

# “The Power of a Story – Tom Robinson”

February 20, 2022

*The Faith of a Mockingbird* series

**Media:** Week 3 intro - Tom Robinson, then prayer

This week, I started a journey with a small group of pastors in Michigan who are moving toward ordination in our United Methodist Church. They serve all around the state - some of them preaching, some teaching, others appointed specifically to ministries of justice. We are a diverse group - some born outside of the U.S., some who speak multiple languages, some who have endured struggle that I can only imagine: one living in a refugee camp and one serving as a missionary in a third-world country. Our stories are definitely not the same, but our call to ministry in the name of Jesus Christ is something we share.

Getting to know these pastors reminded me that our different stories strengthen us as the Body of Christ. I grew up on a farm in mid-Michigan. One colleague in this group is fluent in Spanish and translated for her family as they settled in the U.S. Another worked as a scientist before she answered a call to ministry. We are not the same in so many ways, but our diversity is a gift as we seek to understand God’s movement in our lives and in the world.

The same is true for us gathered together today in-person and virtually. We didn’t all come to faith the same way, but we can see how God works in mighty and many ways in our lives. We don’t ignore differences; we appreciate them and see them from a broader perspective of God’s work in us.

As we’re diving into the power of a story, we can give thanks for the blessing of our stories - each one unique, interesting, and a witness to God’s work in the world.

But *To Kill a Mockingbird* challenges us to hear stories that aren’t always shared - or believed. Perhaps Harper Lee didn’t set out to write a story about just one issue, but she challenges us to face the truth about ourselves and our world, especially when it comes to racism. We make assumptions about people before we know them. We throw down judgment prematurely - and many times unfairly. And even when it hits us in the gut, when we realize that about ourselves, we have to face it.

Lee writes about the assumptions made about Tom Robinson - many of them based on his race alone. **(SLIDE)** What are the evil assumptions we make about

others? The word “evil” is there for a reason. Sometimes our assumptions do great harm to others.

Have you ever assumed that you knew someone’s story? Have you made a judgment based on what you figured was true - or what you heard second or third hand? Tom Robinson suffers the consequences of a community and society that is overcome by assumptions about race - enough so that Tom can’t possibly get a fair trial. As far as most people are concerned, he’s guilty before the trial begins.

Tom never has a chance. Even when Atticus Finch offers evidence of Tom’s innocence, even when Tom testifies, there’s no convincing the jury (or most people) to change their minds. Tom’s story is already written without an opportunity for him to be heard. The guilty verdict, though untrue, defines Tom’s life, and he’s killed, supposedly trying to escape - shot 17 times, which adds to the pain of his story.

As is so often true, we don’t think beyond our assumptions, and assumptions become more powerful than the truth. Has that happened to you - when an assumption was more powerful than truth? And many times, it’s destructive. It hurts people. It is unjust. It is sinful. It is the presence of evil in our midst.

The clip we showed is heartbreaking. Actor Brock Peters, who played Tom Robinson, hadn’t rehearsed the scene that way. His tears came in the midst of real time, and Gregory Peck said that he had to look past Peters in order to keep his own composure in what is a powerful, painful, and poignant moment in the story.

Tom is caught in an unjust system even as he’s experienced unwelcome advances. He couldn’t fight Mayella off for fear of hurting her, and running away was his only option. In the book, when Atticus asks Tom why he ran away, Tom replies, “If you were like me (with a reference to his skin color), you’d be scared, too.”

What the film doesn’t include is a part about Tom being questioned about his prior conviction for disorderly conduct. Again, it’s an instance where Tom was beat up, but was charged unfairly because he couldn’t pay the fine. And when the prosecutor asks Tom about being scared, Tom says he was scared he’d “have to face up to what I didn’t do.”

Dill Harris, Scout and Jem’s young friend, gets physically sick and sad because of how Tom is treated in the courtroom. It’s a man from town, Mr. Raymond, who understands why Dill is so upset. Mr. Raymond says Dill is crying “about the simple hell people give other people – without even thinking...without even stopping to think that they’re people, too.”

Scripture is full of stories where assumptions are up-ended, where perspectives are challenged, where people are transformed by the grace of God, especially when it comes to how we view one another. Jesus continuously challenges those around him to see each another with a new view - spending time with people who were cast out and hurt by assumptions.

Saul (Paul) is literally knocked down by God and eventually comes to a new understanding of how God is working in the lives of all people. He's the one who writes the letters we read today, including this clear call to find unity in Christ amid differences. It's not that the differences don't exist; it's that they aren't a license to view one another as something other than beloved of God. Christ calls us to create a beloved community where we find unity in diversity.

Paul makes a shift to how we relate to one another. Christian character is also about how we live together. But it's not just any community. It's a community that's grounded in Christ and sees itself in union with Christ. It's an alternative community – different from what's going around in the world because it shows others the Kingdom of God.

It's a community led by the Holy Spirit where everyone is equal before God. No one is better than anyone else. No one is of higher status than anyone else. No matter what our struggles, our family dysfunctions (and we all have them!), or our hurts. Paul lifts up ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender. Are we willing to add other categories that we create as barriers to unity - sexual orientation or gender identity, political leanings, or anything else that keeps us apart? Can we actually claim that all are welcome – not because we say it, but because God says it?

And there's Peter, another one who had assumptions overturned, who has a vision and an encounter that changes his understanding of God and people. In Acts 10, we hear his words: **(SLIDE)**

*Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.*

Assumptions upended - and the call to hear a story we didn't know before.

There's no doubt Harper Lee knew about the power of a story. I'm heartbroken by the injustice shown through Tom's story, but it can't stop there. It must not stop there for us. We need to be uncomfortable and discomfited by it,

and I wonder if that was one of her goals when she wrote in 1960. Some say this was a help to the civil rights movement. Racism still exists - as do so many "isms" that we use to separate, demean, or dehumanize others. Doing something about it is as urgent as it was when Lee shared this story more than 60 years old.

Racism is sin. It's an evil in our midst that separates us from God and causes us to prejudge and judge others without knowing them. It's a lie perpetuated simply based on the different amounts of melanin in our bodies. Racism is sin. Racism says that the amount of pigment in one's skin determines status and worth. That is not from God; that is a human construction. Racism dehumanizes and destroys. And it's not what God intends for us.

We can celebrate the beauty in our diversity - and claim our unity as beloved children of God. Those are not mutually exclusive. We can do both even as we do the spiritual work to truly seek justice, which invites us to understand our own assumptions, prejudices, biases, and privilege. We cannot assume that we're okay or that we don't have personal work to do.

We have to be honest. There are moments when I realize my own prejudice. I make assumptions based purely on someone's appearance - even skin color - and treat them with a bias because of it. Friends, as much as it happens, we can't say that's just normal or the way things are. We are called to examine our hearts and be honest about our actions or inactions that separate us from God and each other. That's what sin is - separation from God. Racism is sin; we must be honest about it.

Yes, we can pray about it - and we should. Yes, we can talk about it - and we should. But we also must fight against it. We must read and hear the stories of those who have experienced it because it's not my experience, though it is for many people. We must work to rid ourselves of it and seek justice in our community. We can't be silent or complacent just because "it doesn't affect me" directly. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall said, "In recognizing the humanity of our fellow beings, we pay ourselves the highest tribute."

I'm challenged by people like attorney Bryan Stevenson, whose work centers around pointing out injustice in our legal system. He's clear that the experience is different when someone is rich and guilty than when they're poor and innocent. Sometimes race factors in, too. Stevenson works to help condemned prisoners who have been unjustly imprisoned. It's staggering to consider the number of people who have been unjustly accused and imprisoned.

In a recent interview, he said, “the more you disrupt systems that have operated unfairly for a long time, the more you implicate bigger issues.” His work hasn’t come without threats or struggle. And he talks about the power of knowing our history in order to liberate us - to free us and get us to something better. That’s working for the Kingdom of God in its fullness.

This isn’t about guilt; this is what God calls us to do to bring the Kingdom of God closer to reality! So, as we consider the power of a story - our story, the stories we need to hear, the power of God’s story - I invite us to consider this question: **(SLIDE)** How do your roots influence your role in God’s story? How do we see ourselves and others? Are we listening to stories that are different so that we can get a better understanding of just how wide, deep, and high God’s grace is - and how God is working in all of us, constantly transforming us personally, and calling us together to build a beloved community? I hope we feel the discomfort and an ache and challenge to make things better, to listen and hear, to respond, and to act for justice and peace. God, help us. Let us pray...