

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Dr. Ken Hughes at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on June 11, 2023.

LOVE TO TELL THE STORY

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Back in the 1860's Katherine Hankey penned the words to a hymn that for decades was a staple in Protestant songbooks – "I Love to Tell the Story."

When Hankey wrote the song Christianity was ascending in America, with the numbers of believers swelled by Roman Catholic immigrants through the end of the 19th century. So, whether Christians professed formal church membership or not, the sentiments expressed in Hankey's song about the sweet presence of Jesus in people's lives would have been a widely embraced idea. And most would have been familiar with the gospel stories about Jesus that underpinned that affection.

That was then. What a difference a century-plus makes. Not only have the number of professing Christians plummeted since the 1960's, but the familiarity and attachment to stories about Jesus – formally known as biblical literacy – has eroded even more. So it's no longer a matter of telling the story of Jesus, as it is giving a reason for why anyone would want to listen to the story in the first place. As the Gallup poll reported recently, for the first time in the 80-year history of the poll, church membership in America has fallen below 50 percent. For context, in 1998 that figure was around 70 percent. Our reality is that there are so many casual or lapsed Christians that even those who have heard a Bible story or two are pretty much unmoved by the experience.

So how do we tell the story we love to tell? That may be the single most important decision we make – what to say. I know how many Christians approach this – they start bellowing; I've done it myself. They start declaring truths in capital letters: The Lord Is Your Savior; Jesus Loves You; God Wants You To Be His!!!

All of which is true. But in a society that is increasingly cold toward organized religion, what do stock phrases like that mean? Even if you have heard a motto like “Jesus Saves” all your life, when you hear it only as a shouted slogan, it is hollow and empty. To a non-Christian’s ear, it sounds almost like a threat, and to a Christian who has drifted away it comes across as yet another unfulfilled promise of the institutional church.

But Christianity has been here before, speaking to the unreached and the turned off, as well as to the harassed and the helpless, who are sometimes the same people. Maybe what we need to do is drop the marketing slogans and get back to what the first evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – did. Let’s tell stories, and trust the Spirit of God do the rest.

It’s been said that there are two types of stories in the Bible: stories that speak of brokenness, and hurt, and separation; and stories of healing, and transformation, and promise, and hope. I don’t care who you are, what ethnic background you have, what religious upbringing you had, or didn’t have, or what your current views of God are, or are not. If you’ve lived past the age of five, you have experienced sadness and separation; your life has exposed you to some of the darker sides of being human.

At the same time, you’ve probably also had occasion to feel or be healed, you’ve had times of happiness in your life, and you may have had your heart touched by something you can’t describe, but that seems heaven-sent. These human experiences that we all share are what the Bible regularly uses to speak about God, and as a result these stories can be life-changing. They are Gospel, without being overbearingly “religious.”

That’s why I find today’s story from Matthew so appealing – it has all the ups and downs of human life in it, and at the center of it all is Jesus. I don’t have to pound you with slogans, with bumper-sticker notions of who God and Jesus are. All I have to do is begin to tell a story. Let’s say I’m sitting in a restaurant, or a coffeehouse, or a bar, with a bunch of skeptical friends. I might say something like this:

Here's what grabs me about Jesus, what makes me think that there's never been anyone like him. There's this same amazing story told by three different writers -- how he was sitting around with friends having dinner, when a man comes into the room out-of-breath, his eyes filled with tears. He kneels at Jesus' side and says: "My little girl has died, but I know you can bring her back to life." Jesus doesn't hesitate, he stands up, gestures to his followers, and starts out the door to the man's house.

As he's walking through the town, a woman sneaks up behind him. Jesus doesn't see her, but he feels someone tug – for just a second – at the back of his clothing. He stops in his tracks, turns around, and immediately sees who touched him, and why. He reaches out to her and says: "Daughter, this sickness that has made you hemorrhage for years is healed; your misery is over, because of your faith." And then he returns to the situation that opened this story -- he continues on his way to where a little girl lies, to bring about yet another miraculous healing.

During his life on earth, that's how Jesus responded to the harassed and the helpless. He changed sorrow into joy wherever possible, and at the same time preached about the nature of God, something he called the Good News of the kingdom of heaven. That's what he did, from the beginning of his ministry to the end of it. There are dozens of stories just like this in the Bible, and in each one of them, I believe we get a glimpse of God.

Now, on sharing a witness like that, you don't expect long-time doubters to fall off their barstools, struck dumb by the power of your words. You just try to pry a small hole in the attitudes the world has taught them to adopt – and pray for the Spirit to move in. You just try to get them to listen to what the Gospel sounds like from Jesus' lips and how it feels from his hands. Because in the space of a few sentences, you can tell them volumes.

You can tell them that rather than a lifeless icon on a wall, Jesus Christ was someone who loved nothing more than to sit down to a meal with friends. At the same time, you can tell them that in the face of faith – the faith of a man with a dying daughter or the faith of a hemorrhaging woman – Jesus responds. You can communicate that this Jesus coupled *words* of the Good News with *acts* of mercy, and that both were of equal importance to him. And you can tell them that, believe it or not, we know what God is like because of Jesus. Jesus actually did restore withered hands, sent demons fleeing, brightened sightless eyes; why, he even provided wine for a party and showed mercy to an adulteress. And he still does, because he is the God who lives.

This is the Gospel – the gift -- of which we are protectors, promoters, and beneficiaries. And, we are storytellers, who can end our testimony to a skeptical world with a closing that Tom King, a professional storyteller, often uses as a sort of benediction to his tales:

Take this story.

It's yours.

Do with it what you will...

Forget it, if you choose.

**But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived
your life differently if only you had heard this story.**

You've heard it now.

Amen.