

33 Years As A Biblical Storyteller

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Biblical storytelling has transformed my life as a scholar, a teacher, a pastor, and a person hungering for a deeper life with God. The seeds of it were planted and began to germinate during my two years at Union Theological Seminary, New York, where Tom Boomershine talked a lot about telling Biblical stories. For some reason I was never present when he told one, until he asked me to be present at the recording of part of Mark's passion narrative he made to go with his dissertation. I don't remember anymore whether that was in 1970 before I left for a year's study in Germany or after I got back. Probably the latter. I only remember listening to him read the episode of the death of Jesus and thinking to myself, "So, what's wrong with that?" And then he told the same story, and my experience of the Bible was transformed.

I know my first try at telling Biblical stories in Tom's way was during the summer of probably 1972. I decided to serve a church while I was finishing my dissertation. Summertime was a time to do something different in worship. So instead of a standard sermon, I used the sermon time to tell Mark's passion narrative, an episode per Sunday. After I told the episode, I invited responses from the congregation. I remember that, after telling the story of Jesus' death, ULY one man sat there for the longest time with a look of great consternation on his face. Finally he blurted out, "I thought Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!'" I don't remember what I made by way of a lame reply. But I have often reflected on that response. One thing very striking about it is that it was made by a man who clearly had heard the stories of Jesus' passion many times. Why had he not noticed before that those familiar words from the cross were not in Mark? Perhaps he had only heard the story told as one of Jesus "Seven Last Words," where a later "word" supplied the missing words. I wonder whether my isolating Mark's version of the story this particular Sunday was all there was to it. I wonder whether it was not also the fact that I didn't *read* Mark's story to the congregation but told it. My subsequent experience is that when people listen to a reading, unless it is in a storytelling style, their minds easily wander and they hear what they are accustomed to hearing. When I tell a story, I engage my listeners at an entirely different level. I recreate for them an experience, I draw them in. They are less inclined to drift, because whenever I sense that I am beginning to lose them, I do something to draw them back – often simply pause a bit till they look up to see what happened to the flow of words.

This little incident is a parade example of the importance of Biblical storytelling for my work as a teacher, scholar, pastor, and seeker after God. Learning, telling, and listening to Biblical stories being told is a way of becoming newly attentive to the version of a Biblical story as it is found in the canon rather than continually replaying the one found in my head. When I teach stories and press participants not to add motivations and other details that are not in the Bible text, the learners are often quite surprised at what the Biblical teller does not say. Sometimes they are resistant, as when I led a workshop at a church on the Birth Narratives and pressed tellers to leave the star out of Luke's story of

the shepherds. Discovering what the narrator does not say throws into relief what the teller does say. And that drives us to the question of how the teller might have said it. This exploration often begins in humorous play, like saying the Beloved Disciples' words "It's the Lord" in Jn 21:7 with a bored yawn. But it can lead to some significant exegetical grappling, like asking what the Fourth Evangelist, or his "editor" (not the best word for a storyteller remolding an earlier version of a story), hoped would happen to the listeners as they *heard* this story told or read aloud.

Learning to tell Biblical stories provided the context for training in exegesis for the nearly 25 years I taught at Lancaster Theological Seminary. It was the source of energy and excitement among my students. Whether it was introduction to exegesis using Greek tools or a course on John or Mark's Passion Narrative, the task of learning to tell the stories in powerful ways ignited student interest in discovering new possibilities for oral rendition and interpretation opened to them by particular methods of study. We explored the force of different translations and evaluated them in relation to the Greek text and what we could learn from Bauer or a Verbal Thread study, which in turn raised the question how to read Bauer and how to work with various concordances and upped the interest in learning the Greek alphabet and becoming adept at pronouncing the words in the Greek text. The discovery of variant readings in the Greek text of a story led to significant investment in learning about the Greek manuscript tradition and basic principles of text criticism. Since our basic exegesis course included learning to pronounce the Greek text in order to increase facility with the lexicon, concordance, and scholarly resources that included Greek words, but did not include the teaching of grammar and syntax so that students could translate entire sentences, I would occasionally employ an interlinear in order to help them appreciate the impact of the Greek word order, as in Mark 14:30. We raised questions of cultural norms of judgment and tried to track them down with the help of Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and monographs. We refined our appreciation for the plot of a story, both in terms of the development of the action and of what the teller allows the listeners to know and when she lets them know it, as in Jn 20:1-18.

Teaching New Testament beginning with the tasks and skills of oral communication of the Gospel through storytelling as the starting point and goal generated an atmosphere of vital interest among the most frightened, resistant, and disdainful students from the very beginning. My years of teaching were punctuated with students returning and telling me how important my courses were for their work as pastors. They were even still using their Greek. From time to time I was invited to be a guest teacher in a colleague's class or give a lecture or be a key note speaker for a meeting. Beginning with a Biblical story riveted attention, even among students skeptical of substitutes. Unfolding the story in the wake of being drawn into the story through a live teller recreating an experience through voice and body language made the discussion of the story of poignant significance. For it became immediately clear that the meaning of the story does not lie solely in what we think about it but in the experience of characters and action and aesthetic delight that it mediates and that lingers long after the story is finished.

My life as a teacher would surely have been a very different life if I had not been blessed with the friendship and partnership of Tom Boomershine. Once during my two short years at Union, Lou Martyn spoke of the joy of his partnership with Leander Keck. When I heard that, it stirred within my heart a desire for such a partnership myself. But I never at that point thought I would ever be given such a gift.

My real partnership with Tom began in the wake of a terrible event: an accident that nearly cost Tom his legs and did cost him a great deal of pain and suffering and years of rehabilitation. He was living in New York, I in Pennsylvania. It was about a three hour drive from my house to his. I was working part-time in a parish and finishing my dissertation. So for two years or so I drove to New York to spend a few days with Tom learning stories and dreaming up the Network of Biblical Storytellers. In the years that followed Tom was teaching at NYTS and forming what became the New York Chapter of the Network. When I began teaching part-time at Lancaster Seminary in 1974 I also began to teach Biblical storytelling.

But I was not good at forming a Pennsylvania Chapter of the Network. My chapter for seven years was the Maine Chapter, not because I formed it, but because I was given another wonderful gift of being the NYTS faculty resource person for the groups of pastors and lay persons Clay Woodbury gathered in the state of Maine to do an off-campus degree program through NYTS. These were extraordinarily creative years. I would fly to Maine three times a year to spend a few days with the group and learn one or more Bible stories as resources for community building, pastoral care, evangelism, worship, Christian education, and administration. We also began to play with oblique ways of telling the stories that emerged from our intimate knowledge of the oral story to which the text gave rise when we learned it as a group. One year we learned the Joseph cycle from Genesis, and for each story transposed it into a modern genre, like an obituary or a poem. This approach expanded over the years to include non-verbal forms, such as mimes and puppet shows. As time went on, under Tom's leadership, we moved into video and other electronic media. While this new dimension of imaginative interpretation has been very powerful, we remained committed to learning the story as it is mediated by the Biblical text and exploring in a responsible exegetical way. There is where the potential power lay that generated the new forms and media.

My experience with the people who came to constitute the Maine Chapter of the Network of Biblical Storytellers was as priceless as my partnership with Tom. These experiences were of a piece. I would not have been the resource person for Clay's programs unless Tom has asked me to do it and I had been available. My gratitude for Clay and Ken Parker and Gary Vencill and Rick Souza and Art Kuen and others remains deep in my heart. The Biblical stories and all we shared in relation to them formed us into a community. Even though I rarely see any of these friends anymore, they remain an indelible part of my communion of saints. And the Network continues to enjoy the legacy they left us. It was these members of the Maine Chapter who put on the first Festival Gathering in 1983, was it? The Maine Chapter continued to be one of the foundation stones of the Network for many years. This at first semi-annual and now annual event has been a crucial source of energy for the Network and its mission, in the

planning, execution, and fruitfulness of the event. Over the years good stewards of this inheritance have made it grow.

Early on in the formation I got the idea from somewhere or sending out a periodic newsletter called NOBS NEWS. It contained something substantive on Biblical storytelling, and then news of the different chapters of the Network that were coming into being. My former student and then friend and colleague Pam Moffit was a great encouragement for the newsletter. She also provided some important copy by working with her youth group in Groton, CT and Steve Rose to develop a telling of the entire Gospel of Mark in story and song which she took on the road. Pam later became our first executive director of the Network after we incorporated. It is still a source of deep grief to those of us who were on the Board of Directors during this period that we ran into great financial struggles that necessitated our ending of Pam's position and resulted in the loss of a deep friendship.

During the early 80's Ken Parker suggested we publish a *Journal of Biblical Storytelling*. Ken was a member of the Maine Chapter and went on to do a Ph.D. in Religious Communication at Kent State University in which he explored the effect of Biblical Storytelling on various listeners. Ken then became Professor of Evangelism at Eastern Baptist Seminary in Philadelphia for a few years, until it became clear that influential people would not continue to tolerate a storytelling approach to evangelism. Ken and I got together regularly during the time he was in Philadelphia. I helped him with several storytelling events he put on at Eastern Baptist. And I began to edit and produce *The Journal of Biblical Storytelling*. Our vision was to include a range of articles that included theoretical, exegetical, practical, and imaginative contributions. The idea was that this range of articles would foster an "inclusive hermeneutic" that informed many dimensions of Christian life, both academic and practical. I gathered and edited and also wrote copy and got it into publishable form on my computer. Pam Moffit and then later office staff, when we could afford a staff again, did the production work of assembling, stuffing, addressing, and stamping in preparation for mailing.

Over the years most of my work as a scholar and writer was focused on Biblical Storytelling. The exception has been my editing of the Biblical Interpretation section of *Homiletic*. I wrote several contributions for Discipleship Resources, one on preaching from John and the other on narrative preaching. I had the great privilege of being Tom's reader for his two articles on the ending of Mark that were published in the JBL. My small contribution to one of the articles merited my name being included with his as author. I made one presentation to the Bible and Modern Media group at the SBL meeting, result in an article in *Semeia*. Writing that article taught me what a fine editor can do. Lou Silberman went through my article with a fine-toothed comb, suggesting corrections in both style and substance. His question about how I understood John's use of the different Greek words for "love" led me to see how by interchanging these different words and in one case juxtaposing them (Jn 15:13) they define each other in John's Gospel. I have always been deeply grateful to Lou Silberman for his attentiveness to what I wrote, and often tried to follow his example in my own work as an editor.

In the early 90's I was invited to write a contribution to the Kaleidoscope series published by the United Church Press as an adult education resource. Once again, I learned some critical things about writing and editing from being part of that project. The idea was for Lancaster faculty members to take a course they were teaching and put it in the form of a book, video, and study guide that could be used anywhere. My first idea was to offer something on John's Passion Narrative. But the editor for the entire project thought I needed a better spread of stories, and stories that included women! The next two years were spent in an intense and very rewarding new engagement with the Fourth Gospel involving colleagues and students at the seminary who helped both with editing and video production. The result was *Pass It On: Hearing & Telling Stories From John*. A few years later I was invited by the United Church of Christ Board for Homeland Ministries to be a consultant and writer for a new interdenominational curriculum called *Bible Quest* that would center on Biblical stories. More recently my friend Ron Allen from Christian Seminary in Indianapolis invited me to help with a book on preaching "verse by verse" that would be textually focused but informed by the new appreciation of the Bible's literary character, including storytelling.

Seven years ago I moved from my farm and parishes and teaching position in Pennsylvania to begin a new life with Linda, who was then Linda Milavec, a colleague from the Network of Biblical Storytellers who was in the process of becoming an Episcopal priest. Four years ago I made the transition into the Episcopal priesthood myself and soon got a position as "Resident Theologian" at the Indian Hill Episcopal Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati. This is thanks to the foresight of the rector, Pat Merchant, who believes in adult education in the parish enough to pay someone a good salary to do it! My chief responsibility is with adults, who are people of extraordinarily great intellectual ability and accomplishment. And we have had a wonderful time wrestling with all sorts of theological issues, from the ordination of a gay bishop to the meaning and importance of the Trinity to studies of 1 and 2 Samuel and Revelation and the Gospel of Thomas to reading and discussing Walter Wink's *The Human Being*. But I would have remained somewhat isolated among the relatively small group of men and women who engage in these studies if it had not been for my Biblical storytelling. I have been given the opportunity to do a lot of storytelling in worship and a few times with children and youth. Storytelling has made me accessible to the whole congregation as a human being with a heart and a body as well as a head. Through my storytelling I have become a whole person to people with whom I otherwise have little contact.

I have become a different person through my Biblical storytelling. Through the storytelling I have developed my emotional and artistic sides to balance my inclination to approach everything with my mind. Biblical storytelling has made a deep and rich and nourishing place for my body and my heart and my senses and my love of beauty. Biblical storytelling has opened me to dimensions of the Bible stories that were not in view during the early and invaluable years of my training in Biblical scholarship. I still thirst for exegetical depth in my study of a story. I still am compulsive about uncovering ancient and unexpected meanings. But that exegetical depth has broadened beyond question of conceptual and cultural meaning to impinge on the riches of events and worlds experienced and relationships and metaphor and association. But ultimately the

contributions of the stories do not stop there. Ultimately they have transformed my relationship with God by changing it into a storied and experienced relationship that keeps growing and offering new twists and turns. My experience and the experience of other people are drawn into the Biblical story.

Early on in my learning and study and reflection on Jesus' conversation with Peter in Jn 21:15ff, for example, I became impressed with the fact that when people read and interpreted this story in church, the reading and interpretation often contained no hint of the drama that develops around Jesus' relationship with Peter. Vocabulary that weaves through the Gospel comes together in a critical mass of implication that has its most powerful effect when listeners have heard the entire Gospel and are able to put the whole thing together on their own when they hear this final conversation. If they don't put it together on their own, they will completely miss it. But the way the storyteller tells the story can at least suggest to listeners something of what came before. I was initially most intrigued by the Fourth Evangelist's explicit statement that Peter was "grieved" when Jesus asked him for the third time, "Do you love me?" As I played with Peter's words, I began to wonder, How did Peter feel in answering Jesus' first two questions? It struck me that Peter's last significant action in his relationship with Jesus prior to this conversation was to deny that he was a disciple of Jesus. Hypothesis: unless Peter was an incredibly shallow and amoral person, he probably came to this new, post-resurrection conversation burdened with that memory. And for Jesus to ask him whether he loved him was bound to trigger a deep sense of shame and remorse. I connected this experience of confrontation with times my mother would put the screws to me about some recent violence I had perpetrated against my younger brother Ed. So far, no stunning new dimension to my relationship with God through this story. Typical shame and forgiveness and call to new life scenario I had rehearsed Sunday after Sunday in the confession and absolution from the Evangelical and Reformed liturgy.

One afternoon, however, I was sitting in my office sharing this story with a student. Suddenly this student stopped and became reflective, and he began to tell me about a painful experience in his life. His father had left the family years before. One day he was walking along a street in Florida, and he saw his father walking towards him. He looked at his father and his father looked back at him. And his father walked right on past him without a hint of recognition. As this student took up the words of Jesus in John's story, he filled those words with pain and anger that I had never heard attributed to Jesus. That student opened for me an entirely new dimension of my relationship with God and God's relationship with me. It transformed my Christology and therefore my theology through the experience of hearing both my student's personal story and his telling of John's story. In my *Semeia* article I tried to show how that telling and experience and Christology and theology is true to John's story of Jesus. And it brings my failure to live up to my promises into powerful confrontation with God's anger, but not only with God's anger but with God's deep disappointment and with God's profound pain. Sometimes that angry and disappointed and pained God wears the face of someone in my life whom I dearly love. The story reveals in that human face the face of God enfleshed.

I must close these reflections. There are other stories to tell. Just one more favorite. I was they keynote presenter for the annual meeting of the Penn Central Conference of the United Church of Christ. We formed a team within the staff for that meeting to make John's story of the miraculous catch of fish (Jn 21:1-14) the theme of the entire meeting. I taught it to all the delegates over the course of about three different presentations. Some months later I was interviewing for a new church in the Poconos. I was telling the committee of my interest in Biblical storytelling. After talking *about* it for some time, it finally occurred to me that I might to well to tell a story. I wondered aloud, "What story shall I tell? Well, how about John's story of the miraculous catch of fish?" Immediately the teenaged young woman on the committee piped up, "I know that story." I was astounded, since I don't meet many people who know Bible stories. "How do you know that story?" I asked. "Because you taught it to me," she answered. "Where?" I asked. "At the annual meeting of the conference." "Then you tell it," I said. "I can't," she replied. "I'll bet you can," I answered. "Just start it." And she did. And she told the entire story.

What I miss most right now is that I don't have a community to share the stories with. I don't teach the stories to other, and one of my basic convictions is that NOBS is not about professional telling stories but about the entire community knowing and sharing the stories. I have never been good myself at building a community around enjoying the stories. I had such a community for a while during my years working in Maine and as a member of the Board of NOBS. I had it for a while in a different way when I was teaching in the seminary. I pray for such a community, but I have not yet found it. Perhaps one day I shall find such a community again. Meanwhile, I keep telling the stories whenever I can, and my life is enriched. Maybe I need a story of people teaching others to tell stories to pray with and to be the source of a new mode of action!