

“Our World in Stories: Stories Bind Us Together”
1 Corinthians 12:1-11

We will begin again with a story! This one comes from Mark Yaconelli as he was hosting a storytelling event. “The theme was Wilderness Tales. Tresa was a high school counselor and one of the six storytellers presenting at the upcoming Hearth. She needed help crafting her story about a cross-country canoe trip. The story began on the Oregon coast where she had lived with her fiancé for two years. He wanted her to meet his parents before the wedding. The parents lived in Michigan. An avid outdoorsman, her fiancé decided they should travel to Michigan by canoe. For the next hour I listened as she described, in excruciating detail, the landscapes, weather patterns, flora and fauna along the canoe trip. Waterfalls flowing into the Columbia River. Churning rapids of the Missouri. Birds. Sunsets. A lightning storm outside of Chicago. Her story was hardly a ‘story.’ Nothing happened. Just one postcard picture after another. I waited.

They leave Chicago and make their way into the interior of Michigan. They paddle up to her future -in-laws’ home. She meets the parents. They have a party. The End. I was bored, restless. I felt as if I had been forced to watch someone’s vacation videos. Grasping, I asked, ‘So then you got married?’

‘Well, no.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, it was because of the hamburger. I wanted a hamburger, and he said, ‘No.’

Suddenly, I was interested. ‘Tell me about the hamburger.’

Bit by bit, with patience and gentle questions, I heard the story hiding behind the story. She came from a long line of abusive relationships. Her grandfather beat her grandmother. Her father beat her mother. As a young adult she found herself in a similarly volatile relationship. She was actually terrified of canoeing to Michigan, did not want to go, but she was afraid to contradict her partner. Forced to paddle for hours upon hours, she became physically strong for the first time in her life. Canoeing through rain, thunder, and windstorms, she began to face her fears and develop some psychological strength. When they entered the headwaters of the Mississippi River, a local told them to stop at a riverside restaurant for the best hamburger in the region.

It was at that point she did something she had never seen a woman in her family do— she asked a man for something she desired. ‘I want to stop and get one of those hamburgers.’ Her fiancé initially agreed, but when the riverbank restaurant came into view, he changed his mind and they continued down river. ‘It was at that point I made a decision that I would leave this man, no matter what it took, and start my life over.’

Anticipating the night Tresa would tell her story, she asked her adult children to fly home to hear it. Her story opened like this: 'There were three rules passed down from the women in my family. One, a man will always be the captain of your life. Two, your needs will always be subordinate to his needs. Three, don't rock the boat.' Her story went from a pastoral picture book to the inspiring testimony of a woman who found her strength and freedom amid the heartbreaking wilderness of generational abuse."

You can imagine the deep connections that were made that evening between that woman and her children as such stories bind us together in a way that is not possible otherwise. Knowing the deep stories of others brings a sense of wholeness and connection among people. We are all unique in our own lives and thus we often feel separate from others and even from God. By sharing our stories, we allow others to enter into our own being. Our stories bridge the gaps and divisive that exist among us.

The Apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, drew on the same power of deep connection to heal divisions in a fractured community. The people in the churches in Corinth were competing and showing off their social skills. This was the way the world behaved around them. Competition was the norm of the day in that city. The people of Corinth were always in competition with the people of Rome. They wanted their city to rival the beauty and culture of Rome. They became a society that valued material wealth over relationships and saw the oppressive values of the Empire as the norm for daily life and their economic and political systems. Yet, by the grace of God, the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ took hold in that city and a community of believers was formed. They struggled over time between the sway of their cultural values and the call of Christ on their lives to follow the values of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. The Apostle Paul challenged the Corinthian Christians to follow the way of Jesus and forget about the ways of the Empire. The way of Christ for Paul was the way of service and not competition. The imperial cult of Rome and Corinth were promising superiority and success, while faith in Christ seemed to be calling them to service and asceticism/self-denial. What they were called to live by were the values of faith that invited them to serve the world without being entrapped by its false claims of success and peace.

The way the social and cultural pressures manifested themselves in the life of the church in Corinth was also through the divisions they had internally. They had factions of different leaders. There were those who had their allegiance to Paul; those who had their allegiance to Apollos; those who followed Peter and those who followed Christ. Each group believed themselves to be better than the other groups and their gifts were better than the gifts of the other. And the central debate was around the spiritual gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge. They had tests of who was right and who was wrong based on the spiritual gifts of each group. That is why Paul felt it was important to write a letter to the Corinthians to help them return to their main focus of using their gifts for service. All the gifts that they had were not goals in and of themselves. The message of Paul to them was to remind them of the overarching story of Jesus which bound them together. Let's listen to the scripture from 1 Corinthians 12:1-11:

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. ³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Paul used a similar argument with another church that was conflicted. This was the church in Rome where people were fighting amongst themselves and looking at their differences as barriers to connection and to sharing in leadership.

Romans 12:4-8

³For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your^[a] faith; ⁷if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead,¹ do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

In both cases, Paul was appealing to something deeper in these communities. He was calling them back to the common story they share in Jesus. Differences and diversity were seen as important parts of the ministry because the overarching story brought people to a common core. In fact, the differences were to be celebrated for the sake of the enrichment of the body of Christ. In this way, Paul was inviting people to look at their stories as part of the larger story.

I know from experience that whenever I have had the honor of accompanying people to discover their spiritual gifts, telling stories about one’s life is essential. People often say, “I don’t know what my gifts are for ministry.” But when they start sharing their life stories, we often discover so many treasures that could be shared. The gifts are not about skills or qualifications. They are usually found in how God has worked in people’s lives.

So telling our stories and listening to the stories of others can bring us closer to each other. Mark Yaconelli has put this idea into practice in his community by bringing people

together for a program called the Hearth. This started in a pub where people were invited to share their authentic stories, but today it is a vibrant program that draws hundreds of people together to bring wholeness to their community. Here is a video of people sharing together about the power of this storytelling project:

<https://youtu.be/BmlUK9DprQI>

How have authentic stories changed your life, your family's life, or your community's life?
Amen.