**Preaching as Storytelling**

How to rely on stories to carry spiritual freight



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A story, if it's a good story, is tailored and contoured to the audience. It's never repeated exactly. It's fitted in. A different condition calls for a reshaping of the story that will address appropriately the new condition; you have to put the grease where the squeak is.

I was at a family reunion, and I was seated on the patio on a very cold seat. All the other seats were wooden, except this one, and it was cold. Someone said, "Don't you recognize that?" I looked at it and said, "I don't recognize this. Why should I?" I was told: that was the bottom step at the old home place where we were born. Then I remembered the old rotten wooden steps, and how someone replaced the bottom one with a piece of marble. And the person said, "Turn it over." We turned it over and on the other side were burial inscriptions appropriate for someone named George Washington Duncan who had died in 1792. A piece of marble became a gravestone, then a step, and now a patio seat. That's the way a story goes: it's the same, it's not the same. The Bible uses, and good storytellers use and re-use, the basic stuff of the story in many ways.

**Difficulties of storytelling**

Storytelling is difficult because all communication is difficult. Communication is difficult because taking what is profoundly important to me and moving it into the public arena is like holding open house in a prayer room. Therefore it is important that I re-experience that story at the time I'm telling it.

*Storytelling assumes that value is put upon continuity*. A story has continuity. We have gone through a period of existential influence in which the great accent was on the moment, the now. A story is not important in a culture where there is general disinterest in what happened before I was born and in what happens after I'm gone.

Scott Momaday, American Indian writer, professor of literature in Southern California, tells this story. When he was a small boy, his father woke him early in the morning and said, "I want you to get up and go with me." His father took him by the hand and led him, sleepily, to the house of an old squaw, and left him saying, "I'll get you this afternoon." All day long the old squaw of the Kiowa tribe told stories to the boy, sang songs, described rituals, told the history of the Kiowa. She told the boy how the tribe began out of a hollow log in the Yellowstone river, of the migration southward, the wars with other tribes, the great blizzards, the buffalo hunt, the coming of the white man, the starvation, the diminished tribe, and finally, reservation, confinement. About dark his father came and said, "Son, it's time to go." Momaday said, "I left her house a Kiowa."

When youngsters leave our church building, do they leave Christian? To be Christian is to be enrolled in a story, and anybody who can't remember any farther back than his or her birth is an orphan.

*Stories must be trusted to carry the message*. The greatest difficulty in storytelling is the matter of whether or not we trust a story to carry the freight. Do you trust the Kingdom of God, the message, to something as fragile as a story?

Some believe that telling stories to change the world is like trying to break up concrete by throwing light bulbs against it. I've been present when someone threw light bulbs against concrete walls, and the walls cracked and fell.

I do believe there is in many of us a lack of trust in the power of the word that's spoken. Jesus compared words with seeds. A seed carries its future in its bosom. The farmer does not put it in the ground and then scream over it. He leaves it alone. When preaching, many of us operate out of caution, hesitation, fear, and defensiveness. We can reflect our lack of trust in the very thing we're saying.

**Characteristics of good storytelling**

Think about what goes on in telling a story.

*The storyteller is not speaking to people, but speaking for them*. In preaching we don't just speak to those people; we speak for those people. We don't tell them what they want to hear. We've all been warned about that. But now and then why not tell them what *they* want to *say*? The unused treasure of preaching is the experience, the faith, the commitment and love of those people, all of whom have a story to tell but they can't articulate it. You can speak for them.

The mark of a good story is when it's over people say, "As you were talking I was thinking about when … " Ah, now you're stirring the story. You're not just tapping more in; you're calling more out. Good storytelling speaks for the congregation and evokes their own stories. Good preaching is an act of the people.

*Stories must be realistic*. If your stories are all shaped into homiletical contortions, then nobody can identify because they're unrealistic. The tragedy is stories are bent out of life's shape to fit some homiletical enterprise. Let the story stand up on its own. Stories must have the smell and sound and taste of life. When you tell a real story, everybody is relaxed. It's not confrontation time. It's not challenge time. "Once upon a time … " Everybody relax. And in that relaxation you're drawn into the story, and identification begins to take place. The great single power in storytelling is the power of identification. And things that have long been in the head, known, begin to move toward the heart, and that's when life is changed.

*Stories create an experience*. It's a long trip from the head to the heart.A sermon is full of information. The substance is there. But preaching is not just transferring information. It's creating the experience of that information.

If you are preaching on freedom, what's going to be the size, the sound, and the shape of that experience? There's freedom and then there's *freedom*. There's bombs-bursting-in-air, Fourth-of-July-parade, firecrackers, drums, 76-trombones, John-Philip-Sousa-down-Main-Street freedom. You can also preach freedom that's as quiet as six female voices outside a county jail humming "We Shall Overcome." Don't just say you're preaching on freedom. What experience are you going to create?

The way you put the words together creates it. I hear some powerful passages used in sermons as though it were information. "There was this beggar sitting at the gate." Wait a minute. Give me a chance to experience the beggar at the gate. See the rags, smell the odor, hear the coins in the tin cup, see the hollow eyes. Don't rush to the destination. Take the trip.

*The fit of a story is extremely important*. Have you had the experience of telling a story in a sermon and then later you say, *I wish I would have saved that story*? Most of the power of a story is not somebody's particular ability to tell it. Most of the power in a story is in its appropriateness. The Word of God is appropriate. Therefore the fitting of a story to Scripture is extremely important.

Select stories with size and quality—not little, bumper sticker, cute things—but big things. Then move among them with the magnet of the text to be appropriate, not just to the text, but also to the listener, and the experience.

This appropriateness applies not just to the selection of stories for the sermon but the location of the stories within the sermon. Take the egg out of the nest, set it out on a limb, and it's a different story. What makes the story powerful is the taking of time to build the context in which it is told and then placing it. The people have to be given time to get on the bus before you go roaring off.

Be very careful in the preparation of an introduction. How can you prepare an introduction to what you don't have? For most of us it should be prepared last. Then you will not unload too soon your strong material and stories that need contexting.

*Stories have movement*. The key to the power of the story depends very much in its movement. Forget structure. Stories are to be heard not seen. That is my best counsel about a sermon. Forget about getting an outline. Get the movement. Masterful storytellers do it that way.

Picture an old man peeling an apple for his grandson. "Grandpa, will you peel this apple for us? Momma thinks I might get choked some on the peeling."

"Okay," and he pulls out an old Barlow that he uses for everything, opens it up, rubs it on his britches. After all, it's his grandson. He doesn't want any germs. Then he starts peeling real slow, and the curl begins to drop. And he says, "You know one time I peeled thirty-five of these before I ever broke a peel." And what's happening to the kid? The juices are flowing. The stomach is saying, *I thought I was going to get an apple*. The saliva is flowing; the body is getting ready for the apple. Getting ready for the apple. And it just keeps going, *When is he going to get through?*

Finally the peel drops at his feet. I made it. The kid starts to lunge. "Wait, just a minute." And then he lays it down. "Let me get the core out for you." And just taking forever. When the kid gets the apple, it is the best apple in the world. Now contrast that to walking up to a machine, putting in a quarter, pulling a lever, grabbing an apple, and eating it on the way to something, when the stomach is saying, *I didn't ask for an apple*.

Now think of the movement of your preaching. Do people get prepared to come to the conclusion when you come to the conclusion? It's just a matter of saying I respect the listener and I want to take them with me.

**Gathering stories**

Where do we get stories?

*You can create stories*. In the creation of stories one gives clues to the listeners that the story was created. "Once upon a time … " The way Jesus usually started them was with two statements. One, "Which of you … ?" You knew it was a parable. Or "There was a certain man … " and you knew it was a parable. Little clues that don't detract from the power of the story should be given to release people from engaging in the things in the wrong way. But create stories.

*Stories are mostly in observation and experience*. The stories of life, the things that happen, are as available to you as to me. Some of us have by negative adaptation lost our capacity to pick up on the sights and sounds of our world. Or if we notice it, we don't make any notes to ourselves. And therefore, it's lost.

I keep a journal. I enter the way I feel about experiences; I reflect on the day and the context of things I heard or saw. Then I can recover the experience, not just the information. Observation. Just listing things. If you have freedom to think about yourself and your own experiences, that will be a grand source of stories.

Kind of sad thing, funny thing, happened once. I don't get to go to New York often. I spent my money on the room and was in a place getting a hot dog. And there were only two customers besides myself. The elderly woman waiting on us was in her seventies. Her name was Anna. There was an old man in a booth. He wasn't being waited on. I could just see the top of his head. I knew he was an old man. Later I heard his voice. And so I was just listening, and suddenly conversation started between the old man and Anna. I don't know his name. She never called him by name. He said to her, "The boss wants me to stick around in case you get busy. I can help you."

She says, "Who's busy? Three people."

He says, "Well, you may get busy."

"I won't get busy."

He said, "Well, just in case."

She said, "Okay, if you want to stick around."

He said, "And then when you close, I can walk you home."

She said, 'Ah-ha, now I know why you're staying."

"I just want to walk you home."

She said, "You'll not walk me home." She was, I would say, seventy-five years old. "You'll not walk me home."

He said, "I will walk you home. You need somebody to walk you home."

"Yeah, you want to walk me home. Pretty soon you walk me home, and I will be great with child."

He said to her, "What are you talking about, Anna? You passed that point years ago."

She said, "Huh? You don't know about Sarah?"

He said, "Sarah who?"

She said, "Sarah in the Bible. Sarah in the Bible was older than I, and she was great with child."

And he said, "Well, how did she do that?"

Anna said, "She believed in the man upstairs. And the mother of our Lord before she was ever married, before she ever knew a man, was great with child."

And he said, "How did she do that?"

And she said, "She believed in the man upstairs."

And this old man said, "Well, if I were a woman I wouldn't believe in the man upstairs."