

“Our World in Stories: Listening to Stories”
Genesis 16

We all have the need to be heard. Yet, we live in a noisy world and our ordinary stories often get crowded out. So when we listen to other people’s stories, we open the door to deeper connections and to great healing. Here is an example of an ordinary story that is so powerful for both the listener and the teller. This comes from a storytelling event hosted by Mark Yaconelli’s community, the Hearth. The theme was “Tales from Childhood.” A young father reaches out to Mark in an email saying, “I have a story that needs to be told. I don’t want to tell it. But I need to tell it.” Mark knew Sean as a very successful baseball trainer and coach. When they meet, Mark sees the stress around Sean’s eyes and feels the tension in his shoulders. “Sean begins his story, ‘My earliest memory of my mother is listening to her sing. I would sit on her lap by the radiator, and she would hold me and rock me in a chair and sing to me in Spanish...’ Mark was raised in New York City, his mother Puerto Rican, his father Irish...His father served as a firefighter, and his mother cleaned the local church at night. A memory comes to him, ‘Sometimes mom would take all of us kids to the church with her to clean. I loved those nights. We felt special. Mom would unlock the doors and we would have the whole sanctuary to ourselves. Mom would make a game, tell all of us to run up and down the pews and see how much paper we could collect. Sometimes we could find loose change. It was like a treasure hunt. Then she’d wax the floors, and we’d put rags on our feet and skate up and down the aisles, polishing. We loved it...I didn’t realize until my older sister told me years later that mom cleaned the church because we were poor. She cleaned the church so that we could go to the Catholic school for free...I’m in sixth grade, and notice this boy, this friend of mine, passing out birthday invitations. I had known this kid since I was five. We played on the same baseball team. I had been to every one of his birthday parties since we were little. I see him hand out invitations to most of the other boys in our class, but not to me. So I go up to him and say, ‘Hey, Nick, where’s my birthday invitation?’ Nick says, ‘I don’t have one. You’re not invited.’ I don’t understand. So I ask him, ‘Why? Everyone else is invited. Why not me?’ And he says, ‘You’re a spic. I don’t want spics at my party.’

I had never heard this word. I had no idea what it meant. So I just said, ‘No, I’m not.’ By now some of the other boys have gathered around, and Nick starts laughing and says, ‘Listen, your mother cleans the church, right? She’s Puerto Rican. Puerto Ricans clean up garbage. Puerto Ricans are spics.’ Sean feels the insult to his mother. The intimacy and fun he felt as the family cleaned the sanctuary is suddenly replaced with shame. Without thinking, he cocks his fist and slams Nick in the face. He is expelled from school for a week. His mother is furious...When they get home, she asks why he would do such a stupid thing. He tells her...My mother’s face changed immediately, but when she heard what happened, she got quiet and had this really scared look in her eyes...And then she said, ‘When you go back to school you need to tell Nick and the other boys that you are Spanish. Tell them your mother is from Spain, not Puerto Rico.’ He is shaken by the fear he senses in his mother and is confused by her instructions. Why lie about his identity? Is it dangerous to be Puerto Rican?...Six years later, Sean leaves home. When asked about his racial identity he says he’s Spanish, but he learns quickly that being Spanish

does not protect him from the negative racial stereotypes some people hold toward Hispanics. So in early adulthood, he starts wearing Italiana T-shirts. He learns a few Italian phrases and slang words...He displays posters of Italy in his room...I never actually told anyone I was Italian, I just made a lot of references to Italy. And when someone would ask me about my ethnic heritage, I would just say an Italian phrase and folks would say, 'Okay, so you're Italian,' and I wouldn't correct them."

Despite his fears of rejection, the day finally comes when he shares his story with an audience from his community, he finished his story with these words, "So I needed to tell this story to you. I need to stop hiding. I need to say to you, and to myself, something I've been terrified to admit ever since that incident in sixth grade: My name is Sean Gallagher. And I am Puerto Rican."

Imagine the pain of holding on to that shame for all those years! Also imagine the relief and healing that took place when Sean was finally able to tell his story to a group of people who welcomed his story and listened to his pain!

In today's Bible story we hear about a woman who was not heard by her owners or by anyone around her. Hagar was the slave girl of Abraham and Sarah. No one cared to hear her story or to know about her pain. When Sarah could not bear a child for Abraham, Hagar was used for carrying Abraham's child. But something interesting happens. God hears Hagar's voice and her story. Let's listen to a part of her story in Genesis 16:

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, ²and Sarai said to Abram, 'You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³So, after Abram had lived for ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. ⁴He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. ⁵Then Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!' ⁶But Abram said to Sarai, 'Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her. ⁷The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And he said, 'Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?' She said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.' ⁹The angel of the LORD said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit to her.' ¹⁰The angel of the LORD also said to her, 'I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.' ¹¹And the angel of the LORD said to her,

'Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;
you shall call him Ishmael,
for the LORD has given heed to your affliction.

¹²He shall be a wild ass of a man,
with his hand against everyone,

and everyone's hand against him;
and he shall live at odds with all his kin.'

¹³ So she named the LORD who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi'; for she said, 'Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?' ¹⁴ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵ Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Because God listened to Hagar's painful story, her story became important to the whole story of the people of God. Her son's name was to be Ishmael, meaning "God will Hear." The life of an Egyptian slave girl could not get any more ordinary. Most people would not have even given her the time of day. Hagar had no say over her body, her son, or any aspect of her life. Consider for a moment the lessons we can learn from her story. Let's take a few moments to do that together. Who are the Hagers of our lives today?

Hagar's story mattered to God. It became an important part of the retelling of the story of the people of God. Her story challenged the fears of scarcity, cruelty, sexual exploitation, and slavery.

I would like to invite us today to consider the name of Hagar's son as a rallying cry for our time to listen to the stories of others, especially the ordinary stories of suffering or abuse. Let the name "Ishmael"/"God Will Hear" be an inspiration for you to listen to such stories. We are going to end with a breath prayer. This breath prayer comes from an image used by W. A. Mathieu.

Breathing in: Make an altar . . .
Breathing out: of my ears.
Amen.