

“Story”

John 1:1-14

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Prayer for Understanding Almighty God your word is a fountain of truth, a wellspring of love and living water for our souls. Helps us to drink deeply of your living, quenching word. Amen

A blessing of being a pastor is that I get to hear stories from many of you. It is a great honor to hear your stories and a wonderful gift you share with me. Pastor David Butler, my spiritual director, believes that the primary role of a pastor is to be a story keeper. To listen to your story, to listen to the stories of the Bible, and to listen to the unfolding stories of the Holy Spirit in the world today. A faithful sermon points out where these stories overlap, how God is forgiving, healing, transforming, redeeming, and resurrecting. Many times, when someone shares a portion of their story, they are transformed with insights. Friends, family, pastors, and counselors often help us by reminding us of our stories and asking questions about our stories. Usually, I do not use absolutes. However, I cannot think of a single thing a church does that is not the result of a story. Some of the things that happen at a church seem peculiar if one does not know the story behind it. One of the tasks of the pastor is to keep telling the stories behind what we do as a church.

David Butler also believes a primary role of a pastor is to be a lead listener. Listening to each of you, listening to God, and listening to current events. A great challenge of being a pastor is often when a decision is being made and there is not enough time to share all of these stories; so, a pastor strives to capture the essence of each perspective and share each perspective, then prayerfully we make decisions. Our decisions create new stories. We share these stories. Listen to these stories. Repeating the process over and over striving to grow in love.

All of us are called to constantly remind each other that we are a beloved member of the story of God. Our story is interwoven with God's story, with unbreakable threads of love. We are tempted to believe lies such as God abandons us, God judges us, God is disappointed in us, that we will not be perfected and glorious by God's grace. We are tempted to believe the lie that God does not love us. As a church, we are called to keep telling the story of God's love for one another and the world.

The Bible is story after story of people who experienced every sort of tragedy. Every story evolves to a point where God's steadfast, everlasting love restores all they lost and gives them more than they dreamed.

The Bible is story after story of people who have been excluded, pushed out, forgotten, belittled, oppressed, and outcast. God's steadfast, everlasting love brings everyone home to harmonious, joyful community.

The Bible is story after story of sinful, hateful, murdering people who thought they were beyond the reach of God's grace. Life became so messy for them that they started believing a lie that the tapestry of God's love for them was severed, yet God's love for us can never be broken. Absolutely nothing, absolutely no one, can separate us from God's steadfast everlasting love.

The reckless, wild, and sinful prodigal child was welcomed home with a loving embrace and a huge celebration. The despised, foreigner, the Samaritan woman, who tried everything to have a healthy marriage yet kept getting divorced, experienced God's love by drinking living water that united her entire village with each other and united those Samaritans with Jews, Jesus, and his followers. They ate together. They shared stories. They listened to each other. Peter was devastated after his impulsive, fiery temper caused him to deny and betray Jesus something he swore he would never do, yet Jesus' love for him never wavered, never diminished. Jesus trusted him to be a key storyteller of God's love upon which the church would grow and spread around the world.

The gospel of John expresses the story of God's love with poetry and metaphor. The Word, Logos, the Story of God's love, Jesus, who gives life and light to all came into the world, comes into our story. **John 1:14 MSG “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”** We are all called to serve like John to be witnesses, storytellers of God's love for all.

Steven James writes in his book *The Story*, “I am a story hoping to unfold as my future meets my past. I am a tale waiting to be told with the right words, now, at last.” Steven continues, “there's a Jewish saying: “God created people because God loves stories.” I think that has a lot of truth to it. But not only does God love stories, God loves the people whose stories are being told moment by moment across the globe. And I am amazed that the story of my choices, mistakes, regrets, the story of my life matters to God.”

Steven continues, “What makes us unique is not so much our height or shape or fingerprints or eye color but our histories, our stories. Day by day, our lives are woven into a giant narrative, and every moment we become more

and more the story of who we are. We are our stories. And we only connect with other people when we know their stories. The more intimate we are, the more our stories intertwine. That is one reason losing someone we love is so painful — because it rips an interwoven, deeply threaded, story apart into two, until we are rewoven together in heaven.”

Steven continues, “I think about all the billions of stories swirling around each other on this planet, touching, deepening, unfurling, unraveling. And each one of those stories, each one of those people, mattered so much to the Author of Life that Jesus left heaven and began the dreadful trek to the cross. The original script called for unity and harmony, but our first parents chose to derail the story of humanity into a graveyard. ‘Okay,’ said the Creator. ‘Then I will tell a new story. One that includes a detour through an empty tomb.’ But to make that tale come true, God had to enter our story.”

When Jesus was born, the Word of God became flesh, enmeshed in our story. The storyteller entered the tale. The author stepped onto the page. The poet whose very words had written the cosmos became part of the text of this world. Like the harmony and the melody living together in the same song, Jesus was divinity and humanity living together in the same heart. Jesus was the Word of God, God’s story, in the flesh.”

Steven continues, “I went looking for God first, I searched through the tomes of church history, the volumes of philosophy, and the writings of the great and holy men and women...but God was not in the books. Then I walked the hills and listened to the creek and learned the ways of the stars and the seasons...but God was not in the wilds. Then I looked inside myself and my own knowings, to my will and my reason and my mind’s discernment...but God was not in my heart. Then I met Jesus who told me who I was and who whispered to my spirit the truths of my soul and told me stories that echoed with the longings of my heart, and God was in Jesus’ stories. Then I saw that God had been in the books and the forests all along. For I discovered God was in my heart, in my story all along. When Jesus came to earth, he brought along the folktales of heaven. Jesus did not lecture like a professor but told fables like a poet, weaving tales of another world into the fabric of human lives.

Jesus told stories because he knew humans are rarely interested in truth unless it is wrapped in a story. Jesus taught through stories, used stories to explain God to his detractors, and helped people with eternal hungers get a foretaste of heaven through parables. In fact, most of the time, storytelling was the only way Jesus taught.

Most of Jesus’ stories were metaphors of heaven. Jesus described the kingdom of heaven in terms of shepherds who would risk their lives for their sheep, women who cannot find enough excuses to celebrate with their girlfriends, and fathers who party till dawn with their wayward sons.

In Jesus’ stories, kingdom dwellers are not just monks or mystics, priests or pastors, but jewelers, treasure hunters, bridesmaids, fishermen, farmers, business executives, outcasts, widows, prostitutes, and thieves.”

Steven continues, “I love how irreverent Jesus is in his stories. He compared himself to a chicken, the coming of God’s kingdom to a robber breaking into your house, God’s message of hope to an uncorked bottle of wine, and prayer to a nagging neighbor hungry for a sandwich at midnight. According to Jesus, we can learn about God’s kingdom from eccentric landowners, dishonest managers, fools who build condos on quicksand, demon possessed do-gooders, a warm loaf of bread, a field full of weeds, and a little kid tugging at your pants leg asking you to come outside and play. The kingdom of heaven unfurled from his lips in story after story after story.

When Christianity becomes something other than entering into and living out the story of God, it becomes something other than Christianity. Jesus, you untangle the mysteries, you whisper forth the parables, you live within the fairy world and light up the real world with your tragic magic and your heart full of blood. ah, sweet storyteller what will it take to slay the dragon and rescue your future bride? In your hands straw becomes gold, rags become linen, and thorns become roses— dew-covered, scarlet, and fragrant forever. Speak your tale into my heart so that my life might finally make sense.”

The gospel proclaims, **John 1:14 MSG “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”**

There is a story of a season of anger, resentment and fear between Jacob and Esau. It is a long story, a horrible story, of dysfunction, hostility, manipulation, stealing, lying, trickery, transference, jealousy, and deception that fueled an explosive hatred between the siblings. Both Jacob and Esau lead large tribes. Everything indicated that a war was imminent in the morning. That night the stories of God’s forgiving, healing, uniting peaceful love grasped Jacob and wrestled with Jacob until these stories transformed him. In the morning he was filled with stories of forgiveness, healing, reunion, and peace. The story of grace transformed him so much that he was given a new name Israel. Instead of a bloody war, Esau and Israel embraced in a reconciling hug. They affectionately kissed each other. Then there is a wonderful dialogue: “To see your smile is like seeing the smile of God.” Each of them experienced the story of God’s grace, the smile of God.

It is a historical story about a family, two opposing groups of people, who saw everything from polar opposites who were transformed by experiencing God's story enabling them to reconcile and began a new story of love. It is a foreshadow story telling how every family will be united, every opposing group will be reconciled, how God's grace will bring all people together.

Each brother let go, imagined life from the other's perspective and believed in the story of God's grace freely given to all people. Peace flows from listening and understanding each other's stories.

There are many lies out there that seek to divide and tear us apart. The truth is we are all an integral part of one story, one family. We are all siblings, all beloved children of God. Surely God will bring us all home where we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

We are all called to listen to each other's stories and the Biblical story, so we can perceive how they are interwoven. We are called to be story tellers. We are called to tell even the messy stories of despair, heartache, ugliness, fear, and hate. And to point out to each other the wonder of God's steadfast everlasting love and reconciliation of God's grace that will resurrect everyone and everything for eternity.

A statement can easily be misunderstood, distorted, argued, and divisive. Someone's story often expands our compassion, reveals mutual connections, unfolds positive transformations, presents hope and a path into a more loving community.

"Black lives matter" is a statement. This past June, I went to George Floyd Square with our youth. We were greeted by a black man who asked, "Why did you come here?" He wanted to hear our stories. He listened. He then asked if we would listen to his story. We listened to each other for almost an hour and yet it seemed like only a few minutes. I wish he was here to tell you, his story. When I was writing this sermon, I tried to write about his story, but I was unable to remember the details. At first, I was frustrated thinking I failed as a listener. However, later I realized that I did hear his story for I am inspired, transformed, and filled with hope. That morning, I was wondering how and when there will be peace, equality, and safety for all. That evening after hearing his story and listening to the youth share their plans, their future stories I believe we are on the road to peace, equality, and safety for all. The words that especially inspired me that this young black man said several times was "love is overcoming hate". He achieved success and chose to move back to that neighborhood even though he knew life would be more difficult there, because he loves the community, and he wants to be an agent of change a person who overcomes hate with love. He spends a good deal of his free time at George Floyd Square, listening and telling stories, inviting others to overcome hate with love. He believes that as a country we are at a tipping point where the love of a multitude of people will overcome the long history of hate, ushering in equality peace and safety for all. I also have listened to the story of my nephew, who recently became a Minneapolis Police Officer. He wants to protect and serve. He also wants to overcome hate with love. He recently married and hopes to have children. He is striving to lovingly create peace, equality, and safety in Minneapolis, so his children can enjoy abundant life with all people.

I could tell you stories for days about how I thought I had a pretty good understanding about someone, some statement, until I heard their story. I strive to not share an opinion about an issue until I have heard personal stories from at least two people from different perspectives. Sharing stories grows love, nurtures peace, and invites one into joyful community. We are all called to be listeners and story keepers.

Hear the story of select verses from the gospel of John replacing, "the Word" with "the Story". **John 1:1-14 MSG Select Verses. "The Story was first, the Story present to God, God present to the Story. The Story was God, in readiness for God from day one. Everything was created through Story; nothing—not one thing!—came into being without Story. What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light Story blazed out of the darkness; the darkness could not put the Story out. Every person entering Life the Story brings into Light. The Story was in the world, the world was there through the Story, and yet the world did not even notice. The Story came to God's own people, but they did not want the Story. But whoever did want the Story, who believed the Story. The Story made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves. The Story became flesh and blood and moved into our neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory. Amen**