

Theme: Tell stories

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, the story of the good news of Jesus Christ is a story: Jesus told stories; the apostles' told stories; that is how the message spread; let us tell our stories and how God has transformed us and molded us, spreading the good news of him through whom we pray, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Fred Craddock, while lecturing at Yale University told of going back one summer to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, to take a short vacation with his wife. One night they found a quiet little restaurant where they looked forward to a private meal - just the two of them.

While they were waiting for their meal they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired man moving from table to table, visiting guests. Craddock whispered to his wife, "I hope he doesn't come over here." He didn't want the man to intrude on their privacy. But the man did come by his table.

"Where you folks from?" he asked amicably.

"Oklahoma."

"Splendid state, I hear, although I've never been there. What do you do for a living?"

"I teach homiletics at the graduate seminary of Phillips University."

"Oh, so you teach preachers, do you? Well, I've got a story I want to tell you." And with that he pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with Craddock and his wife.

Dr. Craddock said he groaned inwardly: Oh no, here comes another preacher story. It seems everyone has one.

The man stuck out his hand. "I'm Ben Hooper. I was born not far from here across the mountains. My mother wasn't married when I was born so I had a hard time. When I started to school my classmates had a name for me, and it

wasn't a very nice name. I used to go off by myself at recess and during lunchtime because the taunts of my playmates cut so deeply.

“What was worse was going downtown on Saturday afternoon and feeling every eye burning a hole through you. They were all wondering just who my real father was.

“When I was about 12 years old a new preacher came to our church. I would always go in late and slip out early. But one day the preacher said the benediction so fast I got caught and had to walk out with the crowd. I could feel every eye in church on me. Just about the time I got to the door I felt a big hand on my shoulder. I looked up and the preacher was looking right at me.

“‘Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?’

“I felt the old weight come on me. It was like a big black cloud. Even the preacher was putting me down.

“But as he looked down at me, studying my face, he began to smile a big smile of recognition. ‘Wait a minute,’ he said, ‘I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You are a son of God.’

“With that he slapped me across the rump and said, ‘Boy you’ve got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.’”

The old man looked across the table at Fred Craddock and said, “That was the most important single sentence ever said to me.” With that he smiled, shook the hands of Craddock and his wife, and moved on to another table to greet old friends.

Suddenly, Fred Craddock remembered. On two occasions the people of Tennessee had elected an illegitimate son to be their governor. One of them was Ben Hooper...a man with a great inheritance.

How do we change people's hearts? We tell stories. Arguments and debates can go on forever, but tell a story and empathy gets created. Ben Hooper certainly created empathy. Fred Craddock told this story many times. And we preachers get to repeat it.

Debates and arguments are often the forms we use when we disagree about something. When we get to name-calling, like our current politics, then we never get to resolutions.

Then there are problems in the church. We get alarmed, like in Acts.

There is trouble in the church! There is controversy in the church! The Word of God is compromised! Evil acts are being done in the name of Jesus Christ! Peter baptized Gentiles! The end is near!

When Peter got back to Jerusalem, he had some ‘splaining to do. Peter had the gall to baptize gentiles, letting them into the church without first making them Jews. At this time in church history, Christianity is a Jewish sect. Christians are Jews. Baptizing gentiles, non-Jews, is just not done. (We’ve never done it that way before.) The purity of this Jewish movement is in jeopardy.

There were theological, traditional, and political issues with baptizing Gentiles without circumcising them first. Theologically, the Christian movement is Jewish. Jesus’ death is viewed through a Jewish lens linking the crucifixion to the Passover sacrifices. Jesus, as messiah, the Christ, is a fulfillment of Jewish longing. Jesus’ death fulfills Israel’s destiny of union with God.

During this Easter season, we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection. We look at his resurrection with the Christian hope that we, too, will be resurrected. But the early church was theologically focused on the crucifixion, not the resurrection. Even the gospel writers do the same. Jesus rose from the dead. Good for him. But what has that got to do with us? It was St. Paul who linked Jesus’ resurrection as the first, with his followers to literally follow, into a resurrected life. Jesus’ death accomplished a general forgiveness of sins once and for all.

For the very early church, it was important to observe the Law of Moses. That meant that all Christian males should be circumcised. That means that food must be kosher. And if not, it cannot be eaten. All 613 laws must be diligently observed. This is what God handed down to Moses and that is how all God-fearing people live.

Politically, being Jewish, gave the early church cover from the Roman Empire. Judaism had a rare freedom of expression in the Roman Empire. For example, the people of the empire were required to worship the emperor as a god. The Jews were exempt from this legal requirement. Christianity, as a branch of Judaism, was also exempt. When the Jews officially expelled Christians in 90 AD, Christians lost their exemption and were subject to official persecution.

Not only did Peter baptize Gentiles without Jewish conversion first, he also ate non-kosher food – food that was unclean. That was a biggie. Peter denied the faith he grew up with. Peter was turning his back on Judaism. Peter was turning his back on the Law of Moses. In his critics' minds, if Peter rejects Judaism, then he is rejecting Christianity and he is rejecting Jesus.

Peter's defense is to tell his story: about the vision of the animals he saw and God's voice telling him to eat, about how the Holy Spirit told him to go with the men to Caesarea, how the Holy Spirit entered the gentiles, a household that just happens to be headed by a Roman centurion, a military commander, about how Peter just happened to remember Jesus saying that John baptized with water and you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Peter doesn't offer an argument. He tells a story. So Peter reasoned, that if God gave those gentiles the Holy Spirit, who was he to deny them baptism? Well, Peter's story won them over. They praised God who has broken through Israel and has included the gentiles.

The problem for the church is always discerning what new thing is from God and what is not. This usually takes time. Discernment is not easy. The New Testament took four to five centuries to arrive at the form we have it now. Tradition is a very strong element in making decisions in the church. It is important in Anglicanism.

The lesson we have from Peter and his critics is that they decided to stay together through their disagreement. Granted they came to an accommodation quickly, but they took the time and energy to listen to each other. This is how Christians are to approach disagreements. And it's not a bad way in dealing with our marriages and personal relationships.

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, give us the gift of story-telling, so that, we can defuse disagreements and model Christian evangelism, sharing our story with others, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Text: **Acts 11:1–18** (NRSV)

11 Now the apostles and the believers^a who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers^b criticized him, ³ saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹² The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.^c These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” ¹⁸ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” ¹

^a Gk *brothers*

^b Gk lacks *believers*

^c Or *not to hesitate*

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ac 11:1–18). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.