

Group 6. “Practical Theology, Worship, and Spirituality” have to work on:

“How do we reflect critically on Christian practices in contemporary contexts where we are consistently with persons and communities who do not share Christian beliefs? Can Christians worship together with Jews, Muslims, and others and remain true to distinctively Christian teachings and practices? How? How can we pray in public occasions (e.g., public ceremonies, governmental occasions, school and educational occasions, sports events) where we are in the presence of non-Christians and persons who are not religious or observant in any traditional ways? How can Christian spiritual practices engage with spiritual practices of non-Christian communities? How can we as Christians learn from the spiritual practices of other communities, and what do we have to offer them?”

My focus is:

How can Christian spiritual practices engage with spiritual practices of non-Christian communities?

I have lived and served for 25 years as a pastor in a large congregation in a small local community with good contact to families who are not religious or familiar to the Christian tradition and scripture. To build a bridge from the Biblical world to the lives of the people in our community one of my tools has been story telling. This paper will introduce two specific stories and how they were interpreted in the local church.

- (1) God’s story: The Word creates the world, The Bible itself is the history of God’s story, Telling a story
- (2) God’s story and all the other stories: Paul, Justin, González, interacting the surrounding culture.
- (3) All the other stories – or at least two of them: Laura Ingalls Wilder and Astrid Lindgren
- (4) All the other stories and God’s story: Are we then allowed to do so?

(1) God’s story

In the beginning of the Bible we read how God creates the world by his word. From nothing comes everything! The world is established and so are the relations between God and his creation. “Out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” Gen 2:19

The greatest story ever is God’s story – the love-story of God and his creation. Coming from The Unknown, Untouchable and Indescribable this particular story is always moving the listener. The story rearranges the way we look upon each other, the creation and ourselves. It shows us where we come from and where we are going – what we have to do and how.

“God’s story. You cannot improve on it – you can revisit it again and understand it even more clearly” quote Danish theologian Johannes Sløk.

Sløk talks of the difference between “describing” and “telling”. If you describe and analyze a text, you do not create space to live and experience. As when you tell a story! God’s story is never understandable, as well as you are never able to understand God. God is only to be loved! In the Apo-phatic theology known especially in the first centuries of the Church, we define what God isn’t and thereby creates an image of God. But story telling can draw us into a world where we can get a glimpse of the love and life of God.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. – And the Word became flesh and lived among us...” John: 1–3,14. “God’s Word the living Christ became man and lived among us. And his life, death and resurrection became the story known as The Gospels. From the first Pentecost, the people soon to be known as the Christians are telling the story of what they had experienced following Jesus. In Acts and letters of NT we learn how the stories are told, explained, received and lived even before they were written down.

Telling stories is part of human life. We have always done it. From the paintings in caves in France more than 15.000 years old, telling about animals and hunting and to commercials on TV, stories are part of our lives. Gathered around the campfire or the lamp after a long day of work and survival our forefathers and mothers told stories to remember teach and entertain.

Storytelling is an important part of any religious life. In song, drama, painting, ceremony, the story of gods and man are told over and over.

In religions based on the written word we read what had first been outspoken for centuries.

Telling stories is how we understand the world. How we understand ourselves in it.

Tribes, nations, and families define themselves in storytelling. Part of becoming a grown person is to create an understanding of who I am, where I come from and how that fits into the rest of the world. Confronting crisis it’s sometime needed to retell and rearrange our understandings. Pastoral care or therapy can be useful in this process. The words create, not a new world but a new and better understating of the world and makes it a better place to live.

Some people have a gift as storytellers. I believe they had always had a special place in society in every culture. Sometimes they were not welcome. As when Nathan told king David the story of the poor man having his only lamb stolen by a wealthy man (2. Sam 12) and the king through the story suddenly understood his own actions in a new and horrifying way. The prophet, the preacher, the court jester, the ballet dancer, the singer in a cabaret – they were not always looked upon as upper class or even respectable people. Other stories establish the world as it was and shall be. These are stories about the battle between good and evil in the Universe in society and in the family. Stories that gives hope and courage for the future and rearrange our understanding of what is possible, are important in showbiz as in preaching (and perhaps what commercials are made of?)

(2) God’s story – and all the other stories.

When Paul in Athens had argued with the local philosophers for days, they asked him to explain what he was babbling. And then he did something remarkable: using their religion, their gods and a local poet he tells God’s story.

What Paul is doing is not only establishing a meeting point. He identifies God's story in the Greek culture even though he had been "deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17) he did not moralize or condemn but used what was well known and familiar to his listeners. And the Acts says: "As a result some of them became believers!"

This way of entering a culture and using it as base for telling God's story anew is used as a method in conquering the world for The Kingdom of God!

We call it typological interpretation.

Justin Martyr (100 – 165) says, "Everything true whoever, out spoke it, belongs to the Christians." Justin was rooted in Greek culture and languishes. When he became a Christian after having searched for truth in philosophy as the stoics and Aristotle he saw himself as a true philosopher = a lover of Truth. He became a bridge builder between philosophy and Christianity.

Justin interpreted scripture talking about "sayings" and "types", logoi and typoi. Types are events that have actually taken place in historical time seen as patterns that finds its culmination in later events. When Noah and his family is saved in the Arch during the big flood and when the people of God are walking thru The Red Sea saved from slavery and persecution it is a story that can be seen as a pattern for both Jesus being baptized in the river of Jordan and for the people of God practicing baptism as a sacrament from the days of the apostles and until now (as the story are told in the UMC ritual of baptism).

Irenaeus sees history as in God's hand recognize themes or manners of action, which appear repeatedly, although they are not identical. The same theme can appear over and over again always with variations but basically it is the same story – God's story!

(Halldorf)

Paul's method wasn't always in use during Church history.

In "Christian thought revisited, three types of theology" dr. Justo González describes theology in a schematic typology. On Scriptural interpretation we find type A using Scripture as a lawyer studies a legal text. Tertullian as a representative has main interests in law and moral. He refers to the Bible as an instrument and the Old Testament as the Law of Moses and the New Testament as the Law of the Gospel or the Law of Christ. (González)

Type B – Origen as an example is using the allegorical interpretation and seeks to discover a symbolic meaning in every part of a text. He is looking for the eternal truth hidden in the symbolism of the biblical narrative.

Type C - Typology is used as the way of interpretation in type C-theology:

"As history moves on, with both its newness and its continuity, some themes appear repeatedly, always with variations, but consistently pointing to their fulfillment." González.

And for the time and church we live and serve in: In the book "7 Myths of the United Methodist Church" Craig Kenneth Miller say: "As in times past, the church will ""co-create with the culture to bring the message of Christ to the world,"" fulfilling the Gospel call."

For me storytelling is in a type C way of preaching the Gospel to un-churched people. It gives the opportunity to invite people into God's story disguised in another story new to them or already known. The story is not to be used as an example but as a guided tour in the Kingdom of God.

(3) All the other stories – or at least two of them

Craig Miller, director, general board of Discipleship, UMC, has in the School of Congregational Development taught us to create church service on times when the church building is already filled with people. As in Strandby, Denmark where I served as a pastor for 25 years. On Wednesday evening up to 50 kids would sing, dance or take part in other programs but we could not make them join a Sunday service. We began services for the kids and their families – people who are never attending church but for Christmas. Every service includes music and songs for children, pictures on power point or drama, invitation to write and draw their own prayers – often there will be “stations” spread over the sanctuary where different things can be seen or made. The service will always include the Lord’s Supper and proclamation of The Good News. To illustrate God’s story I have naturally used stories told by Jesus and stories from his life, death and resurrection. But I have also used storytelling from daily life or fairy-tales or other stories for children.

As examples of storytelling used in teaching and preaching to children and adults that are not usually church-goers I have chosen two stories written for children - one from the US and one from Scandinavia: “The darkest hour is just before dawn” by Laura Ingalls Wilder and “The Red Bird” by Astrid Lindgren.

Laura Ingalls Wilder (LIW) was born in Wisconsin February 7, 1867 and died in Mansfield, Missouri February 10, 1957. Her ancestors were among the first European immigrants. Her parents Charles and Caroline moved on from the big woods in Wisconsin to the prairies where Laura and her sisters grew up in houses their father made and on prairie land that he broke. LIW became a teacher and in 1885 she married Almanzo Wilder. Together they carried on living as settlers and for most of their life had to fight bad harvest and financial problems. In the 1930s LIW began writing novels about her life as a child. Her daughter Rose Lane a journalist encouraged her mother to make the stories public. That was the beginning of “The Little House series” – books that gained and still hold an enormous popularity.

The books are not all autobiography, but based on LIW’s own life. As a little girl I read the stories about Laura and her family and later I read all the books two or three times.

The story “The darkest hour is just before dawn” is part of book number four “On the banks of Plum Creek”

On the time of this particularly novel Laura’s father Charles, called Pa, has left the family for several months to find work because grasshoppers have eaten up everything on their own fields. Laura is deeply attached to her father and she is sad. “All day long Laura missed Pa, and at night when the wind blew lonesomely over the dark land, she felt hollow and aching”

Once a week they might receive a letter from Pa. The neighbor Mr. Nelson would bring home the letter from the post-office and Laura would go to the Nelson’s and pick it up.

Persons in the novel:

Laura, her mother Ma, big sister Mary, younger sister Carrie – the guests: Mrs. Nelson the neighbor-wife and her baby-daughter Anna.

The story is about a rag doll lost, found and restored.

The story:

Winter is near – frost has come. And visitors come as well:

“Then one afternoon Mrs. Nelson came visiting. She brought her baby Anna with her.”

“Laura liked Mrs. Nelson, but she was not glad to see Anna.” Anna cried if she didn’t get what she wanted and they didn’t understand each other – she talked Norwegian.

While Ma and Mrs. Nelson is having a good time, the girls have to “play nicely with Anna”.

Laura brings her their paper dolls – but Anna laughs and rapidly tears the doll in two parts.

“Laura and Mary are horrified” and they didn’t know how to entertain the little guest, afraid that she will cry and bawl.

>>“Then Mary whispered, “Get Charlotte. She can’t hurt Charlotte.”<<

Charlotte is the rag doll Ma made for Laura way back when she was a little girl. The doll is kept in a box and even though Laura doesn’t play with her any more Charlotte is dearly to her.

Bringing the doll to Anna seems a good idea. Anna is happy and quiet for the rest of the visit.

“Then a terrible thing happened”. Anna will not let go of Charlotte! And Ma tells Laura to behave like a big girl and let Anna have the doll! There is nothing Laura can do, but “she felt crying inside her because Charlotte was gone.”

After some days Ma regrets she made Laura give up her doll seeing how sad she still is, but now there is nothing they can do about it.

Time goes on and every Saturday Laura goes to The Nelson’s to ask for letters from Pa. She avoids going into the house because she didn’t want to see Charlotte there.

And there is no letter from Pa.

“One stormy day she caught sight of something in the Nelsons’ barnyard. She stood still and looked. It was Charlotte, drowned and frozen in a puddle. Anna had thrown Charlotte away”

Laura is shaken. The doll is spoiled – hair ripped loose, yarn mouth and eyes torn. “But she was Charlotte!”

After asking for letters at the house Laura frees her Charlotte from the ice and rapidly brings her back home. Here Ma confirms that it is ok Laura took the mistreated doll back:

“It had been a terrible experience for Charlotte, but Laura had rescued her. Together Ma and Laura repair the little old doll and make her as good as new.

And the next morning Pa is back in the house with money and in good mood.

Laura’s world is back to normal – the family is united – the house is a safe home and Charlotte is, where she belongs.

How is this story God’s story?

The longing and love for the lost one is like God’s longing and love for his creation – the jealous God - described in the Bible e.g. Song of Solomon, by the prophets and by Jesus as in Luke 15: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin and The Prodigal and His Brother.

The way Laura acts is like the work of Christ in type C by González: Liberation, victory and opening the future.

The elements of the story are not used like an illustration – but the story is a way of telling God’s story. A little girl and her mother acting like the triune God: creator, liberator and

restorer. And seen from the doll's perspective you can imagine how it is to be lost and found – like the sheep. The story shows how bad things can happen even in good homes with people who have only good intentions.

From Laura's perspective the lost and found doll is her dear Charlotte whom she loves unconditionally. But she is not able to repair her. That's for Ma to do.

As John Wesley says: "But our comfort is, He that made the heart can heal the heart."
The Creator is also the healer.

The story of the beloved doll lost, found and restored offers to us a new way to take part in God's story.

"The Red Bird" by Astrid Lindgren (AL)

Lindgren lived and died in Sweden - born 1907 in a small village and died 2002 in Stockholm. Her father was a farmer but did not own any land – he worked on the farmland belonging to the local preacher. AL's father was a great storyteller. The family had an embroidery on the wall saying: "God is Love". AL wrote a book on her parents "Samuel August and Hanna" and in 1999 the people of Sweden voted it the Love story of the 20th century. Childhood was wonderful but teenage wasn't. Upon finishing school, Lindgren took a job with the local newspaper. When she became pregnant with the chief editor's child in 1926, he proposed marriage. She declined and moved to Stockholm learning to become a typist and stenographer. She gave birth to her son, Lars, and left him in the care of a foster family in Denmark.

Although poorly paid, she saved whatever she could and travelled as often as possible to Copenhagen to be with Lars, often just over a weekend, spending most of her time on the train back and forth. Eventually, she managed to bring Lars home, leaving him in the care of her parents until she could afford to raise him in Stockholm.

In 1931, she married her new boss, Sture Lindgren (1898–1952) and they had a second child. All her life she worked as an editor and a writer. She was a dedicated mother and the stories she told at her children's bedside later became novels for children all over the world: "Pippi Longstocking", "Emil of Lönneberga", "The Brothers Lionheart"

The story "The Red Bird" is a fairy-tale.

The story is about two poor children who find a new and better world to live in.

Time is "The days of poverty" and focus is on the children.

Persons: the orphaned siblings Anna and Matthew from Sunnymead. The (nameless) farmer at Myra. Children at school.

The red bird, the door, the children at Sunnymead. And Mother.

As the story begins the poor children lives in a grey and harsh world working nearly like slaves. No fun, no playing, no colors, lots of threats and bad food – and Anna is afraid she wouldn't live long. The only thing they look forward to is going to school for a short time during winter. "School, that's as may be! But God help you if you're not home by milking time" the Farmer says – every day!

School is ok – but not that fantastic. Ice, snow and bad weather makes the way complicated and at school they are still poor looking like two grey mice.

And one day Anna declares: "Matthew, school didn't help. There is no fun in my life, and I don't want to live till spring"

Exactly at that time they caught sight of the little red bird - easy to see in all the white and grey.

Following the bird they are led into the wood through the drifts and a dark crevice and finally they stand at a wall where a door stood ajar letting in light.

As the children pass through the door they enter a wonderful landscape at springtime full of playing children in colorful cloth. Anna and Matthew have a great time at the place called Sunnymead ("Sunnymead, that's where we used to live, before our mouse-life in Myra began. But it didn't look like this"). Anna and Matthew ask why the door in the wall is open, and are told: "Once the door shuts it can never, never be opened again!" Suddenly "All the children's Mother" is calling: "Come, all my children!" – and at Mother's house Anna and Matthew eat pancakes and newly baked bread together with all the other children and have a wonderful time till they suddenly remember: they have to be back at milking time!!! And they are.

Now comes a time where Anna and Matthew goes to school and every day on the way home they follow the little red bird into the Sunnymead, playing, eating and having fun. But one day it is the last day at school. The children know they wouldn't stand a chance to get out of the grey farm and the poor and harsh life again. Anna and Matthew follows the red bird for the last time and enjoy there stay in the everlasting spring of Sunnymead intensively.

>>Anna looked out through the door into the darkness and shuddered. "Why is this door not closed?" she said. "Oh, little Anna," said Matthew, "once the door is closed it can never be opened again, don't you remember that?" "Oh yes, I remember that," said Anna. "Never, never again."

Then Matthew and Anna looked at one another. They looked at one another for a long time, and then they smiled a little. And then, very gently and quietly, they closed the door.<<

How is this story God's story?

Describing the world as dualistic is familiar to every reader of the Bible: Cold winter / warm springtime, grey and white / colorful and green, starving / all you can eat, slave like work / playtime, a harsh and mean farmer / a warm and generous mother, longing for death / longing for never ending life.

Going to school is part of a better life, as can seeking for Wisdom, make us long for the Kingdom of God.

The best part of the story is the image of the triune God!

God The Spirit: "Red is a color of fire, symbolizing the Holy Spirit. It is used on the Day of Pentecost and at other times when the work of the Holy Spirit is emphasized" Book of Worship UMC

The Spirit: pictured as a bird; In John 1 John the Baptist testifies he have seen the Spirit as a dove from Heaven. In John 3 Jesus tells Nicodemus about the nature of the Spirit: Moving like the wind – here, there and every where, you never know!

God The Creator: The Mother is everybody's mother – she feeds all her children.

God Savior: The door! John 10: 7 – 10 "I am the door: if any one enter in me, he shall be safe, and go in and out, and find pasture." 10:9

And the Kingdom of God: a world existing close to the known world, so familiar but colorful and generous, where all you are longing for and dream of is reality. It is in one time a picture of the lost childhood and Home, as of Paradise lost.

The story of the Little Red Bird offers to us a new way to take part in God's story.

The gospel according to the two stories

In the two stories, not written to preach any gospel, I joyfully recognize the way I have come to know the triune God: Loving, longing, acting, victorious, liberating, Telling the story can introduce the Christian dogmas in a new and surprising way and overcome the barriers in the minds of non-Christians. The listeners are invited to take part of a drama.

(4) All the other stories - and God's story

At seminary I was told history of preaching and became familiar to e.g. Origen, who perfected the allegorical method. I was also taught to use stories as examples to emphasize points in my sermons. But I never learned to seek and find God's story everywhere.

Incarnation is the key word when it comes to identifying God's story.

The Word became flesh – and words are used to tell stories about Christ The Living Word – and about everything else. In the stories the preacher can find help to identify God's story and invite listeners into a new room (or even an already known) and help them experience the God they did not know.

If God creates the world then it is full of sign and stories pointing to Him. We as Christians are to know God's story and the stories of the world and to identify, tell and open up these stories and thereby create platforms and meeting points, doors and gateways from God's Heaven to God's earth.

As in Oxford – we are reminded of The Inklings. At least two of them, Tolkien and C. S. Lewis wrote great novels to tell God's story intentionally. The young Lewis had lost his faith in God for understandable reasons - but he was a reader and through the thick books he read God met him again. He considered himself an apologist. As a scholar of both Cambridge and Oxford he wrote novels of science fiction and especially the chronicle of Narnia to convince his readers of the Christian God. Wikipedia: *The Chronicles of Narnia, contain many strong Christian messages and are often considered allegory. Lewis, an expert on the subject of allegory, maintained that the books were not allegory, and preferred to call the Christian aspects of them "suppositional". As Lewis wrote in a letter to a Mrs. Hook in December 1958: If Aslan represented the immaterial Deity in the same way in which Giant Despair [a character in *The Pilgrim's Progress*] represents despair, he would be an allegorical figure. In reality however he is an invention giving an imaginary answer to the question, 'What might Christ become like, if there really were a world like Narnia and He chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as He actually has done in ours?' This is not allegory at all.*

But neither Wilder nor Lindgren wrote their stories to proclaim any gospel. They both had good families and not wealthy but loving parents. They both had to face difficulties later in life and look back on childhood as a time of harmony and of parents overcoming hard conditions. In their stories home is a good and safe place.

In the Little house books LIW writes about the children learning long Bible passages by memory and going to Sunday school and church. But church life doesn't draw much attention. The family is, I believe, a settler family as they were at that time good Christians with moral standards. LIW and her husband attend church and for a part of their lives we know it is a Methodist church. But she considers faith a personal matter.

How come we can read God's story in her story then?

Lindgren did said: “No to be honest I do not believe in God! But I dared not say so if my father had lived because that would make him sad. And maybe it’s a shame to say I do not believe in God as I thank Him so often and ask for his help when I am sad.”

Calling herself Agnostic, she would anyway often make fun of questions of faith and doubt and not directly deny faith.

It is not about the intension or the belief of the original storyteller. It is all about the preacher recognizing and interpreting God’s story wherever it may be found. To long for Love, Home, caretaking parents and a life in creativity, accept and renewal – that is for everybody. The Church understands this as a longing for God. When the answer of our longing is described in a novel as in the two examples, we are free to use the stories in the proclaiming of God’s story.

You all know the story of the pastor telling the children at church about an animal and ask them to guess whom the story is about and the kid giving the answer: "I know the answer must be Jesus because you ask me ... but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me!"

No - we do not get silly! The criteria of choosing stories are: Do I recognize the living God I know trough the Bible, the Tradition, Experience and Reason? Does this story make my picture of God clearer and does this story honor God?

The two chosen stories in this paper are both about children and women. The men are either absent or mean. I am a wear. These stories are not The Gospel. The Gospel is not these stories. They cannot be the only way we speak of God. It is though my belief and experience: fairy tales and stories, chosen carefully from making deep impression to me recognized as God’s story, can be re-told as God’s story and make a difference in the life and belief of non-Christians and persons who are not religious or observant in any traditional ways.

Jesus: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.” John 14: 26

Most powerful Holy Spirit
come down upon us
and subdue us.

From heaven,
where the ordinary
is made glorious,
and glory seems
but ordinary,

bathe us
with the brilliance
of Your light
like dew.

“Invocation of the Holy Spirit”
Celtic daily prayer,

Justo L. González: "Christian thought revisited – three types of theology". Abingdon
Peter Halldorf: "21 kyrkofäder". Cordia
Laura Ingalls Wilder: "On the banks of Plum Creek". Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York
Astrid Lindgren: "The Red Bird". Arthur A. Levine Books
Arne Reberg: »Du och jag, Astrid«. Bokförlaget Libris
Werner Fischer Nielsen: "Astrid Lindgren och kristendommen – utifrån Pippi, Emil och Madicén".
Argument Förlag
W. Stephen Gunter: "The Quotable Mr. Wesley". Candler School of Theology, Emory University
"Holy Bible, NRSV"
"Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament by John Wesley". Epworth Press
Wikipedia
The Internet