

“Our World in Stories: Harvesting Stories”
Acts 22:1-16

In his book, *Between the Telling and the Listening*, Mark Yaconelli makes this assertion, “At this moment in history, it is possible to feed every human being. It is possible to house every human being. It is possible to heal the suffering of every neglected child. It is possible to create a just society. It is possible to heal the environment. To do these things, we have to overcome what philosopher Charles Eisenstein calls the most damaging story in the world: ‘We are separate.’”

What are your reactions to this statement? Does it ring true?

I believe that authentic stories can bring about healing. Authentic stories are the ones that connect us instead of separating us. They ring true for others instead of just the teller.

Yaconelli shares about a time when he was in a training program and on the first day, he was placed in a group of six people where each person was given 45 minutes to share their life story. At first, he was disappointed in the seeming dullness of the group. He wanted to be in a diverse group where people would have really interesting stories. He writes, “As I took my seat, I surveyed the other group members and sighed: a retired pastor, an elderly socialite from Newark, a fifty-something professor of social ethics, a middle-aged homemaker, an English teacher from Florida dressed in golf pants and polo shirt. Even though there seemed to be some racial and economic diversity, this had to be a collection of the least interesting people in the program.” Yaconelli tried talking one of the leaders into moving him into another group that had more diversity or people closer to his age, but that didn’t work. He continued, “I returned to my group and slouched back into my chair as our group facilitator asked, ‘All right, who would like to start?’ The heavily made-up woman from New Jersey raised her hand. ‘I’ll go.’ I prepared myself for a forty-five-minute tale of museum fundraisers and cocktail parties...She paused, gathered herself, and with eyes closed, she began. ‘Twenty years ago I woke up in a motel in Connecticut. I was naked, lying on the floor in a room filled with empty bottles of vodka and vials of morphine...and my body was bruised sore. I sat up, showered, dressed, and called the motel manager to ask where I was, what day it was. I had no memory of the past three days. No idea why I was hours from Newark, so far from my home...I didn’t know where my kids were, where my husband was. I didn’t know anything. That was the first day. The first day I realized I had a problem. That I needed help.’” As you can imagine, Yaconelli was shocked. He writes, “I had no idea this well-dressed lawyer’s wife could have this kind of recklessness in her. I looked around at the group expecting to see expressions of disbelief. Instead, I found faces that were present, kind, and full of empathy...The woman proceeded to tell a story of a troubled marriage, a prescription drug addiction, a childhood of abuse and neglect, a gnawing self-hatred, hospitalization, suicide attempts, a wise friend, a divorce, a struggle to renew her relationship with her children, a new marriage, a spiritual awakening, a daily struggle for self-acceptance. The story ended, and I found myself full of a kind of holy wonder. I had no idea a woman who looked like this could have such pain, confusion, and bravery inside of her.”

Every person has a story! Each story is worth listening to. Some may not be as dramatic as the one of the woman from Newark, but all stories have value and potential to bring us closer to each other. But I wonder if the people in the woman's hometown and those who knew her before her conversion still hold her past against her. Being open to people's stories requires an openness of heart and mind to let go of our past judgments.

I think of the story of the Apostle Paul going back to Jerusalem. Paul was one of the most adamant persecutors of the followers of Jesus, but then he had a conversion experience on the road to Damascus where he was going to arrest those whom he deemed as corrupting the Jewish faith. He had a personal vision of Jesus which left him blind until he was taken in by a follower of Jesus in Damascus and helped by the community there. As a result, Paul became one of the most effective spreaders of the message of Jesus all over the Roman Empire. He used his power, influence, and resources to share the good news with others. He even went as far as saying that Gentiles, those who were not Jewish, could become part of the community of Christ without first converting to Judaism. He argued this case with the other disciples and won them over during the council in Jerusalem in chapter 15. Paul and the other disciples remained Jewish but also allowed for others who were considered outsiders to be part of their movement.

Now imagine Paul's story from the perspective of those he worked with to squelch the movement of the followers of Jesus, the ones who knew him before his conversion. They believed that they were protecting the purity of faith. They also were trying to do things in ways that didn't incur the wrath of the Roman Empire against them. But here was Paul now defending the whole movement, joining it, and becoming very effective in getting the word out about it. They wanted the old Paul back and if they couldn't have him, they were going to get rid of this new version of him they didn't recognize or like.

When Paul returned to Jerusalem according to chapter 21, he was trying to show his fellow Jews that he was still very faithful. In fact, he went into the temple and was helping with a Jewish ritual. But those who knew him before the conversion were not going to accept it. They were still stuck on the old Paul. They stirred up a mob and started beating him up to the point that the Roman guards had to carry Paul out. But he refused to be silenced. He used his skills once more to share this story of conversion. Let's listen to it from Acts 22:1-16

'Brothers and fathers, listen to the defense that I now make before you.'

²When they heard him addressing them in Hebrew, they became even more quiet. Then he said:

³'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today. ⁴I persecuted this Way up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison, ⁵as the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify about me. From them I also received letters to the brothers in Damascus, and I went there

in order to bind those who were there and to bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

⁶“While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. ⁷I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” ⁸I answered, “Who are you, Lord?” Then he said to me, “I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.” ⁹Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. ¹⁰I asked, “What am I to do, Lord?” The Lord said to me, “Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.” ¹¹Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus.

¹²“A certain Ananias, who was a devout man according to the law and well-spoken of by all the Jews living there, ¹³came to me; and standing beside me, he said, “Brother Saul, regain your sight!” In that very hour I regained my sight and saw him. ¹⁴Then he said, “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; ¹⁵for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.”

Paul shared his story courageously even though the resistance he was facing was fierce and his life was on the line. His story was that of authentic faith, while his resisters were stuck on the story of his earlier life when he was about violence and control. His story was about the greater good by seeing that we are all connected and that everyone belonged to God. Their story was about control and of keeping things the way they knew them. Because of the pressures and threats of the Roman government, they felt that they had to keep the boundaries of their faith rigid. We can vilify these leaders but if we are honest, we can also see ourselves in them. When we feel threatened, do we not resort to what is comfortable and known? Do we not hold onto the boundaries we know, even when God is calling us to greater love?

Today, I want to invite you to consider what makes a story authentic, i.e., being about real connections to the larger story of life. What judgments and fears do we need to let go of in order to open the door for others to share their stories? Harvesting stories requires that we stay open and to look at all the people of our lives through the eyes of Christ. As people who are invited to heal the world, how can we harvest stories that remind us that we are all connected?

One of the ways which Katharine Henry, our Community Youth Ministry Leader, has identified for harvesting stories in our community is by asking you to share our experiences and stories about our community.

(Katharine to share about the exercise and to invite people after worship to do it).

Community mapping group activity

I. Introduction to community power mapping

a. This practice can help people identify the forces that shape our communities, who or what holds power there, and who is marginalized, ignored, or disempowered. It urges us to consider the historical, political, economic, religious, and social or cultural forces that shape our local community. Our work today and next Sunday includes questions about stories, or narratives. This practice invites us to consider the different stories that are told about a single place or group of people. This can be helpful and illuminating for doing community-based ministry and mission. As I begin my community-oriented role with local youth, I am making a community power analysis map for the greater Batavia and Genesee community. To do this map project well, I need your help! Firstly, I need your help because different perspectives bring different stories. Secondly, I need your help because I'm new to town and can benefit from your local experiences and knowledge. I think that this project will help me lead faithfully in ministry with you and the youth of this community. I aim to complete the project by the end of December and will report back to you in the new year. Before we continue, I must give proper credit to the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries for many of the questions we will use and for teaching me about community mapping.

II. We are getting to the interactive part of this activity. A community power map involves a bunch of questions. I am going to share seven of them with you, but if you would like the detailed list, you can ask me anytime. Each of you will receive a green paper with the seven questions; this is for you to keep. In groups of three to four people, please pick one question to discuss. Please take care to include everyone, including children, in your group discussion. Let's read the questions together:

- a. Narratives: What is the dominant story in our local community? Are there competing narratives here?
- b. Power: Who or what is powerful in Batavia and Genesee County? Who and/or what institutions hold power in our local community?
- c. Margins: Who are in the margins—far from the centers of power? What issues of injustice are not being addressed adequately?
- d. Assets: What are the assets of the community? What does Batavia/Genesee have to offer?
- e. Young people: Where are youth and children in the community? What power do they [you] hold? What are their [your] strengths? What issues of injustice impact them [you]?
- f. Church: What role, if any, does First Presbyterian Church play in the community? Where would you locate our church? With the powerful? With those in the margins?

g. God's work: Where do you see God's work of justice and peace breaking in? What is especially beautiful and sacred in our local community?

III. [Few minutes to talk in groups, then wrap up]

IV. After worship, I invite you to take a few minutes to put some responses into writing or drawing. You can use a notecard and hand it to me or a greeter, or you can write or draw on the posters on the walls. Additionally, you may take the green paper home with you and respond to the questions by next Sunday. You may even want to solicit answers from people in your family or social circle. Any of you can help, no matter your age, if you are a longtime church member or here for the first time.

V. [Conclude by thanking everyone for participating and thanking my helpers.]

Prayer:

God of Discovery, help us find the strength to excavate the stories of our lives and of the world around us. Let us lean on one another as we brush them off, hold them up to the light, and find their meaning and use. May our roots nourish us, so that we might grow abundantly and flower into blessings for one another and the world. Amen.