

Telling the Story

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Uncle Raymond has something important to say.

He is the sweetest of the characters in the movie *Moonstruck* and he is sitting with the family at the dinner table. To introduce what he wants to say he says, “I never told you this before because it’s not really a story.”

Uncle Raymond’s words make complete sense; somehow we know that *story* is what we want to *tell*. To say “it’s a story” has little to do with whether it is fact or fiction. To say “it’s a story” is to say it has action and character, connection and consequence and, most of all, it *makes meaning*. To say “it’s a story” is to say “it wants to be told.”

The first time I heard a preacher “tell” rather than “read” the Gospel lesson, I was impressed. I was so impressed that I knew “telling” was something I could never do. Yet I relished the listening (and every teller needs listeners). So the following year, I signed up for a workshop of the Network of Biblical Storytellers (www.nbsint.org). I knew four days of listening would stir my spirit. And it did! But during the course of those four days I also learned to tell Luke’s Gospel story of Mary and Martha—five verses, word-for-word, from memory. I learned to draw the story’s action on paper, to look for mnemonic devices and to make memorable connections. I learned to say aloud what I remembered. Those verses were the first things I had memorized since “Whose woods these are, I think I know...” in fifth grade and “We should so fear and love God that...” in seventh grade.

As it happened, Luke’s story of Mary and Martha was the Gospel lesson for the following Sunday. (Good planning, NBS!) I decided to “tell” that Gospel lesson in worship that week. As I told it, I discovered that I was face-to-face with the people gathered for worship in a way that drew us together. We became a “community of listeners.” This felt different from being a “community of simultaneous readers.” Then and there, I committed to learning and telling the Gospel lessons each week.

The first few weeks that I told the Gospel instead of reading it, both the congregation and I were anxious. I could see that some people were reading the printed words as they listened, probably so that they could help me if I forgot a line. But gradually we adjusted to the change. I grew more comfortable as I stood to tell, and the congregation grew more attentive as it stood to listen.

That was eight years ago and now I cannot remember how to work on a sermon if I am not also in the process of learning the Gospel text by heart. It has become a single process: learning the text and reflecting on it in the context of community and current events. Learning the text by heart means carrying it in my consciousness while going about the rest of the tasks of the week. The text is there, with its questions and its claims, in the grocery store, preparing a confirmation lesson, on the road, attending a committee meeting, playing with grandchildren, washing laundry, visiting people in the hospital—wherever I go. The text is *everywhere* when it is being

learned. For me, “by heart” expresses this better than “memorizing.” Memory carries important data but it is the heart that gives the steady beat and the exciting flutters to the flow of life.

The bad news in all this is that I always preach on the Gospel because that is the text I learn. The good news is that I find connections with the rest of the lectionary texts that I would have missed if I hadn’t learned the Gospel by heart.

I use the word “tell” to describe what I do because I think telling is different from performing. Telling happens from the perspective of a narrator even when the narrator quotes a character in the story. Telling is an oral version of pointing at third persons in order to show what those third persons see and do and in order to hear what they say. Performing adds the perspectives and the expressions (and sometimes even the outfits) of characters in the story to the narration of the text. I don’t have the skills to do that. But I love to “tell” the story. (I know—there’s a song.)

Even “telling” requires decisions about expression. What to emphasize? What to soften? These same questions are answered as we read a text, but I find that I pay more attention to them when preparing to tell the Gospel by heart. I can read and study the text silently but I can’t learn to tell the text unless I practice out loud. The meanings of words spoken aloud are nuanced by expression.

Don Juel, of blessed memory, taught me how much of the meaning of the text is made by the expressions of the one who speaks the words aloud. One of his examples was Mark 15:39—“Sure! this man was God’s son!” (“sure!” with an expression of positive certainty) and “Sure! this man was God’s son!” (“sure!” with skeptical irony). The printed words look the same; expression makes all the difference.

As I imagine the telling of the Gospel that preceded the written text, I imagine *shared* telling—that many of the people who gathered for worship remembered the Gospel stories so that one would begin to tell, and then another would continue the story, and then another and another—a sort of serial telling. I wonder how shared telling could happen in one of our worship services and how that would affect listening.

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One notable characteristic of Mark’s Gospel is the frequency of the word “immediately.” It appears dozens of times. Was Jesus always in a hurry? To me, the word “immediately” is a hurry-up word.

But as I read the Gospel out loud this week—thinking about telling this Gospel and about what it means to tell it—the word “immediately” showed a different side—not meaning *with* a rush but meaning *without* a “mediate.” To be im-mediate is to be without medium, without “something in between.” The Spirit “immediately” drives Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. There is nothing between the voice from heaven and the Spirit’s driving. No quick lunch.

No rushing home to pack a few things. Nothing between that revelatory voice, “You are my beloved...” and that steering Spirit.

Im-mediate is how it feels to tell the Gospel.

The Gospel reader turns eyes to the words printed on the page in order to articulate them. The page is between the one who reads aloud and those who listen—most of whom also keep their eyes focused on the print. The Gospel teller’s eyes are free to look in listeners’ faces while articulating the story by heart. Listeners are free to look up from the page, to see the teller and to see each other. All are im-mediate together. As the story takes shape among us, we all become “listeners.” We are engaged by the Gospel story. Our attention hones in, our curiosity is piqued and we are open for what this story does here and now, among us. Does it sound grandiose to say the Gospel story told-by-heart is heard-by-heart, too?

I am learning that listening and telling are deeper and more central to humans than reading and studying. I am learning this from our grandchildren. To be sure, they love it when we read to them. They like to point at pictures and spell out words. But something more profound seems to happen when there are no books or pictures—when it’s just us, usually in the dark at bedtime, and they say, “Tell me a story.” They are listening with their ears, and also with their hearts and their minds and their imaginations. Their attention is riveted to the telling. We know this because their energetic little selves are stilled by the act of listening. They may interrupt with a question but if I pause to think for too long, they say, “Keep on!” And they do not want the story to end.

The writer of the Gospel according to Mark doesn’t seem to want the Gospel

story to end either. That might be why it doesn’t end so much as it trails off, “for they were afraid...” and the question “Are you afraid?” hangs in the air, prompting the story to continue.

There is another aspect of the experience of telling the Gospel.

Forty years ago, a gymnastics team from the USSR came to the United States on an exhibition tour. In an interview with one of the athletes, a journalist asked, “Why do you study so much? You are a gymnast; do you also want to be a scholar?” She answered, “I must know my lessons. I would fear to be called to the blackboard and have nothing to say. I would fear my silence.”

There is a moment when I fear my silence. The moment comes just before we sing the Gospel acclamation. It’s the moment when my left brain asks my right brain: “Hey! Did you practice enough?” and my right brain answers, “I don’t know!”

The possibility that I will not remember the text exists side-by-side with the possibility that I will remember it and be able to tell it. Maybe it is our awareness of those two possibilities *together* that engages listeners and teller im-mediate, with nothing between.

Maybe it is because of such an awareness that listeners’ expressions are attentive, alert, and even surprised as the Gospel story begins to be told. It is certainly because of that awareness that the same expressions are on the teller’s face along with one more: plain *relief* when there is not empty silence caused by empty memory.

There are silences and fears in Mark’s Gospel story, too, but they are neither empty silences to be avoided nor self-focused fears of embarrassment. Mark’s silences are full of wonder (4:39), sometimes even commanded by Jesus (1:44, 5:43, 8:26). Mark’s fears are full of perplexity and danger (9:32, 16:8). These are silences and fears to be explored.