

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

A sermon by James R. Blades
First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, CA
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Mark 5:1-20

Recently the creator and producer of television's hugely popular "60 Minutes" Don Hewitt died. Across the years, when aspiring journalists asked this television news veteran for advice, he simply replied "Tell me a story." It was the core of his success.

"Tell me a story." Whether your five years old or fifty-five, whether you're a rough blue color worker or a refined Ph.D., whether your European or African or Asian or American, there is nothing like a good story to entertain, to enlighten, to encourage.

"A story begins in delight and ends in wisdom," goes the saying.

Jesus, of course, was a master story teller. Crowds of every variety—rich to poor, illiterate fisherman to learned scribe – were all alike spellbound by his homespun tales. "They were amazed at his teaching," say the Gospels, "because he did not teach them like the Scribes and Pharisees."

"Tell me a story." It was the heart of Jesus' ministry.

And it's the heart of the Bible too! Stories of love and betrayal, of heartfelt faith and heart wrenching disappointment, of lives redeemed and lives gone wrong. It's all there. If you think the Bible is a compendium of ponderous theology, a laundry list of laws and morals, then you haven't really read it. The Bible is story, from the story of Creation to the story of the Exodus, from the story of King David's melancholy to the story of Solomon's glory, from the story of the Babylonian exile to the story of Jesus Christ, from the story of history to the story of a history yet unfolded.

I will also go on to say this: that the heart of our Christian calling is storytelling. "Go into all the world," said Jesus, "and tell the story. Tell what you have seen and heard." And that's just what the first disciples did. They went the world over to tell of their encounters with Jesus, of his compassion and courage, of his birth and death, of his cross and resurrection. Everywhere they went they told the story and their story transformed the world.

And then along came what we call the "Church Fathers." Clement, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, Ambrose. All were steeped in Greek Philosophy: in logic and reason and abstraction. Their ambition was to pin the Gospel down into formulas, to cram mysteries into creeds and fit the Christian faith into systematic theologies. Over the centuries, the Christian faith increasingly lost its accessibility to the very masses Jesus most attracted. Only the ordained elite of the church could access what had now become an academic faith. Even their worship was in a language the common person could not understand.

How utterly unlike Jesus the Church became. Jesus, friend of the poor. Jesus, champion of the common. Jesus, story teller.

So what's the point?

I think the problem is still a bit with us in the modern church. When the Church is unattractive to outsiders, when sermons are uninspiring, when Sunday school classes are unstimulating, when friends and neighbors seem so little attracted to our faith, when churches and denominations are shrinking, it is because we have forgotten the key and the charm and magnetism that made our faith great from the beginning. "Tell me a story."

How many of you have been told across the years that it is your duty to *witness* for Christ? And how many of you when I think about “witnessing” to someone, think of pigeonholing them with theology and quotes of the Bible? Maybe handing them a tract? That’s how I was trained. And how many of you are so turned off to this approach that you just don’t want to do it.

I think of a story I heard about a monastery in Germany. There was a brother in training who lived in mortal terror of being called on to testify in front of the others in the daily chapel service. His mentor told him his turn was up. He begged to be let off. He would do anything else the mentor required: mop floors, clean latrines, wash clothes; anything please but give his testimony. The mentor recognized that this assignment, this facing his worst fear, was exactly what the young novice needed. “Tomorrow,” he said, “you will stand in front of the assembly and testify.”

Next day, the young man stood up, his knees trembling, his heart nearly beating out of his chest, he hardly knew what to say. So he started, “Brothers, do you know what I am going to say?” They all shook their heads “no”. “Neither do I, let’s stand for the benediction.”

The mentor was furious. He said, “I’m going to give you a second chance. Tomorrow, you will testify.” Next day, the scene was the same. He stood up and said, “Brothers, do you know what I am going to say?” When they all nodded their heads in the affirmative, he said, “Since you already know what I’m going to say, there is no point in my saying it. Let’s stand for the benediction.”

The mentor was livid. This time he nearly roared at the poor initiate, “I’m tired of your chicanery. Tomorrow I’m going to give you one more chance before I clap you in solitary on bread and water.”

Next day, the brother began as he had the other two occasions: “Brothers, do you know what I am going to say?” Some nodded their heads while others shook theirs. “Very good,” he said, “Those who know tell those who don’t. Let’s stand for the benediction.”

I wonder how many of us are like this hapless brother when it comes to the business of “witnessing” for our faith. We know Jesus calls us to be witnesses. But we would rather do anything than “testify” to a neighbor, a coworker, or even to a fellow church friend. We wonder: What would we say? What theology would we spout? What Bible verse would we quote?

I believe the answer to this quandary is imbedded in this morning’s Gospel story.

A remarkable miracle has taken place here. A man so desperately fragmented and tormented within himself, so tortured by evil spirits, that he lives among the tombs, comes out to meet Jesus as Jesus enters this Gentile town on the west bank of the Sea of Galilee. The Gospel writer goes to pains to paint a picture of just how repugnant and fear-provoking this poor man’s life has become: A man who howls like an animal among the tombs at night, a man whose body and mind is a habitat for unclean spirits. Jesus’ approach to this loathsome creature must have surprised everyone. With a note of kindness in his voice, Jesus says, “What is your name?” “Legion,” comes the reply, “for we are many.” Now a Roman legion numbered in the thousands.

This was the man’s hideous state, but Jesus heals him and when the townspeople came out to see what has happened, they see him clothed and in his right mind. And how do these good people respond when they see this amazing spectacle? “Wow! Amazing! Wonderful! Praise God for God’s healing grace!” No, it’s says “They were afraid.”

How true, in my experience, is this story to reality! How often the fear of healing is more formidable than the malady! The people had become accustomed to the man’s insanity, to the howling terror. The townspeople reward Jesus extraordinary feat by asking him to leave town.

Now it's possible they just didn't like Jesus meddling around with their economy. After all they did lose a lot of pork! But the text seems to suggest otherwise: that it was the remarkable change of status quo, miraculous as it was, that made them nervous.

So Jesus gets in a boat and leaves.

So what's all this got to do with our quandaries about witnessing? We're coming to it! The healed man, overwhelmed by Jesus' kindness, asks to go with him. Jesus says no. "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you."

Here's the key we're looking for. This man has not been trained in theology. It is doubtful he knows anything about the Scriptures. He has just this very day encountered Jesus Christ and I'm sure cannot answer the mysteries of the faith. But here's what he can do and what Jesus tells him to do: "Go back to your family and friends and tell them your story." I submit to you that that command is the heart of our Christian faith and witness.

You know, when you think of it, every human being's life is a witness to something. Every life tells a story. Some are tragic stories. Some are stories of courage and honor. Some are tales of disappointed dreams or dramas of dreams attained.

While we're on the subject of people hanging around cemeteries, I must confess to you it is something I sometimes do. I find an old cemetery and take a long walk among the headstones and reading the markers. It is a time for solemn reflection for me. I find myself wondering what kind of story each life could tell. Sometimes there are clues: the era during which the person lived and for how long; the sayings that may be written on the stone, what graves of spouse or children nearby. To me it's fascinating to think about the fact that every human being who has ever lived has had a story to tell - every life has been is a witness to something.

What's your story? What has God and Christ done in you? That is your testimony. And it is crucial that you tell it. Why?

Because, first of all, it is in the telling of our stories that we remember what is important, what God has done for us and can do again. "I will tell of God's wonders," says the psalmist, and in that telling the psalmist finds him- or herself reminded and encouraged.

It is crucial for another reason too: because if your story is not told, then the experiences you have had and the lessons you have learned and the wisdom your trials have taught you will be lost to the world.

"Whoever survives a test, whatever it may be, must tell the story. That is his duty," says Elie Wiesel.¹

What's your story? That's the question of this morning! And are you finding and making opportunities to tell it?

Which brings up another related point. It is important we tell our stories. It is just as important to ask other people to tell theirs. Every month, I lunch with the old folks at the Villages, an assisted living facility. It's one of the high points of my week. A few months ago, I asked one of the folks at the table, "So, where did you grow up?" She had a story to tell. A fascinating story. When we were all getting up to leave, this woman said to me, "You know, you're the first person who has asked me tell my story in a long, long time."

How tragic. Someday soon that woman's story will be gone forever. It was a privilege to hear it!

Last year, I visited another woman who had just moved here from LA area where she had grown up and lived all her life. The move here to a SLO assisted living facility had separated her

¹ From his bestselling book of surviving the Jewish Holocaust, *Night*.

from all her remaining friends and she was very depressed. The only picture that had been hung on the wall was of a lovely young woman in a wedding dress. “Who is this,” I asked her as I stood to scan the picture more closely. “Why that’s me!” she said. And she proceeded to tell all about her wedding day as if it were yesterday. I was enriched by her telling and I’m sure she was too!

Tell me a story! I believe that should be the mantra of our church life: of our fellowship meetings, our Sunday school classes, our family gatherings: The opportunity to hear the stories of the Bible, and the opportunity to share our stories with each other. What treasure!

“Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you,” said Jesus to the healed man. “And he went away and began to tell how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.”

There, my friends, is the power and charm and appeal of our Christian faith!

What’s your story? And how do you tell it? That’s the question I want to leave you with this morning.

And I have a couple of suggestions: First, write your story down. It doesn’t have to be a book! Just two or three pages. I have seen people who didn’t think they had a story change their minds after they wrote it down.

Second, whether you’re running a Bible study or a fellowship group or a breakfast or a lunch or hosting a family or social gathering, deliberately ask the participants to tell some portion of their story. Then watch the Spirit of God transform your gathering.

Tell me a story. It is the heart of our faith.

I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.
I love to tell the story, because I know ’tis true;
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.

I love to tell the story; more wonderful it seems
Than all the golden fancies of all our golden dreams.
I love to tell the story, it did so much for me;
And that is just the reason I tell it now to thee.

I love to tell the story; ’tis pleasant to repeat
What seems, each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet.
I love to tell the story, for some have never heard
The message of salvation from God’s own holy Word.

I love to tell the story, for those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.
And when, in scenes of glory, I sing the new, new song,
’Twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long.