

This is our Story; This is our Song

Matthew 13:24-35

“Tell one of your stories Grandpa!” I’d plead, my blonde hair falling into the bowl of ice cream covered in maple syrup that my grandma had placed in front of me. He’d lean across the table, savoring his own dessert, clear his throat and say, “Well, when I was about 19 or so...” My late Grandfather, Francis, was the best story teller I’ve ever met. His memory for detail of his rather adventurous life as a gold miner, US soldier, logging camp worker, and Okanagan Apple Picker made it impossible to resist his stories; even the ones he’d tell over and over again. The explosion in the gold mine. The logging camps are full of a cast of colorful characters (Really, Francis, I don’t think the kids need to hear that!”, my Grandma would shout. This, of course, made the story that much more enticing to a 10 year old). Or the story of the night he met my grandmother, the love of his life for 63 years.

We, as humans, love stories, don’t we? I’m a relative new-comer to Anabaptism, and I’m not ethnically Mennonite, and I love when the people in my church tell me the stories of their families; the stories of their own Mennonite faith. How their parents caught the last train out. The music and singing that filled their homes. The low German comedy shows that would draw people from across the province. Some of the stories are dark; stories of generational trauma and violence, some of the stories are beautiful and hopeful; of grace and provisions that followed our Mennonite foremothers and

fathers on their journeys. And in ways that are conscious or unconscious, we are shaped by stories. The stories we are told, or the stories that we pick up, what we read between the lines.

Jesus, too, knew the power of story. In the Matthew passage that our wonderful readers dramatized for us this morning, we're reminded about how again and again Jesus told stories; stories with everyday characters, people we could relate to. People in everyday situations—a lost coin, a worker in a harvest field. These seemingly ordinary stories about ordinary things are how he illustrated this new kingdom he was building. This Emmanuel—God with Us—a God who shows up in everyday places and in everyday people. Verses 34-35 of Matthew 13 in the Message paraphrase says it this way, “All Jesus did that day was tell stories—a long storytelling afternoon. His storytelling fulfilled the prophecy: I will open my mouth and tell stories; I will bring out into the open things hidden since the world's first day.”

Author Madeline L'Engle said it this way, “Jesus was not a theologian. He was a God who told stories.”

Now, in Church in North America, (and I'm talking big C church here), there has been a lot of discussion about dwindling congregations, less and less young people, more and more uncertainty about the future of the church. Covid seems to have accelerated some of those tensions. Further still, many Mennonites are wrestling with the questions of how to reach out to their neighbors and communities in a way that feels authentic, and non-coercive.

MC Canada's Executive Minister, Doug Klassen, raised these questions in his sermon at National Gathering, "When I think of how much the Western church has struggled with witness, proclaiming or evangelizing or whatever we can safely call it...how disastrous and traumatizing some of those efforts have been, I think we've gotten lost, we've forgotten the personal encounter, the hearing, the seeing, the gazing upon the eating with, the sharing our homes with, it was the primary way back then and it must be the primary way now...we must recover a way of hearing and seeing Jesus who is very much alive and present with his church."

The ideas Doug raises are big, and the consequences of missing the mark feel overwhelming- as we consider a watching world. Where do we begin? How do we begin? How can we declare the good news of Jesus?

Simply put: We begin by telling stories.

The Story of the Life of Jesus is about God's action of love towards humanity and humanity's encounters with the divine. When I'm talking about Story here, I'm using the capital S sense. This is not a story like Hansel and Gretel, a fairy tale, a fable, this is about the big narrative, about an understanding of God that shapes our understanding of truth and of our world.

Churches can face an identity crisis when the stories we lived by are no longer true. “We used to be a church of hundreds of people...” “We were once so devoted, this church was our whole lives ...”

Just as stories can pull the rug out from underneath us, can make us feel uneasy or uncertain, so too can stories give us a firm foundation, a place to build our identity on. For people of faith, this firm foundation is Jesus Christ. God with us. Love incarnate.

Again and again in the Gospels, we find stories of ordinary people, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, healthy and unwell. People with stories, problems, occupations, worries and families like our own. Then they encounter Jesus-Immanuel, God with us. And that encounter changes them! They are touched, healed, rebuked, frustrated, grateful, astounded, and loved. Regardless of their reaction to Jesus, they are changed. They have encountered God in the midst of their reality, and for many of the people in the Gospels, that encounter becomes their new story.

Author, Speaker and Professor, Dr. Andy Root, who studies and writes extensively on the interections between the church and broader cultures shared about a research project that he had conducted. He interviewed 10-15 people each from three different churches on the west coast of the US. His key interview question was “Do you believe that God speaks to people? Have you experienced this?” Of the 45 or so people that he interviewed, every single one of them said something along these lines, “Oh no! That’s never happened to me....*long pause*...buuuut, there was this one time...” And people

proceeded to tell him these amazing stories of a time when they first personally led, spoken to, or ministered to by God. After they finished their stories, Root would say, "That's incredible! What an amazing story about God working in your life. Have you ever told your church that story?" "Oh no, never." "Well, have you ever told your pastor about that?" No." "No?" "No."

I know that I have stories like this, and I would venture, based on Dr. Root's research that many of us here this morning do too. So..why aren't we telling these stories? Why do we hold these encounters with the living Christ so close to our chests? I'm sure that fear and doubt play a part in this...what if people think we're over spiritualizing something? Maybe there was a rational explanation for what happened. We don't want to risk putting these precious stories out there, to be analyzed by others. We're also not a culture that values storytelling in the way we once did; and in the way that our indigenous sisters and brothers still do. But we NEED to for these stories of encountering Christ to be told and we NEED to have ears to hear them for our future community together.

We get a sense of this notion of story-telling as vital for the life and future of a community in Deuteronomy 6:1-12

"These are the commands, decrees, and regulations that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you. You must obey them in the land you are about to enter

and occupy, and you and your children and grandchildren must fear the LORD your God as long as you live. If you obey all his decrees and commands, you will enjoy a long life. Listen closely, Israel, and be careful to obey. Then all will go well with you, and you will have many children in the land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

“Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

“The LORD your God will soon bring you into the land he swore to give you when he made a vow to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a land with large, prosperous cities that you did not build. The houses will be richly stocked with goods you did not produce. You will draw water from cisterns you did not dig, and you will eat from vineyards and olive trees you did not plant. When you have eaten your fill in this land, be careful not to forget the LORD, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt.

Did you catch that? It bears repeating.

“Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

I have no doubt that the laws of the torah and holy rules were taught again and again in the Iserailite homes, but notice again verses 10-12, “The LORD your God will soon bring you into the land he swore to give you when he made a vow to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a land with large, prosperous cities that you did not build. The houses will be richly stocked with goods you did not produce. You will draw water from cisterns you did not dig, and you will eat from vineyards and olive trees you did not plant. When you have eaten your fill in this land, be careful not to forget the LORD, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt.”

They are telling their descendents the stories. “This land you see here? God gave it to us. God gave Abraham and Sarah a baby in their 90s! God sent an angel to spare Isaac when his father was ready to sacrifice him! Jacob wrestled with an Angel! We were slaves and God freed us-God cracked the Red Sea in half! We walked through on dry land! God loves us!” We need to be telling our children and one another these stories from the Bible and especially from our own lives. Stories of rescue. Stories of despair. Stories of hope. Stories of fear. Because in all these stories, we can say, “God was

there. In my reality. In your reality. God was and is here.” And isn’t that the foundation we want our faiths to be built upon?

Dr. Andy Root likened faith to Manna, the bread from heaven that God sent to sustain Israel during the wilderness years. When the Israelites tried to store the manna, to bank it for the coming days, it rotted. It swam with maggots. There is a sense in churches that if only we could bank some of this faith in ourselves, and our in young people that maybe they would have enough faith to get them through the hard times; the times of doubt and deconstruction. But we can’t bank faith. We can tell the stories though. We can tell the stories so that they stick in our collective memories, so that we can reach for those when doubt creeps in. “Remember how the manna came yesterday? Remember how it was enough? Remember the promises?” The Story sustains us.

So friends, I’d invite us to return to the Story. The story of Jesus- of his days of ministry, the ordinary people that he encountered. The story of his suffering, his death and his resurrection. So much of our faith is born in those places of death or loss, and then the resurrection and new life that comes with it. Let’s try to really listen to the story. Let’s aim to retell our own stories in the shape of the cross.

Shortly here, we will have time together to reenact this story, to proclaim the resurrected Jesus by participating in the meal that Jesus had with the disciples. To gaze at one another, our family in Christ, and say this is a Story that gives us life, a story of being

sustained with bread and wine, with body and blood.

After all this talk of sharing our stories of God ministering and speaking to us, I feel like I would be remiss if I didn't share one of my own this morning.

Almost eight years ago, after my daughter Junia was born, I suffered from what I now realize was postpartum depression. It didn't look like what I thought depression "should" look like: I wasn't overwhelmingly sad or disconnected from my feelings. I felt anxious, heightened emotionally, trapped, angry, and like a failure in parenting this baby. And I thought it was normal-this is what motherhood was like, but every other Mom was strong enough to handle it. But not me. Junia was also a high needs baby-slept little, cried often and was hard to soothe.

During this time, I stumbled across a worship song called, "My Lighthouse" by a group called Rend Collective. It's in our Voices Together Hymnal 597. The chorus has this line "My lighthouse, my lighthouse, I will trust the promise that you will carry me safely to shore." I remember listening to that song on repeat, trying to bounce and sway a squalling baby to sleep and holding on to those words. That God would bring me to shore on the days that felt like I was drowning. Fast forward, a few years. Junia is almost three years old and Ezra is roly-poly 2 month old. Ezra's arrival brought no depression for me this time, which is how I finally realized that what I had experienced with Junia wasn't normal. We attended a christian family camp on Christopher Lake up

by Waskesiew, and one of the songs during the worship sessions was My Lighthouse. And I watched Junia, now a bright, engaged preschooler singing and doing actions. “You’re my lighthouse. My lighthouse. I will trust the promise that you will carry me safe to shore.” And I felt overwhelmed. I had been carried. I was safe at the shore now, with two beautiful kids. By the grace of God alone.

Let’s tell our stories, friends, to one another and for one another. Let’s tell them in the shape of an empty tom, in which all our stories find their deepest meaning, in the living, risen Jesus Christ.

Amen.