional. What stories are we telling our teens? More specifically, what stories do they hear when they come to church – not just from or about the Bible, but about themselves and their place in the world? Do our stories invite young people into lives of joy and belonging, courage and compassion?

My main claim is simple: the New Testament teaches that a life of joyful discipleship is the result of *entering into and participating in the gospel story*. But how does one enter into and participate in narrative? What role can the gospel narrative play in adolescent growth? What are the unique barriers to, and advantages for, participation in the gospel narrative during the teen years?

After briefly discussing the importance of narrative for identity formation, I’ll turn to the New Testament, where we see that Jesus clearly understands the power of story. Just think of how he refers to stories from Jewish Scripture to make a point (e.g., the story of David, Lk. 6.3), or the fact that he tells parables in order to teach and challenge those around him. The author whom we traditionally call Luke carries this theme of the power of story through his Gospel and into its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles. As the first account of the newly-formed community of Jesus followers, Acts has a lot to teach us about stories, storytelling, and the Christian invitation to live a life of flourishing.

How and Why Story Matters: Identity Formation

Narratives give meaning to people’s experiences. They can save people from isolation, drawing us to face each other in the mess of human complexity, so that we can interpret, reflect on, and come to terms with human experience together.^[2] And stories interact with each other; they build on, weave into, and challenge one another, gathering power along the way. As Colleen Cullinan writes:

. . . we live in the midst of many interlocking and overlapping stories. Our own story is built out of the stories that hold together the history, hopes, and meaning of our nation, our

hometown, our family, our religion, and our own past.[\[3\]](#)

Stories spoken and remembered in community honor the deeply human experiences of comedy, tragedy, joy, and pain. Paradoxically, through story, the personal becomes universal without erasing the individual's unique experiences.

The power of story stems from the fact that narratives don't just mirror or reflect reality; they also help to *create* reality. Through our imagination, we are constantly shifting between the roles of character, narrator, and author of our own life story. As ethnographer Michael D. Jackson writes, "Stories are a kind of theatre where we collaborate in reinventing ourselves and authorising notions, both individual and collective, of who we are."[\[4\]](#)

The well-known Eriksonian model of psychosocial development makes clear that one of the main developmental tasks of adolescence is *individuation*. Erikson's stages of personal development are:

1. Trust vs. Distrust (year 0-1.5);
 2. Autonomy vs. Shame (year 1.5-3);
 3. Initiative vs. Guilt (year 3-5);
2. Industry vs. Inferiority (year 5-12);
 5. Identity vs. Role confusion (year 12-18);
3. Intimacy vs. Isolation (year 18-40);
 7. Generativity vs. Stagnation (year 40-65);
4. Integrity vs. Despair (year 65+).[\[5\]](#)

According to Erikson, transitioning from one stage to another provokes a kind of crisis, as the individual faces significant change. The high school years are characterized by (sometimes fitful) attempts to cross the threshold to adulthood. Even as the desire to do so is strong, differentiation can be frightening.

Border-crossing into adulthood happens, in part, through increasing ownership of one's story. One way we can help adolescents manage these transitions well is to teach them how to reject unhealthy narratives – those narratives that run counter to the gospel story of redemption, forgiveness, and new life. Sociologist Brené Brown underscores the importance of paying attention to the stories we tell ourselves: "When we own our stories, we avoid being trapped as characters in stories someone else is telling."[\[6\]](#) Powerful stories shape our understanding of ensuing events. Even if a particular narrative is detrimental (e.g., parents repeatedly demean their children, or one culture consistently erases the contributions of another), we tend to perpetuate that narrative habitually in our interpretations of later experiences – we're creatures of habit even in the stories we tell. Careful discernment is necessary because, to cite Cullinan again, sometimes, "stories hijack other stories."[\[7\]](#)

Therapists Alan Parry and Robert Doan note that people often develop "survival stories" in

which they are the objects, acted upon by external forces outside their control. These stories can help people survive tragic circumstances, but the same stories ultimately become limiting or destructive later in life. The goal of therapy, then, is “revision” of harmful stories – a *re-visioning* of one’s story: “At [the point of re-vision] the individuals can resume the writing and living of their own stories and abdicate from those stories into which they were born and which have defined them and lived them.”^[8] Alcoholics Anonymous has effectively used this principle to create healing and transformation for millions of people worldwide: “The life story plays a central role for the individual as a means to reinterpret personal experience in a new framework of understanding, and thus to create a foundation for renewed experience.”^[9] Stories can help us imagine alternatives *and* cultivate the inner resources necessary to actuate transformation. Bruno Bettelheim’s assessment of fairy tales applies: Stories, writes Bettelheim, “offer new dimensions to the [person’s] imagination which would be impossible for him to discover as truly on his own.”^[10]

Even as we recognize the importance of “owning” and “re-visioning” our *individual* stories, youth ministers know that something similar happens in communities. The stories we tell contribute to a group’s evolving self-portrait, which “is constructed, not out of stone, but out of words, spoken and remembered: out of opinions, stories, eyewitness reports, legends, comments and hearsay.”^[11] Narrative accomplishes this identity-forming work in part by creating and challenging group boundaries. On the one hand, remarks Jackson, “the stories that are approved or made canonical in any society tend to reinforce extant boundaries”; on the other hand, “storytelling also questions, blurs, transgresses, and even abolishes these boundaries.”^[12] How do these narrative dynamics work when it comes to the Christian gospel?

HOW AND WHY THE GOSPEL STORY MATTERS IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Stories function on two levels in Acts: first, there are the stories told *in* the narrative (i.e., by the apostles and other characters), and second, there is the story *of* Acts itself (i.e., that told by the author about Jesus’ earliest followers).^[1]

Within Acts, the earliest followers of Jesus fulfill their risen Lord’s commission to be his “witnesses to the ends of the earth” (1:8). Indeed, they are shown “preaching the gospel” repeatedly, moving from Jerusalem to Samaria (8:5), Damascus (9:20), Caesarea (10:42), throughout Judea (11:1), Antioch (11:20; 15:35), Lycaonia (14:6-7), and elsewhere. What was this “gospel” they preached? In short, it was a story. When Paul explains what he means by “gospel” in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, for example, he tells a story:

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received

I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

In the famous prologue to Luke's Gospel, the author uses the Greek word for narrative (*diegesis*) to introduce his gospel story to his addressee Theophilus:

Since many have undertaken to set down a narrative (*diegesis*) of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³ I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

The "gospel" preached by the apostles in Acts is the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In this sense, the "gospel" is what Cullinan calls a "'narrative concept,' that is, an idea that tells a story." [13] NT references to "the gospel" of Jesus reflect the classic arc common to nearly every story: an initial state of well-being, subsequent loss and sacrifice, a climactic turning point, and final restoration.

Acts itself tells the story of the earliest Christians' efforts to follow Jesus - both in terms of telling the gospel story and in terms of participating in it. Elizabeth Castelli has described this as the "culture making" function of early Christian narrative, and it was deeply shaped by notions of community identity and integration. [14] But what exactly made people "insiders" or "outsiders" wasn't always clear; throughout Acts, figures like Paul, Peter, and Philip try to discern how to deal with difference (e.g., the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15). They're trying to parse something fundamental - what it means to be a Christian in a diverse and dangerous world - and they do so by means of storytelling.

When the high priest asks Stephen why he's being condemned, Stephen launches into the story of Israel's history (7:2-53). Given the deep significance of story in the Jewish tradition from which the disciples came, they had to ask what it meant for Gentiles to join the movement - Gentiles, who hadn't been shaped by the stories about being God's chosen people, or stories of Hanukkah or Passover. Put differently, the earliest Christians were trying to figure out how their emerging story as a community related to other communities' established stories. How did the Christian gospel fit into the Jewish stories in the Hebrew Bible? How should Gentiles who didn't share the Jewish stories be incorporated into the new community so that all members of the group might flourish?

Again and again in the book of Acts, we see folks move from *hearing* the gospel story about Jesus to *participating* in it. Think of Acts 8.26-40, where the apostle Philip happens upon an

unnamed “Ethiopian eunuch” in a chariot. The eunuch is returning from worshipping in Jerusalem (8.27), and he’s reading Scripture from the scroll of Isaiah. This means that he’s interested in Israel’s sacred story, but he’s not a Jew himself. When Philip asks him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (8.30), the eunuch invites Philip to explain (8.30). Both of these men exhibit the important virtue of hospitality, which often was associated in the ancient world with receiving new knowledge. That is certainly the case here: after asking for and accepting new knowledge about Christ (8.34), the eunuch asks for and accepts baptism (8.36), and finally, he “goes on his way rejoicing” (8.39).

This story can contribute a number of important insights when it comes to the “good life” and the challenges facing adolescents. For one thing, in first-century Jewish Palestine, the label “Ethiopian eunuch” clearly identifies this character as an outsider. He is marked as “Other.” What kind of an outsider is he? NT scholars have proposed a number of possibilities. Some suggest that he was likely at the bottom of the social hierarchy; when true power lies with the elite, married male head of the household (the *paterfamilias*), a castrated male would have been despised and probably destitute. Still others argue that he could not be low status because in ancient Ethiopia, the term “eunuch” could also be a title for the finance minister for the Candace, the Ethiopian queen; finance ministers were castrated as a way of severing their own kinship ties and eliminating their desire to keep money for themselves and their (nonexistent) progeny.

Whether low status or high status, the Ethiopian eunuch is an outsider in the context of Luke’s story because he is not Jewish and because he’s Ethiopian. In the ancient geographical imagination, Ethiopia was the end of the world. Throughout Greek literature, the term frequently used to refer to Ethiopians was *makran*, which means “far away.” Philip encounters an Ethiopian far away from his homeland. Greek writers like Homer also often described Ethiopians as a handsome and dark people; their skin color stood out to the Greeks as different, as well. So, what kind of difference are we talking about when it comes to the Ethiopian eunuch? Gender-related “Otherness,” geographic “Otherness,” physical and racial “Otherness,” and possibly socioeconomic “Otherness” are all potentially in play. The exact category is hard to pinpoint.

I suggest that, for our purposes, identifying the exact way(s) in which the eunuch is different is beside the point. The fact that he is “Other” is the point. The ambiguity about the eunuch’s difference(s) opens up the story for us to imagine ourselves in his place. Young people are acutely aware of their differences from others. Whether because of gender or sexual preference, socioeconomic status, skin color, abilities they don’t have, illness, mental challenges, or being far from home, young people all grapple with their sense of “Otherness” and the questions those differences raise vis-à-vis their own stories.

Notice that when the Ethiopian eunuch joins the Christians, thereby entering into the Christian story, he doesn’t lose his previously “different” identity markers. It’s not that, once baptized,

he miraculously becomes *not* a eunuch, or that he is *no longer* Ethiopian. On the contrary: the Ethiopian eunuch joins the community of Jesus-followers as fully himself, and after he does, he “goes on his way rejoicing” – presumably, back to Ethiopia and his communities there (8.39). As Parker Palmer writes, “In true community, there will be enough diversity and conflict to shake loose our need to make the world in our own image.” There’s no fear or shame around difference in this story. Instead, there is rejoicing: there’s joy in this joining. This is, in fact, a common Lukan theme: welcoming the word results in rejoicing (e.g., Acts 16.32-34).

Drawing these themes together, when the follower of Jesus welcomes the gospel narrative, joins the Christian community, and adopts the gospel story as her own, the results are joy, hospitality toward self and others, and acceptance of difference. A life marked by such characteristics is a life that makes a difference in the wider world. People take notice. In Acts 26.26, Luke proclaims that the early Jesus-followers’ actions were “not done in a corner.” Followers of Jesus are *not* described (to use Palmer’s words) as making the world in their own image, but rather (to use Luke’s phrase) as “turning the world upside down” (17.6).

In light of the crucial function of stories in identity formation, and the particularities of the Christian story described above, I want to close with some questions for reflection. You know your teenagers, their contexts, and their needs better than I do. For you, in your youth ministry, with your individual young people, how would you answer these questions? –

- How do (or should) the stories we tell young people about God, the Church, others and themselves reinforce extant community boundaries?
- How do (or should) those stories question or transgress community boundaries, both within the Christian Church and between Christians and others?
- How do (or should) we frame and tell “the gospel” story for young people?
- If, as Bettelheim and others suggest, narratives expand our repertoire of possible responses to life, what kinds of responses do the NT narratives commend, and what kinds of responses do they denounce? Should we commend and denounce the same things today?
- Activities undertaken in a youth group (e.g. working in an orphanage together, attending camps together, studying Scripture, etc.) help shape the reality of young people’s lived experiences. How are we concretely contributing to the plots of young people’s stories?

I’ll close my letter with this: If we as leaders are to invite young people into a life of flourishing and joy, and set them up to turn the world upside down, we have to start by entering into and participating in the gospel story ourselves. As Sarah Arthur writes:

Beyond reclaiming and telling the Great Story, the church must, as Robert Jenson has said, *be* the story. The church is the narratable world we’re inviting youth into; it’s both narrator and homeland.[\[15\]](#)

Reclaiming and telling stories like that of the eunuch's joyful reception of the gospel pushes us to emulate the eunuch: We, too, are invited to accept the Lukan narrative hospitably, to embrace "the Way," and to respond with joy.

REFERENCES

[1] For a recent treatment of the kerygmatic (Greek *kērygma*, from *kērússō*, to preach) nature of the book of Acts, see Carl Holladay, "Acts as Kerygma: λαλεῖν τὸν λόγον," *New Testament Studies* 63 (2017): 153-182.

[1] Qtd. In Fewell, "The Work of Biblical Narrative," 1.

[2] See, e.g., Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Why Narrative?* 65-88.

[3] Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story: Women, Suffering, and Christ* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 156.

[4] Michael D. Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1998) 16.

[5] Eric Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York, 1950), 245.

[6] Brené Brown, *Rising Strong* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), xx.

[7] Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story*, 14.

[8] Alan Parry and Robert E. Doan, *Story Re-Visions: Narrative Therapy in the Postmodern World* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994) 40.

[9] Vibeke Steffen, "Life Stories and Shared Experience," *Social Science and Shared Medicine* 45 (1): 107.

[10] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 7.

[11] John Berger, "The Storyteller," *The Sense of Sight*, Lloyd Spencer, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 16.

[12] Jackson, *Politics*, 25.

[13] Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story*, 90.

[14] Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (Columbia University Press, 2004) 4.



[15] Sarah Arthur, *The God-Hungry Imagination: The Art of Storytelling for Postmodern Youth*.