

Performing with Different Audiences

Kathy Culmer

The Original

Jesus Blesses the Children (Mk. 10: 13-16 -NLT)

One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could touch them and bless them, but the disciples told them not to bother him. But when Jesus saw what was happening, he was very displeased with his disciples. He said to them, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you, anyone who doesn't have their kind of faith will never get into the Kingdom of God." Then he took the children into his arms and placed his hands on their heads and blessed them.

Story #2

Jesus Blesses the Little Children

The itsy bitsy children were brought to Jesus' side
So that He could touch them, He opened His arms wide.

"No," said His disciples, "You must take them away.
Jesus can't be bothered with your children today."

But, Jesus loved the children, and they heard Him say,
"God's kingdom belongs to them; you must let them stay."

"Let the children come to me," He said as He did reach.
He took the children in His arms and gave a blessing to each.

The itsy bitsy children were brought to Jesus' side.
To touch them and to bless them, He opened His arms wide.

One day as Jesus stood near the Jordan River, healing and teaching the people, parents started bringing their little children to Jesus so He could touch them and bless them. Jesus' friends, the disciples, told the people to go away and take their children. When Jesus heard this, He was not happy. Jesus loved the little children. He said to his friends, the disciples, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them. My Kingdom, the place where God rules, is for children like these." Then, Jesus took the children in His arms, placed His hands on their heads and wished them well.

*For whom was it written?
What tells you so?*

Story #3

A. Superstar was a hot new recording artist, doing his first major national tour. His first stop was **Your Town, USA**. There he would perform before a sell-out crowd. People loved his music. They loved his energy. They loved him! He was not only a great singer and musician, but he was just a great guy, just regular, they'd heard.

When the concert was over, while waving to a very excited group of fans, he was escorted by several big, well-built and kinda mean looking body guards back to his hotel. These burly guys did a good job of keeping the screaming, grasping, and even sometimes teary-eyed fans well out of touching distance.

After the concert, A. Superstar was completely exhausted, so he fell off into a sound sleep shortly after he returned to his hotel suite. He'd only been asleep for a little while when he heard voices and some activity outside the suite door. Neither of the bodyguards was around, so he staggered to the door. When he opened it, there were his bodyguards outside the door to the suite arguing with a group of teenagers who had managed to find their way to A. Superstar's hotel room. The teens insisted they didn't want to bother him. They just wanted to see him up close and tell him personally how much they really liked his music; they had heard he was a really down to earth guy.

The bodyguards, however, argued on and on about how their boss was an important person, and about how tired he was, and how he didn't have the time to talk to everybody, and how he couldn't be bothered. While they were trying to get the teens to go away, A. Superstar interrupted and said, "But these are my fans. These are the people I have come to sing for and bring enjoyment to. They buy my albums and go to my concerts; they are the reason I do what I do. No, don't turn my fans away; without them I would have no work to do. Let them in."

Of course, they were thrilled. They came in and had a wonderful visit with A. Superstar. When it was time to go, A. Superstar gave each of his visitors an autographed copy of his latest CD, which he signed with these words: **To:** (the person's name), **Glad you came. A. Superstar.** That day, they got far more than they had ever hoped for when they came. They got to visit with someone very special to them, and they also had evidence to take with them that they had actually spent time with A. Superstar.

Long ago, in a land far from here, there was a man named Jesus who went about healing and teaching, and preaching about the Kingdom of God. One day as He sat underneath a tree, many people came to hear His Words and to get healed by Him. Many of the mothers wanted Jesus to touch their children and give them a special blessing, so they gathered them together, some in their arms, and they went to Jesus so that He could touch their children and bless them. But when they came near to Jesus, His closest friends, called disciples, stopped the mothers and their children. The disciples said something like, "Go away. Our teacher is too busy. He doesn't have time for little children." But then the people heard Jesus say, "Let the children come to me. Do not stop them." Jesus **wanted** the children to come. He picked them up and He touched them. Jesus loved the little children. He still does. Jesus loves us all, and He will welcome **anyone** who comes to Him, and just like A. Superstar, He will be so glad you came.

For whom was it written?

What tells you so?

When I tell a story, whether it is a Biblical story or not, I want the listeners to be able to see, hear, and experience the story without hindrance. I don't want the words I use, my movement or lack of it, dullness or over exuberance, or any other such factor to stand in the way of the hearer getting the something that the story may have for him or her, personally, to take away from the experience. That's what I hope for and strive for anyway. So, knowing my audience and the purpose for my telling are key factors in the shaping of how I tell the story.

My first consideration in preparing the story, is determining purpose. Sure, the story is the thing, and communicating that story well is the ultimate goal, but, a major driving force for me in the preparation of a story is what I want the hearers to get from the story I share. For me, stories are as C.S. Lewis calls them, "love gifts." I, therefore, try and find the something special in the story that I want to leave with the hearer once the words have all been said. Do I just want to provide information to the listener? Even so, how do I do that so that the information sticks and stays? Do I want to communicate an important truth, give a reassuring hope, or do I just want to provide entertainment that may lighten the load for the present and provide a pleasant recollection for later? To this end, there are several things I consider when I am preparing to tell a story to a particular audience. Although there may be other factors to consider, I primarily consider language, length, delivery, and participation.

Language, of course, is key because it helps people to make meaning of what you're saying, but, it helps to make feeling of what you're saying as well. I remember a couple of years ago, I told the story of the Anointing at Bethany during the Festival Gathering. To prepare the story for telling I used the NIV, KJV, and NLT. Sorry, but I used everything except NRSV; I didn't know I was supposed to back then. At any rate, when I told the words of Jesus' response to the disciples, I used the line from the NIV version, "She has done a beautiful thing to me," instead of "She has performed a good service for me," as found in NRSV. At the end of the session, the lady who had signed for the story thanked me for using those words and spoke of how it had given her a deeper appreciation for Jesus' words on the woman's behalf. So, I work with the words to make sure that the language is suitable for discernment by the audience, and that it creates the images and feelings I wish to convey. If I can't find a ready-made text, then I make certain adjustments, taking care not to change meaning, but only to create a sharper image. Such considerations made here may be impacted by the age, cultural background, setting, and occasion. That will determine whether I say God or creator, angel or heavenly being, the itsy bitsy children or A. Superstar.

Likewise, **length** must be given consideration to help facilitate the "hearing" of the story by a given audience. This area poses a significant challenge to me, because I am, like many storytellers, long-winded. All the words are important to me. All the details are significant. I hate to give up any of those precious words. However, if it is about the listener receiving that precious gift I have determined to give, then I have to make some adjustments. As in the case of language, age is a definite consideration, but in this attention deficit age, it is not only the young who have a penchant for brevity. So, after all that effort to find just the right words, to say just what I want to say and create just the images I want to convey, I have to determine what details I can spare and yet maintain the integrity of the story. However, the story is the story, and sometimes after cutting, there remains more of it than can be told in short, then, I must work the harder on the delivery.

Apart from the words of a story, **delivery** must be the next most important consideration. How we say what we say definitely affects how people receive what is said to them. How often have I said to my children, "It isn't just what you say; it's how

you say it.” Purpose, more than anything, can or will or should affect delivery. Rhythm, tempo, tone, inflection, and a variety of mechanisms of the voice, as well as physicality are tools to help the storyteller convey meaning and engage the audience. When I decided to tell the story of Jesus and the little children to an audience of 2-5 year olds, I thought of the “itsy bitsy spider” because it was a rhyme familiar to children that age and that familiarity would allow them to play along and, thus, be engaged. I wanted to communicate Jesus’ special love for them as little (itsy bitsy) ones, so I used gestures that communicate that to them. It is important, however, for tellers to be mindful with our delivery, as with our words, that we do not offend, condescend, or become a distraction, lest we hinder the hearing of the story.

Storytelling is inherently an interactive experience, requiring activity on the part of both the teller and the hearer. But, in some cases and with certain audiences, I seek to create a more participatory experience by requiring some vocal or physical action or reaction by the audience. Whether or not I can use participation depends on the story, first, but the degree and kind of participation I use are determined by the audience. Younger audiences especially benefit from such participation, but not exclusively. I have often found that adult audiences benefit from and appreciate some participation as well, as long as it is done with dignity. As often as possible I try to use some kind of audience **participation** because it gives me the feeling, and I think the audience too, that we’re in the story together. And whether it is a song in the head they can’t shake, an image, or a deep feeling, participation gives them a little something extra to take away from the experience.

One thing I have realized after years of storytelling is that if you tell a story true, tell it from the heart, tell it as though you are really giving one of those love gifts, audiences will most often accept it. So, perhaps more than anything else, accomplishing these things affects how I tell to a particular audience. What I’m really after is how to tell it for true, how to tell it from my heart, and how to tell it like I really care about the ones to whom I’m telling. When I’ve done that and done it well, I can have little ones believing that a crab has eyes that can pop out of his head, in-between-ers that they can fly like eagles, and adults that they can feel the heat from a fiery furnace.