

Telling Stories

A Sermon on Luke 24:36b-48 and Acts 3:12-19 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ April 14, 2024

Almost every family has a story that gets told to the grandchildren. Often it is a story about one of the grandparents. It might be a story of courage or a story of the struggle for justice. It might be a story about the way the grandmother worked two jobs in order to feed her children. It might be a story about grandpa, fighting on the front lines of the war. In my family, the story that gets told is grandpa's story. Grandpa died ten years ago, but before he died we made sure that all of the grandchildren heard grandpa's story. Grandpa's story took place in the winter of 1965.

Grandpa was pastor of a little church in Cleveland, Ohio. Grandpa was part of a great movement of people who were devoted to the struggle for Civil Rights in America. Grandpa was one of those people who marched up and down the sidewalk with signs, protesting segregated schools and laws that kept black Americans from voting. Grandpa went to the March on Washington and listened to Martin Luther King tell of his dream for America.

In the early 1960s, there were many places in the South where none of the black residents were able to vote, because they were not allowed to register to vote. In January of 1965 the people of Alabama were undertaking a systematic, months-long effort to challenge the Jim Crow laws that kept black people from voting. In some places, hundreds of people stood in front of the county courthouse, standing in line, attempting to register to vote. In almost all cases, they were not permitted to register to vote, so the large crowds of people standing in line became a visible protest against the Jim Crow laws. Alabama State Troopers and local police officers often responded with force to these peaceful protestors, chasing them away from the courthouse with clubs and dogs.

On February 18th, Jimmie Lee Jackson was one of those people, standing in line with his sister, his mother, and his grandfather attempting to register to vote. Jimmie Lee was not a leader of the Civil Rights movement. He was just a regular citizen, a deacon at the local Baptist church. On February 18th, Alabama State Troopers charged at the group of people standing in line, waiting to register to vote, including Jimmie Lee, his mother and his grandfather. Jimmie Lee was shot by an Alabama State Trooper as he had fled from the county courthouse. He died from the gunshot wounds.

In response, James Bevel, John Lewis and other leaders organized a march from Selma to the state capitol, in Montgomery, to draw attention to the violence and lack of civil rights for black Americans. On Sunday, March 7 about 500 people began the 54-mile journey from Selma to Montgomery, the state capitol. In a short time, the marchers came to the Alabama River and began to cross the bridge in the center of the city, the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Edmund Pettus was a man who was the leader of the Ku Klux Klan in the state of Alabama. Edmund Pettus was held in such honor by the white people of Alabama, that they named the bridge after him. The Edmund Pettus Bridge rises up toward the center, like a little hill, so you cannot see what is on the other side of the bridge as you begin to cross.

When the marchers got to the center of the bridge they could see a mob of angry men on the other side, with a line of Alabama State Troopers on horseback in the front of the mob. It was impossible for them to turn around, because hundreds of people were walking behind them on the bridge, so they slowed down and tried to talk to the troopers as they came to the other side. But the troopers, backed up by a mob of white men, charged into the crowd of people as they came across the bridge, beat them with clubs, trampled them with horses, and fired tear gas canisters into the crowd. Sixty-seven of the Civil Rights protestors were beaten. Seventeen were hospitalized with more severe injuries, including John Lewis who bore scars on his head from the attack for the rest of his life. This day became known as "Bloody Sunday".

You may have noticed that I have been talking for at least five minutes and we haven't heard much about the man we call 'Grandpa'. Grandpa's story was part of a much larger story, a story that included millions of people. Grandpa's small part in the story began about one week after Bloody Sunday.

In response to the tragedy of Bloody Sunday, Martin Luther King, Jr. sent an invitation to faith leaders from all religious traditions to support the struggle for Civil Rights by coming to Selma and joining him in another march from Selma to Montgomery. Grandpa responded to Dr. King's invitation.

I'll never forget the day Grandpa left to go to Selma. Grandpa was just thirty years old. I was three years old, standing on the front step with my big sister, and my mother holding our baby brother in her arms. I must have been able to tell that my mom was very worried, because I remember feeling like I was never going to see my father again. Forty years later, Grandpa was telling the story of the march from Selma to Montgomery to the grandkids. Grandpa told about riding the bus from Cleveland, through Kentucky, through Tennessee, and all the way through the night to Selma. 8000 people arrived in Selma for the march. Hundreds of pastors were there, many of them wearing their black clergy shirts and white clergy collars. A large group of Jewish Rabbis had come from all over the country, including Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Martin Luther King, John Lewis, Rabbi Heschel and other famous leaders took their positions at the front of the line and began to march through the city. Grandpa had lost track of the other people from Cleveland. He ended up walking next to a young black man, just about 15 years old. Grandpa was scared. As they began to walk across the Edmund Pettus bridge Grandpa asked the young man, "Are you scared? You know they beat the people who crossed over the bridge two weeks ago." The young man looked at him and said, "I'm not scared, because you are here."

Almost every family has some sort of story like this that gets told to the grandchildren. The children need to know that, like their grandparents, they will need to be courageous, they will need to engage the struggle for justice, they will need to learn what it means to love.

As the years go by, the stories of our grandparents change in important ways. The story becomes more focused over time. New details are worked into the narrative. There have been quite a few changes that have gradually found their way into Grandpa's story. It seems that as Grandpa told the story again and again he remembered more of the details. The first several times I heard the story, the detail about Grandpa talking with the young man was not included, but as time went by that seemed to be one of the most important parts of the story.

When we were younger Grandpa never included the details about Bloody Sunday and John Lewis being beaten and sent to the hospital, because we were little kids and he already knew we were afraid he might have been hurt. Grandpa never told us the details about him marching on the picket lines, because he didn't have to; we were often walking beside him on the picket lines. Today is the very first time, as far as I can remember, that the detail about Edmund Pettus being a leader of the Ku Klux Klan was included. That's because I came across that detail as I was doing research for this sermon.

It is now almost 60 years since Grandpa went to Selma, to march with Martin Luther King. Grandpa's greatgrandchildren are almost old enough to hear the story. Surely it will be told in a slightly different way when they hear the story for the first time. The way we tell the story changes over time.

This is also true for the stories in Bible. We see this especially in one story that gets told four different times, by four different people. It's the story of Christ Jesus. It's the story of what happens after the women discover the empty tomb. Let's consider the broadest outlines of the story of Jesus as it is laid out in the four Gospel accounts.

Mark's Gospel was the first to be written. Mark came into its current form about 35 years after the first Easter. Let's notice two details. The first is that the story of the resurrection, which we read two weeks ago, is the shortest of the four Gospels. In the Gospel of Mark the women flee in fear from the empty tomb, and the story ends right there. Second let's notice that there is not much conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees or other Jewish authorities in Mark.

Matthew comes next, written about 10 years later. Things have changed in Judea and conflict was growing between the Jews and the followers of Christ, who are still mostly Jewish followers of Christ. This is reflected in Matthew's Gospel. Even though Matthew and his congregation are Jews, there are lots of places in the Gospel of Matthew where the Jews are the bad guys. Matthew also includes a brief encounter between the risen Christ and the women who discovered the empty tomb.

By my account John probably comes next, about 60 years after the first Easter. By this time the Jews have forced the followers of Christ to leave the Jewish community. There is lots of bitterness between the Jews and those who have been forced to leave, and this is reflected in John's Gospel. John also includes many more stories of encounters between the risen Christ and the disciples.

I am convinced Luke was the last of the Gospels to be written. By this time many of the followers of Christ are not Jews, they are gentiles. The groups are separate, and the Christians are developing their own traditions, apart from the Jews, so there is much less tension between Jews and Christians. By the time Luke was written, perhaps 70 years after the first Easter, the tension between Jews and Christ followers had dissipated. The lack of conflict is reflected in the text of Luke's Gospel.

In our passage from Luke today, we hear the end of the story of the disciples encountering the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. This is a beautiful story, not included in the other Gospel accounts. This detail has been added, in the same way I never heard the detail about Grandpa talking with the young man as he crossed the bridge until forty years after the event.

The passage from the Acts of the Apostles deserves our attention as well. Acts is the second volume of the story told by the author of the Gospel of Luke. The Acts of the Apostles addresses a difficult question; how did it happen that the Christian Church came to be comprised almost entirely of gentiles? Jesus was Jewish. Every single one of the closest disciples of Jesus were Jewish. Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. Yet by the time Luke and Acts were written, almost all of the Christ followers were Gentiles.

In the Book of Acts, the story is being retold in a way that places the blame on the Jews. In the opening verse of today's passage, Peter addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us?" Then Peter proceeds to blame the crowd of Israelites for murdering Christ Jesus, the 'Author of Life'. The odd thing about this passage is that Peter, and all of the other disciples, are also Israelites. The dangerous part of the story told in Acts is that it is partly responsible for Christian anti-Semitism, which continues to be a problem in our time.

Life includes many challenges; so we have to tell the important stories to the children. The Book of Acts shows us we have a responsibility to examine our motivations as we are telling our stories. It appears that one of the motivations for the Book of Acts was to defend the early Christian Church as it moved away from its Jewish roots. I see the same sort of error, the error of defensiveness in myself. When my motivation is to defend myself or my little group, my motivation is not God's motivation.

Defensiveness is not God's motivation. God's motivation is to build trust. God's motivation is to bring more goodness and truth for all people. God's motivation is to care for others, not just for ourselves.

Tell your story. Tell your story to the young people, to the nieces and nephews and grandkids. They need to understand that life will not always be easy. Tell your story of courage. Tell your story of perseverance and strength. For the sake of the children, make sure it is a story of love.