

Telling The Story

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<Introduction>

My name is Mark Anthony Bogen, and I am so happy to be here with you today! First, I want to thank our spiritual leader, Pastor Kirstie, for providing me the encouragement and opportunity to preach this morning. Preaching is an area that I have had some experience and training in the past, but I have always hesitated to exercise this gift for various reasons. Kirstie is helping me explore what it would look like for me to preach from time-to-time here at First UMC. So, I look forward to your feedback and comments, as we explore God's Word together, today and in the future.

I have observed that Pastor Kirstie has a strong commitment to helping all the members of our church grow in their faith, and utilize their spiritual gifts for the benefit of this beloved community. I realize that not everyone is called to preach or teach, but I do believe that each member of this body has the ability – and even the responsibility, to serve God's people in some unique and wonderful way!

Ephesians 4:12-13 says that the job of pastors and teachers is, “to equip God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith...” Often times, a congregation expects the pastor to do all the work of the ministry. But, the scripture indicates that the pastor's job is to train and prepare us, God's people, to do this work!

For the past couple of months, we have been going through a sermon series entitled, “Read the Story”, and today, our focus will be on putting our learning into practice by “Telling the Story”.

For today's sermon, I have identified the following objectives:

1. We will Remember the power of the gospel – God's Story of Salvation
2. We will Reflect on our own individual and unique Stories
3. We will Encourage one another to share our stories

<Opening Prayer>

Now, would you please pause with me to pray, asking God to bless our time together?

Loving God- we are gathered today to worship and celebrate you. We set this time apart from our daily activities to remember who you are, and what you are doing in our lives. Thank you for bringing us together as a community of faith. I pray that you would bless our time together. Please use this sermon to teach us and encourage us, and build us up for your service- that we might be a blessing to others. I humbly ask this in the Name of Jesus, AMEN.

<The Power of a Good Story>

Raise your hand if you love a good story. Yes- I agree, I also love a good story. I love to read and listen to many different book genres, but I'm particularly fond of history and historical fiction. I enjoy a great movie or show, and I especially love to hear peoples' real-life stories and lived experiences.

Stories are powerful. They can entertain us. They can inform us. A good story can make us laugh, or cry. They can make us think, teach us an important lesson, show us new and different perspectives and views. A good story can open up entirely new worlds.

The Gospel of Jesus has been called "The Greatest Story Ever Told", and I would wholeheartedly agree with that sentiment. According to Britannica, "The word gospel is derived from the Anglo-Saxon term, god-spell, literally meaning "Good Story", a rendering of... the Greek word found in the Bible, "Evangelion", meaning "good news". Is the Story of Jesus "Good News" for you, church family?

I have spent the last 35 years reading and studying the Bible pretty diligently, because of the difference the Gospel has made in my life. I believe I shared in my previous sermon that my undergraduate degree was in Bible and Theology, with an emphasis in Evangelism and Discipleship. I'd like to take some time this morning to share a little bit of my story, as it relates to the beginning of my faith journey.

<My Story>

My path to becoming a life-long Bible student was not obvious or anticipated from an early age. I didn't grow up attending church regularly- I occasionally visited my grandparents small town Methodist church whenever we stayed with them as a child. For a short time I also remember going on a bus to attend a Sunday School program at some church near our home. I always left those experiences with a vague confusion about what the Bible was all about, and it never struck me as particularly relevant or meaningful to me at that time. I just couldn't wrap my mind around the strange book names like: Leviticus, I & II Corinthians, Galatians, and I & II Thessalonians.

As a teenager, I was basically just a punk kid with no purpose or direction for my life. “Aimless and wandering” are the words that would probably best describe me during that time. My parents divorced when I was around 14, and this added to the chaos of my young life. Now, it isn’t necessarily unusual for a teenager not to have a clear path established for their life, but I started making choices during this time that could have had significant consequences, and were putting me on a path to severely limit my chances for any future success or positive outcome. And that is really the beginning of my story.

At 16, I was given a driver’s license and a vehicle- with very little parental supervision. I got a job working part-time at a local Quick Lube, and that turned into my working around 30 hours a week after school and on Saturdays. I got work-study credit for school, but I wasn’t doing much else in the way of homework or studying. The money I was making was immediately wasted on silly things, as I had no real plan for further education after high school. On top of that, I was picking up several bad habits from the guys at my work, including smoking, underage drinking, and experimenting with drugs.

Around this time, I was introduced to a classmate at Lincoln High School who seemed different than most of our peers. She came across as confident and mature, not consumed by the distractions of the various cliques and usual teenage drama. This young woman had a grace and beauty that was way more than just skin deep (although I thought she was also very easy on the eyes).

I found out that my new friend was a committed follower of Jesus, and I had a mixed reaction to that news. Was she weird and misguided, or had she found something truly significant and meaningful for her life? We spent the next two years of my high school career “discussing”, and verbally sparring over philosophy and matters of faith- without me ever really understanding where she was coming from.

Meanwhile, I was increasing my drinking quite a bit, escalating my drug use, and on a December evening during my Senior year- my friends from work and I combined alcohol and drugs with car racing. This led to a devastating car accident where one of my friends was killed. However, I was somehow miraculously saved. As I sat at my friend’s funeral, I remember asking myself, why did Matt die, while I was spared? Was there really a point to any of this?

The following year, after I barely graduated from High School, my Christian friend and I reconnected- and she shared her ongoing story about how following Jesus was truly making a difference in her life. Her life wasn’t always “butterflies and blueberries”, she had her share of trials and challenges too. But, she had a joy, hope, and a peace about her life that was beyond my comprehension. This time around, I was more open to

exploring the source of those blessings she had been telling me about. I truly started to listen to her story with a desire to understand.

My friend suggested I read some of the stories of Jesus- beginning with the Gospel of Mark. Perhaps she thought that having the same name as the author would appeal to me? I learned later that it was the shortest, most direct and concise gospel of the 4, and it was a perfect choice for me- as it immediately captured my attention. I had tried to read the Bible before, but it just never clicked. Starting with “In the beginning” in Genesis may not have been the right place for me to start my faith investigation. This time, I was beginning to see the appeal and impact of this man from Nazareth. I began to really contemplate if Jesus’ story had the answers I was looking for?

In addition to reading the primary source material from the Gospel of Mark, my friend also recommended that I read “Mere Christianity” by C.S. Lewis- to help me organize my thoughts on who this Jesus really was. Professor Lewis’ captured the situation perfectly for me with his statement that there were really only 3 conclusions that a person could make about Jesus: He was either Lord, a Liar, or a Lunatic. There was no room for him being simply a “good teacher” or a very moral man.

I observed Jesus in the Gospel of Mark teaching with authority about God the father, healing and performing miracles, and consistently and selflessly leading his people to be free of the bonds of self-righteous religious institutions. He didn’t seem crazy, and his truth struck a nerve in me. This was wildly different from the weird version of Jesus’ story I was getting from the TV televangelists of the 1980’s, on which most of my misconceptions about Jesus and Christians were derived. I ultimately came to the decision that Jesus was truly the risen savior, my Lord and my God. I have been following Him and learning about Him ever since.

In case you are wondering- my high school friend eventually became my girlfriend, and then we got married. Nichole and I have been married now almost 33 years. I have been talking about the story of my faith journey for the past several minutes, but what I would really like to underscore here is the **Power of Nichole Telling Her Story**, which led me to investigate, and ultimately accept the gift of salvation that Jesus offers to each and every one of us. I am thankful that Nichole was willing to share her story with me all those years ago- it has made all the difference!

I would like to point out that you don't always have to share the gospel verbally either. Oftentimes the most powerful testimony is how you live your life. St. Francis Assisi is attributed with the quote, "Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words."

Is there someone in your life who could use some encouragement and hope?

However you do it, telling Your Story can make a difference in the lives of other people, and give them hope. I Peter 3:15-17 tells us, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

<The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman>

Let us now turn our attention to the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman found in Mark 7. Her story demonstrates the life-changing impact of Jesus on a person's life- when they relentlessly pursue him.

Our Wednesday Applying the Sermon to Life Class had a couple of compelling questions about this passage: **First, Why did Jesus go to Tyre?**

The most likely answer is that Jesus was tired, and needed a break from his difficult work. Nichole and I just returned from a much needed getaway to Colorado last weekend, in the midst of an extremely busy time for me at work, so I can relate to this in a small way. Previously in Mark, we see that Jesus had been teaching large crowds, he calmed a raging storm, he fed 5000 men + women and children, he healed many, and Jesus even walked on water.

I believe Jesus retreated to this predominantly Gentile area to escape the Jewish leaders and teachers that had been hassling him. He didn't want anyone to know that he was there- he was looking for anonymity. But even here, in a remote location, Jesus is recognized and sought after. Where can the Son of God even go to get a vacation?

However, this Gentile woman was a parent on an important mission, and Jesus' vacation was not a priority for her. Nothing was going to stop her from getting help for her dear child. Can any of you relate to that? Would you feel bad about interrupting the doctor on vacation, that was desperately needed to save a loved one's life? What extent would you go to get help? I'd personally like to know what this woman knew or thought about Jesus, but no details are shared. Whatever it was, she did not hesitate to make her appeal plainly. We see that Jesus eventually relented, and honors the Syro-Phoenician woman's faith. Her daughter is restored- even from afar! What a story this woman could tell!

Persistence is a powerful element in any person's story. A faith journey that includes unwavering perseverance develops character, according to Romans 5:3-5. And that "character leads to hope, which does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts."

The world needs to hear your stories of perseverance and hope! Even if you are still going through a challenging time, telling your story could be just the thing that brings hope to someone else around you. Tell your story, show compassion, and then stick with that person. Knowing they are not alone can encourage a person to get through their own trials and tribulations!

Second, what is going on with that dialogue about Children and Dogs?

As Alex Steadman reminded us in his recent sermon, it is important to read the footnotes... there is an underlying current of tension present here between this Gentile woman and Jewish man. The Syro-Phoenician is crossing significant cultural and gender barriers to get this help for her daughter. **For current context, consider the situation in Israel and Palestine today.

Jesus' initial concern is to focus on his mission of ministering to the Jews - his fellow countrymen, referred to here as the "children" in the analogy. He may have been risking the completion of his overall objectives, if he somehow got side-tracked ministering outside of Israel proper. Remember, Jesus came to Tyre to take a short break from ministry. However, the Gentile woman argued that even those considered "outsiders", or the "dogs under the table" received residual blessings from God's overwhelming resources. This also provides foreshadowing for the eventual inclusion of the Gentiles into the fullness of the covenant of salvation. The Apostle Paul later elaborates on this in Ephesians 2:11-22, summarized in verse 13, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

So, we see that this Gentile woman relentlessly advocated for her daughter, and Jesus honored her tenacity. The parallel passage in Matthew 15:28 confirms this when Jesus exclaims, "Woman, you have great faith!" We know that Jesus' gift of redemption and grace is now available to everyone who would receive it. This is Good News indeed!

The world needs to hear your stories of persistent faith, my friends. They need to know that the Good News is for every single person - regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, family background, disability, or any other identifier human beings can come up with!

Tell the Story!

<The Story of the Deaf Mute>

The 2nd story of today's gospel reading just fits perfectly into our theme of "Telling the Story", doesn't it? Here we have a man who was deaf and mute, and Jesus opens his ears, and gives him the ability to speak plainly. Jesus literally enabled this man to tell his own story, what a blessing! It's no wonder that everyone was excited and overwhelmed to share this good news.

We do have to ask why Jesus commands them not to tell anyone? This may be another case of Jesus trying to manage the messaging around his ministry, to keep the focus on his work with the people of Israel, and on his looming sacrifice on the cross. This miracle is performed in the area referred to as the Decapolis, another area predominantly comprised of Gentiles.

One of my main takeaways from this scripture is that a person will not be able to stay quiet when they have had a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ. **If the Good News has made a real difference in your life's story, I am confident that you are going to want to share it from the Mountaintop!**

In Luke 2, after the shepherds saw the baby Jesus in the manger, confirming the message they received from the angels- "they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child."

Paul said in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes..." Paul dedicated his life to sharing the gospel, because it had radically changed his life- a life previously filled with self-righteousness, hatred and anger, and transformed into unconditional love and abundant grace.

<Each One of You Has a Good Story to Tell>

I look out on this congregation this morning, and I see a collection of wonderful people, from a variety of different backgrounds and with many different experiences. I believe that each one of you has an important story to tell. You are unique, and you are fearfully and wonderfully made, in the image of God.

One of the things I have loved about getting involved here at First United Methodist Church, is hearing some of your stories over the past couple of years. When we attend the Wednesday night Bible study, or go bowling together, serve on a committee together, work together at VBS, participate in a fellowship event, or attend Justice in Action meetings – these are some of the best times to really get to know one another, and share our stories about how God is making an impact on our lives.

So, as I close, I want us to **remember the power of the Gospel**- this is Good News for everyone who believes.

I want us to **continue reflecting on our own stories**- how God is working in our lives.

I also want to **encourage us to boldly share our stories with those around us**. The world needs to hear these stories.

Many of our stories reflect a journey filled with hope, love, peace, and joy
Tell your story!

Many of us have experienced tremendous hardship and adversity- and perhaps some are still going through a tough time even today.
Tell your story!

Some of us in this space have experienced profound loss or sorrow
Tell your story!

Some of us have also experienced amazing triumphs and successes.
Tell your story!

If you have experienced truth in the Gospel of Jesus- **Tell your Story!**

If you are still seeking purpose and meaning in your life- **Tell your Story!**

If Jesus Christ has made any difference in your life- **Tell your Story!**

Let all God's People say – AMEN!