

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Lent 2014
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Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Is this not the Christ?

Here's a story to make you stop and wonder. A man speaks in riddles to a woman he shouldn't be talking to in the first place. She tells him a lie which turns out to be true, and he tells her the story of her own life, which changes the story of her life. Fantastic!

Preposterous, perhaps.

The story of the woman of Sychar and Jesus at the well is one of those passages in scripture that seems to be infinitely rich. It has interesting things to tell us about the keeping and breaking of traditions and taboos, about the relationships between women and men, about the source and nature of salvation – there are many riches to be mined in this story of a thirsty teacher, his uncomprehending students, and this sassy unnamed woman.

Today, though, I want to talk about this woman's story.

I am very interested in the power of storytelling to transform people's lives and the world. Once upon a time back when I was in seminary, I even wrote a musical play in which the climax of the play is accomplished when one character tells another a version of that second character's own story in a way that changes him. Writing that play kept me very attentive to the question of whether and where transformative power can truly lie in personal story.

Right now I am in the middle of a big spring-cleaning type purge of my house, and as I sort through what to keep and what to bring to the St. James' Thrift Shop, I am reminded again that I am a person who preserves my own story in physical objects. There's hardly a thing in my house that I can't tell you a story about – where it came from or some use it's been put to or what its potential use may be – and I notice that I have a hard time getting rid of anything that has a story. The stories about where things came from are the history of my friendships, travels and vocation. The stories about what the objects have done are the history of my own activities. And the stories about what use things are being saved for (these are the most irritating to my family, who keep their stories in different ways, and would just as soon be free from all the junk that follows me around) are stories about my hopes.

Every time I give away something I had been intending to use someday, I feel like I'm giving up a little bit of hope; a little bit of potential for something I might yet be. Others, not naming any names, see throwing away all that good and useful stuff as a way to make life simpler, less cluttered, and therefore much better. And, of course, no amount of explaining on my part will persuade anyone else that any of it is vital to my life, because, as I said, we all keep our stories in our own ways. It's only because I'm pretty stubborn that I still have any of that stuff.

So I am keenly interested the power of personal story, and in a relatively new branch of theology called narrative theology, which looks to understand the transformative power of remembering and retelling story.

We don't get to hear much of the unnamed woman from Sychar's story in John's telling, and what we do hear is pretty puzzling.

The situation is quite odd. It was strictly forbidden to speak so much as a word to anyone of the opposite sex who wasn't a member of your family in those days, much less have a conversation. And there was a similarly strict ban on Jews conversing with non-Jews except for the most perfunctory of business transactions. And yet they both, Jesus and this woman, find one another interesting enough to break those strictures and have a conversation.

And what a conversation. Near the beginning, when the woman tells Jesus that she has no husband, Jesus tells her "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

Later, Jesus also tells her directly that he is Messiah, but at the point when she leaves her water jar behind to tell everyone she knows about her strange encounter with Jesus. Her lead story is not, "I met a man who says he is the Messiah." Instead, what she first says is, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did."

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Now the woman's marital status and history is certainly not everything she ever did – perhaps Jesus told her much more that John has not seen fit to report to us. The remarkable thing, though, whatever else Jesus may have told her, is that he told her a difficult truth about her life – the kind of secret that, when exposed, ought to have made her squirm, and instead she hears it as good news.

We all have parts of our lives that we don't share publicly. Imagine if you met a stranger, say at the grocery store, and she or he started telling you about some part of your life that you tried to keep private. Would you be elated? Would you leave your grocery cart in the aisles and run home to tell everyone?

Yet there is something about what Jesus tells here that changes her.

My theory is that it is the way he tells her story that has the power to transform. For Jesus, the point of the story seems to be that she is telling the truth. He does not blame her, he does not call her marital history sinful or shameful, he calls her a truth-teller. And in that moment she becomes one.

It's astounding how much power those kind of stories have. I have a friend from seminary who told me that when he first met with the Bishop about the possibility of being ordained, the Bishop at one point made a statement that was really a question – he

said, “You don’t seem to me to be the promiscuous type.” And my friend said that in assenting to that statement, he felt it becoming cemented in his person – that whatever promiscuity there may have been in his nature was pinned down, was caged by those words, and if it had not been entirely true before, it was certainly true now.

These stories can even have the power to raise the dead.

My grandmother was a rather difficult woman. That’s not true. My grandmother was a very difficult woman. This is not Grandma Thelma, the grandmother with the Apple Cake recipe that I brought to the first “Luck of the Pot” potluck, this is my maternal grandmother Louise (It’s true – my grandmothers’ names were Thelma and Louise).

Grandma Louise was cantankerous, demanding, and did not ever seem to be confident of her own existence unless she was getting attention from someone else. She had her good points as well – she was brilliant and creative and often very generous, but she was hard to be around. She was particularly tough on children, and I remember my childhood visits to her house as seeming eternal.

When she died, we had a small graveside service for her, and after saying a few words about how difficult it is to say goodbye to someone about whom you have mixed feelings, everyone had a chance to share a story about her, much as you all will have a chance to share stories in a minute or two.

My nephew Stephen, who was not quite nine at the time, startled everyone when he said that the thing he would remember most about his great-grandmother is that she always wanted everyone to be happy. My siblings and I looked at each other with some surprise, since this was probably the exact opposite of our experience of Grandma. Did he have secret knowledge of her? Had she been kind to him when our backs were turned? As Stephen continued to talk, though, it became clear that he did not have any unique experiences of Grandma – instead, he had understood her surly, “Valerie, will you make that child stop crying!” as a desire for everyone to be happy. And in his telling, my Grandmother was transformed, I believe, from a cranky old woman into a person who truly wanted everyone to be happy.

The stories we tell can change people. The stories we tell can even change history. Just as my grandmother was transformed by my nephew’s retelling of her life, the stories that we tell about the history of this community as a part of the transition process will reshape the past of this place into something that can drag us down and divide, or give strength and hope for a new and as yet mysterious future together.

And our stories matter most to our children. In Stephen Sondheim’s *Into the Woods* (a far better musical than the one that I wrote in seminary), near the end, the few surviving characters from many of our favorite fairy tales end up huddling together after a marauding giant destroys most of the people and things they hold dear, first in fear, then united to defeat a common enemy, then in fear once again for an uncertain future. In the midst of so much death and destruction, the voice of one of the characters comes from

beyond the grave to tell her husband to tell their infant child the story of what happened, and the story itself will help him to grow up. And as he begins to tell the story another character sings,

Careful the things you say,
Children will listen.
Careful the things you do,
Children will see.
And learn.

Children may not obey,
But children will listen.
Children will look to you
For which way to turn,
To learn what to be.

Careful before you say,
"Listen to me."
Children will listen.

Be mindful of the power our stories have to transform one another. Seek the miraculous, the kindly, the honest, the just in one another, and tell what we see. The story Jesus came to tell, that we are not condemned by God, but are rather God's beloved children has the power still to change us. You are a beloved child of God. You are honest, wise, and beautiful. Your story can transform the world.

Amen.