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I. Storyvangelism

In 1996 the Board of the Network of Biblical Storytellers met to do some planning, and I headed up a group that worked on generating theme ideas for future Festival Gatherings. When I proposed the notion of “storyvangelism” (a word that I had coined by bumping “story” into “evangelism,” they liked the idea, but they were not sure about my coinage. The next year the Board adopted this theme for the 2001 Festival Gathering. And in the discussion that followed, Tom Boomershine said something that stuck me as so important as it fell from his lips, that I immediately began to transcribe it on my laptop—beware what you utter in this world of high speed data storage and retrieval!—and that was this...or something close to this:

Evangelism in the Protestant tradition has been undertaken according to a model of rhetorical persuasion that aims to move from conviction to conversion. This understanding of evangelism is in radical contrast to that of the early church, which was storytelling-based. The rhetorical model has one, single clear aim, any result different from which is considered failure. The rhetorical model, although often very effective, can also be highly manipulative.

Story has something—everything to do with evangelism. Few of us come to faith by being knocked to the ground by a flash of light and a voice from heaven. Few of us encounter divinity in a burning bush. Most of us come to know God by word of mouth, by hearsay, through story. The connection is obvious. I suspect that the earliest stories of the new church were anecdotal, propositional, hortatory and brief, what today we might call “factoids”: “Christ is risen!” “Jesus is Lord!” “This Jesus has become both Lord and Christ!” But within a generation or two, the stories had expanded and coalesced into collections that came to be transcribed. Those early, enthusiastic bursts of anecdotal announcements had matured into full-blown narratives, which themselves took over the nomenclature of the message they conveyed and came to be known as “gospels.”

The earliest Christians told their stories with passion and conviction. They told of what the Lord had done in their lives. People could see that they were different. People wanted to know more; they wanted to know the story. Even though Paul, who insists to the Galatians that his apostleship came directly through a revelation of Jesus Christ and was not instructed in the the Jesus story nor had his apostleship conferred on him by any mortal authority, admits that he did—after three years—go up to Jerusalem to “visit Cephas,” the usual translation that masks the etymology of the verb *historesai*, literally “to get the story.”

A couple years ago I was talking with Tom Long, the author and teacher of preachers, about the relationship between evangelism and biblical storytelling. Tom observed that there is a deep, deep hunger in our culture for all things spiritual; that people are spending time, effort and

considerable financial resources to get in touch with something numinous, something greater, and beyond themselves, something they vaguely refer to as “spirituality.” “But most of this spirituality is like cotton-candy,” he said. “It tastes sweet, but it neither satisfies nor nourishes.” He went on to describe this contemporary kind of fluffy, new-age spirituality (what Karl Barth might have called “cloud cuckoo”) as being lighter than air, floating on every breeze, moved this way and that by every notion. “What Christian faith has to offer this world of seekers is a spirituality that is grounded in a story,” Long said. The direct result of that conversation was the subtitle of this year’s event: “An Invitation to a Storied Spirituality.”

Soon after that conversation with Tom Long, I had accepted an invitation to come to the United Kingdom to do some work with Angela Knowles and the Telling Place, based at the Northumbria Community. It was a life-changing experience that led me deeper into Celtic spirituality, looking back into a tradition that had always placed storytelling at the center of its mission efforts. A most worthwhile book in this regard is George Hunter III’s *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again*. Hunter notes:

...[T]he Celtic Christian movement took and intentionally “redundant” approach to communicating Christianity. They did not rely, as some traditions come close to, upon preaching alone to communicate the fullness of Christianity. They seem to have employed as many different media as they could to get the message across, and to get people involved with the message.¹

Before we launch into an exploration of storyvangelism, we must ask, it seems to me, how evangelism became, if not a dirty word, an embarrassment to many of us who tell the Jesus story as though our lives depended on it? Perhaps when it ceased to be evangel-izing in its early sense of “story-sharing” and began to become a manipulative attempt at coercive persuasion. How can we reclaim evangelism? How can we once again tell the story in such a way that those who know it will hear it again for the first time and that those who hear it new will say, “That’s my story, too!”?

When I was asked to speak at the Gathering of the Australian Network of Biblical Storytellers which was held a couple months ago near Melbourne, I thought it would be sensible to propose the theme of *this* Festival Gathering (“Storyvangelism: An Invitation to a Storied Spirituality”) as a way of giving me a test drive and saving on some preparation time. But the leadership of the Australian NOBS told me that anything that sounded like “evangelism” would drive people away. What do *you* think of when you hear the word “evangelism”?

Now, let me lay my cards on the table. I do not consider myself to be a theological conservative. But, for that matter, I do not consider myself a theological *liberal* either! I used to think I was neo-orthodox. But now I think I am comfortable to be, as medieval philosophers were wont to describe God, *sui generis*—“without a category.” I fear that I may be an equal opportunity failer of litmus tests, a kind of perpetual seeker. Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but this biblical storyteller likes to think of himself as not having a pigeon hole in which to lay his theology.

When I am asked if I am saved, I answer, “I believe that Christ died to save me.” When I am asked if I am born again, I answer, “Well, I trust I have been born anew to a life full of hope through Christ’s rising from the dead.” When I am asked if I am evangelical, I answer, “I am absolutely evangelical in the literal sense of the term.” Yet when I answered the call to become a full time biblical storyteller, I soon found it unhelpful to refer to myself in my interpretive literature as “an evangelist in the original sense of the term,” an honorific that has largely been obscured by the penumbra of the likes of the Bakkers and Swaggarts. So now I call myself a “minister of biblical story.”

Some years ago I witnessed a spectacle that left an impression on me and confirmed some of my own biases against all things that start described with words beginning with “evang.” A clergy couple in my presbytery—a couple who proudly wore the evangelical label—had a passel of children who accompanied them to every presbytery meeting. After one such meeting, when I went to the nursery to collect my daughter, I noticed this couple’s six-year-old son in the corner, holding his four-year-old brother, pinned by the neck to the wall with his forearm and pushing on his little brother as if to suffocate him. The younger child gasped for breath and cried, “Stop! Stop! You’re choking me!”

His older brother shouted back, “I will let go as soon as you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior!”

The story is funny. But it is also sad.

And I think we need to dwell in this sadness of our family history for bit, lest we ignore the problematical, chauvinistic and inherently dangerous tendency toward misappropriation of the mandate to make disciples of all nations. A few vignettes, snapshots, if you will, from our family album.

When Christians came to power in Jerusalem in the 4th Century following Constantine's imprimatur on Christianity, they demonstrated the triumph of the gospel and their contempt for the Jews by using the ruined Temple Mount as a latrine and garbage dump. In sharp contrast, and just a couple hundred years later, a prophet from Mecca urged his followers to make a surrender to God (in Arabic *islam*) and, as his movement gained momentum, urged his followers concerning Christians and Jews:

Do not argue with the followers of an earlier revelation otherwise than in the most kindly manner... Say: “We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you: for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is to him that we surrender ourselves.”²

When within six years after Muhammad’s death, the Caliph ‘Umar took Jerusalem without any loss of life, he climbed to the Temple Mount and saw what the Christians had done to to humiliate the Jews, he broke down and wept. Then he began to pick up dung and garbage in his robe and clearing the place by hand. The Muslims created the most stable, tolerant and cooperative government and society in Jerusalem during the next several hundred years. But then came the Crusades. And 900 years later, that vicious slaughter is still remembered, and the West is despised by the Arab world for the unspeakable carnage perpetrated in the name of Jesus.

In 1532 in the Peruvian highlands at a place called Cajamarca, a priest in the company of

Pizzaro whose soldiers were hidden in the bush, approached the native king Atahualpa and held out to him a closed Bible, saying, "I am a priest of God, and I teach Christians the things of God, and in like manner I come to teach you." When Atahualpa could not figure out how to open the book, the priest stepped forward to open it for him, and Atahualpa stuck him on the arm for touching the king's litter. Then the priest shouted, "Come out Christians! Come at these enemy dogs who reject the things of God!" An eye-witness account of the battle that followed tells that Indians, frightened by the blasts from the guns and canon, "climbed on top of one another, made mounds, and suffocated each other" so that by nightfall a force of fewer than 200 Spaniards had slain 7,000 and cut off the limbs of thousands more. The journal entry concludes, "Truly it was not accomplished by our own forces, for there were so few of us. It was by the grace of God, which is great."³

Can you stand one more, a less brutal, but no less shameful misconstrual of the Great Commission? Herbert Kelm in his book *Oral Communication of the Scripture: Insights from African Oral Art* quotes the journal of an English missionary to Nigeria in 1875 who wrote, "We desire to establish the Gospel in the hearts and minds and social life of the people.... This cannot be done without civilization." One of the requirements of "civilizing" the Africans of course was the imposition of technology of literacy, the underlying assumptions about which, as Kelm notes, have only recently been questioned. Some evangelist missionaries to Africa even set literacy as a prerequisite for baptism. He cites the story of

a mature Nigerian man in church 'playing the game' of acting like a good church member. The elder pretended to studiously find and the page in the hymn book, refused help in find the page and then used the book s ing all the words of the hymn, but failed to realize that he was holding the book upside down!⁴

Kelm continues:

How inwardly debilitating must be the sense of not actually having skill for the role he feels he ought to play but cannot. It is, furthermore, a great devaluation of such a man's memory skill to feel it necessary to sing the hymn hiding behind a mask of false literacy.... Such men and women have all the potential for genuine Bible knowledge and Christian maturity if literacy were not considered the only gateway to it. ... It is impossible to know how many other Christians in Africa have been humiliated for their inability to read well when they should have been encouraged to memorize the Word and display the Christians gifts they had already attained as mature, ministering members of the body of Christ in good standing.⁵

Too often in our history, when the eu-angelion (the good message) has been "ismed," it has become dys-angelion, a sick and twisted evangelism in which the gospel, (that is, "the good spell"), casts an evil and demonic spell. Implied in the very etymology of the constellation of biblical Greek words that get translated into English in the terms "good news," "gospel,"

“evangelizing,” “spreading the evangel,” and so on, is the notion that the message is carried by an angelos—a messenger.

So at least for purposes of this current discussion, I propose the adoption of some new terminology: “Evangelizing” or, better yet, “Storyvangeling.” Let this word denote the re-appropriated, ancient tradition of telling the stories in a way that communicates their full power and depth. Let this nomenclature stand in contrast to the kind of evangelism that has too easily slid into dys-angelism when promulgated by the zealous, an evangelism that was perhaps more appropriate to a literate age, but less so in the post-literate, post-modern, digital, global culture in which we now live and share our faith. We might characterize the contrast between these two approaches like this:

EVANGELISM IN LITERATE CULTURE	STORYVANGELING IN POST-LITERATE CULTURE
primarily propositional	primarily story-based
stresses logic	stresses mystery
often rigid	seeks to be flexible
sometimes argues from superiority	seeks humility
talks/harrangues/“preaches”	converses/listens/proclaims
primarily uni-directional	intentionally bi-directional
seeks to impart truth	seeks to engage in experiences
either/or	both/and
manipulates	extends/receives hospitality
seeks to “win”	seeks to “share”
monological	dialogical
demands	invites
drives toward “closure”	struggles to remain open
seeks a prescribed response	open to multiple responses
ties down (“religio”)	frees up (liberates for faith)
can entail a pre-critical naivete	seeks a post-critical, "second" naivete
proceeds from certainty of faith	proceeds from faithful uncertainty
conquest	adventure
destination	journey

As I have been reflecting on the relationship of biblical storytelling to evangelism, a resource I have found most helpful is Walter Brueggeman’s *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*. As Brueggemann puts it:

...[T]he biblical text is not a handbook for morality or doctrine as it is often regarded, nor on the other hand, is it an historical record, as many are wont to take it. Rather the biblical text is the articulation of the imaginative models of

reality in which “text-users,” i.e. readers in church and synagogue are invited to participate. The texts continue to be alive and invitational because they refuse to stay “back there,” but always insist upon being “present tense” and contemporary. Thus biblical texts were not simply formed and fixed (either by some once-for-all divine disclosure or by some nameable human author); they were shaped by and for repeated use in the community, especially in the practice of worship, but in many other contexts as well.⁶

As practitioners of biblical storytelling, we know that these stories are powerful. We have a felt experience of the gospel is “good spell.” We know that the faithful telling of the stories casts its spell on us and on all those who will listen to us, and that it draws us all into an encounter with God and with ourselves and with each other. And we know that the faithful and lively telling of these stories exposes many competing stories for what they are: half-truths, partial truths or outright deceptions. Brueggemann notes:

Those who come to hear these stories (and those who tell them) do not come to “the meeting” “story-less”.... Rather we come with our imagination already saturated with other stories to which we have already made trusting (even if unwitting) commitment... In the matrix of evangelism, we are prepared to notice that these stories we have embraced without great intentionality are not adequate. They have severe limitations and cannot generate the life for which we yearn.”⁷

Perhaps at this juncture we need to work at a definition of “evangelism.” Brueggemann defines it as “doing the text again, as our text and as “news” addressed to us and waiting to be received, appropriated and enacted in our own time and place. By “doing the text,” I mean to entertain, attend to, participate in, and reenact the drama of the text.”⁸ Pope John Paul II defines it as “the Church’s effort to proclaim to everyone that God loves them, that he has given himself for them in Christ Jesus, and that he invites them to an unending life of happiness.”⁹

As I have struggled with it, I would define “storyvangeling” (feeling the need to spend my new coinage) as “the faithful sharing and living of our stories of experiences of God in ways that build a storied spirituality (that is, that instill memory, develop intimacy, engender wonder and nurture community to be God’s people and do God’s work).” And I would understand the word “stories” to include those that have been traditioned to us in scripture, those which surround the stories that have been traditioned to us in scripture, the history of the church, and individual testimonies of what God has done in individual lives.

A moment’s reflection leads us to the inescapable conclusion that most—nearly all— of us come to faith through story; we are “storied” into faith. Some of us absorb the stories of scripture through repeated hearing and enacting in worship as we grow up in the church. Others hear as witnesses the stories of what God has done in a person’s life and are drawn by the story to the *ecclesia*, the community which is the repository of the story memory. Our faith is story-formed. Story evangel. And, I would argue, it continues to evangel us every step of the journey of faith.

I am happy to report that Brueggemann agrees with me here. He develops three biblical themes related to evangelism. They are:

- 1) that outsiders become insiders
- 2) that forgetters become rememberers
- 3) that beloved children become belief-ful adults.

When we think of “outsiders becoming insiders,” we usually imagine the outsiders coming in to our church and belonging and joining and becoming just like us. But there is another way in which outsiders can become insiders, and that entails moving the boundary that constitutes the “outside/inside line,” to change the very structure of outside and inside. That is, it seems to me, what Jesus was doing again and again. By going to Samaria, to a Samaritan Woman, to a Samaritan Woman adept at serial monogamy and extra-marital survivor skills, he moved the line! His disciples came back from town with a fresh load of grub and supplies, and they tripped over that new boundary.

Give them credit that, although they were surprised that Jesus was talking with a woman—with THIS woman—they did not say, “What the hell are you doing here?!” One wonders how long it took for the realization to sink into the head of Simon, son of John (I sometimes wonder if Jesus called him “Rocky” because he was dumb as stone) that this woman was the very first evangelist--- a keen-witted, water-dipping Samaritan woman, who invited the whole town to “Come see a man who told me all I ever did!” Jesus moved the lines. They fell pleasantly outside the comfort zones of most of the religious folk.

So also we must go outside our comfort zone, outside the limits of our safe theology, off the map of our home turf and into the experience of God’s children, listening to them, engaging them, listening to their stories as well as telling our own. I have a hunch that Jesus was a good

storyteller because he was a good story listener. And he listened without preconceptions, without preconditions, the kind of active listening that my wife is so good at. I wonder if Jesus trained his friends in storytelling and in story listening. We know that when Jesus sent them out on their initial preaching mission, he told them to travel light: “He ordered them to take with them nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in the belt—to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics” (Mark 6:8). I believe there is nothing heavier than a pre-supposition, nothing more massive than mind made up, nothing weightier than the baggage of making “them” more like “us.” Part of the transformation of making outsiders into insiders entails our stepping out. We have that expression, don’t we? “Stepping out in faith.”

Less obvious, perhaps, is the kind of evangelizing that needs doing with people who have already professed faith in Christ, the evangelizing of making forgetters into remembers, the evangelizing that makes beloved children into faith-ful adults. This happens in the community of story, of course. In that community we come to discover, as Catherine Wallace has written:

We belong to the stories that hold us, which are the stories that we hear from or with the people who matter to us the most. ...[T]he hearing and telling of stories is a crucial moral resource in our ordinary lives, a plain and powerful way in which we understand, preserve, and share whatever we possess of wisdom and of virtue and of meaning in a world that seems increasingly incoherent and despairing. In short, the life of faith is lived in storytelling....¹⁰

Two years ago I was invited to tell the texts in the worship services for the National Gathering of Bread for the world. For one service the texts were picked by the preacher, Dr. Gustavo Parajon, a priest from Nicaragua. The gospel text was the story of Zacchaeus—a story we all know at least roughly. The Old Testament text was from a book I don’t turn to much: Nehemiah. It was a serendipitous assignment for me, a blessing to have added this piece from Nehemiah to my store of stories. In his sermon, Dr. Parajon mused about what Jesus could possibly have said to make this rich tax collector turn around! “Wouldn’t you like to know that?” he asked, “especially when your church is undertaking its annual pledge campaign?” Parajon admitted that he had no secret knowledge of what was said over that dinner in Zacchaeus’ house. But, he said, he had a hunch. His hunch was that Jesus spoke about the spirit of the Jubilee, about the restoration of balance and justice, about the acceptable year of the Lord. And as Jesus was a storyteller, he might well have reminded Zacchaeus of the story from Nehemiah, who, speaking, tells it like this:

Some of the men and their wives complained about the Jews in power and said,
"We have large families, and it takes a lot of grain merely to keep them alive."

Others said,
"During the famine we even had to mortgage our fields, vineyards, and homes to them in order to buy grain."

Then others said,
"We had to borrow money from those in power to pay the government tax on our fields and vineyards."

We are Jews just as they are,
and our children are as good as theirs.
But we still have to sell our children as slaves,
and some of our daughters have already been raped.

We are completely helpless;
our fields and vineyards have even been taken from us."

When I heard their complaints and their charges, I became very angry.
So I thought it over and said to the leaders and officials,
"How can you charge your own people interest?"

Then I called a public meeting and accused the leaders by saying,
"We have tried to buy back all of our people who were sold into exile.
But here you are, selling more of them for us to buy back!"

The officials and leaders did not say a word,
because they knew this was true.

I continued,

WHAT YOU HAVE DONE IS WRONG!
WE MUST HONOR OUR GOD BY THE WAY WE LIVE,
SO THE GENTILES CAN'T FIND FAULT WITH US.

MY RELATIVES, MY FRIENDS, AND I
ARE ALSO LENDING MONEY AND GRAIN,
BUT WE MUST NO LONGER DEMAND PAYMENT IN RETURN.

NOW GIVE BACK THE FIELDS, VINEYARDS, OLIVE ORCHARDS,
AND HOUSES YOU HAVE TAKEN
AND ALSO THE INTEREST YOU HAVE BEEN PAID.

The leaders answered,

WE WILL DO WHATEVER YOU SAY
AND RETURN THEIR PROPERTY,
WITHOUT ASKING TO BE REPAID.

So I made the leaders promise in front of the priests to give back the property.

Then I emptied my pockets and said,

IF YOU DON'T KEEP YOUR PROMISE,
THAT'S WHAT GOD WILL DO TO YOU.
HE WILL EMPTY OUT EVERYTHING YOU OWN,
EVEN TAKING AWAY YOUR HOUSES.

The people answered, WE WILL KEEP OUR PROMISE.

Then they praised the LORD and did as they had promised.

And a man named Zacchaeus moved from outside as despised to tax collector to inside as child of Abraham. "Zacchaeus the Forgetter" had become "Zacchaeus the Rememberer. One beloved child of Abraham was well on his way to becoming a belief-ful adult.

And that's what it means to have a storied spirituality.

II. An Invitation to a Storied Spirituality

Yesterday we speculated that Jesus helped Zacchaeus recover a lost memory by telling him a story. It is hard work to remember who we are and whose we are, especially if we do not know our story. Some call it "biblical illiteracy." I prefer to call it "story poverty." The task of storyvangelism in the church is to increase the wealth of stories people have available to them, to make forgetters into remembers---to use Brueggemann's phrase.

In a recent national study a majority of Americans identified Joan of Arc as Noah's wife! The situation in the church today is not much better. Scores on tests administered to first-year seminary students to measure knowledge of Bible content continue to decline. The persistent lament of Christian Educators is "No one knows the stories anymore!" Brueggemann writes:

I believe that the reality of amnesia is massive among us. That amnesia (which on the surface shows up as "illiteracy") causes the church to lack in any serious missional energy. It is only this odd memory, operative at the pre-rational places in our life, that gives us energy for social actions, generosity in stewardship, freedom for worship, courage in care for outsiders, and passion for God's promises. Without memory, there will be little of courage, generosity, freedom, or passion. (p. 90)

I want to suggest that one way to redress this rampant biblical illiteracy in the church of post-literate culture is to employ a process akin to that used effectively in pre-literate, oral culture: storytelling.

In an essay that I first encountered some 20 years ago by Robert McAfee Brown, entitled "My Story and 'The Story'," an essay that continues to guide my thinking about story, Brown focuses on the seeming impotence of the story in contemporary culture and raises the question:

...(In) a day when the Israel story and the Christian story... seem to have lost their power to inform and engage, can we, by reflecting on what happens when other stories are told, get any clues as to how "The Story" might be once again told in such a way that we could respond, "That's my story, too"? (in *Theology Today*, v. 23, #2, 1975)

One obvious answer to this question—obvious to us as biblical storytellers—is, "Yes! We can

tell the stories!” As the old hymn says, “Some have never heard,” and included in that “some” are those who have “heard and heard, but not *heard!*” If they have not *heard* the stories as stories, then they have only encountered the stories as ink and paper notations or as vocalized ink on paper that is read aloud. To really *hear* the stories requires that they be heard as stories told faithfully, told well, and told right.

When the stories of the Scriptures are told faithfully, well, and right, they seem to “come alive.” The experience of the power and enchantment of these stories when they are *heard* creates heightened interest and motivates reading of the Bible. This should come as no surprise when one considers that many of the stories of the Bible circulated in oral form for generations. Their emotional power, their entertaining fascination, their ability to impress themselves on the community memory, all lay behind their preservation. And even after they were “downloaded” to writing, the “told” versions held sway for centuries.

We know that people who hear stories told by a skilled storyteller remember those stories with greater facility than those who read them silently or even have them read aloud to them. Providing experiences for the hearing of the stories told well will increase the general “story store”—a major step toward addressing the biblical illiteracy of our Church and our culture, and the stock in trade for us as evangelists or storyvangelists.

Catherine Wallace in an essay entitled “Storytelling, Doctrine, and Spiritual Formation” asks the question, “What is a good story?” And she answers that question this way:

...You have heard a good story when you know it might have happened to you just like that. You have heard a good story when you see the world differently when the telling is done. You have heard a good story when your heart leaps up at what you have always known but couldn’t find the words to say. In a good story, truth comes alive and grabs you by the throat before you have time to think thoughts like “the Incarnation is manifest trans-temporally in a realized eschatology among the narrative resources of a discourse of community.” (in *Anglican Theological Review* [ATR/:XXX1:1 p.. 41])

I often begin my workshops in biblical storytelling by asking the participants to monitor their vital signs as I stand behind a lectern and read to them a story from one of the gospels. I ask them to observe what is going on inside them: their reactions, thoughts, feelings, attentiveness, inner states, blood pressure, pulse---to get a snapshot of their inner response to the reading of the story. I read in the way that scripture is typically read in worship---not utterly devoid of variation, but minimally expressive. Following the reading, I give them a few moments to re-collect the data of the inner experience. I then ask them to do the same kind of monitoring as I *tell* that same story---nearly word-for-word. We then debrief the experience. Inevitably, the participants observe certain things:

- The telling is more lively than the reading.
- The initial reaction of many to the reading is: "Oh, I already know this," after which many "check out."
- The effort required to pay attention to the reading contrasts sharply with

the virtual effortless impossibility of *not* being attentive to the telling.

- The telling seems to reach out and grab the listeners, engaging them at the level of the affective. The reading, however, seems to convey that the communication is about *ideas*, whereas the telling is about feelings and characters and events.

- The reading from behind the lectern hides virtually everything except the reader's head---a further indication that the communication is about ideas lifted off the page by the reader's optical scanner, converted to sound in the reader's central processing unit, and broadcast across space to be downloaded into the listeners' central procession units for them to *think* about. Stepping out from behind the furniture and the book and into the vulnerability of telling, means that both the teller and the audience become aware of the importance of the body in telling the story.

- The reading sounds like print. The sameness of each page, the neat alignment of the type on it, the square cut corners, the plodding word after inky word gets communicated in that droning "carrier signal" with which we are unconsciously taught to read when we begin to acquire the technology of literacy in our childhood. But the *telling* a different rhythmic grammar: the beat and variety of storied life.

- The reading feels like a rendering of something that happened long ago; the telling seems to be happening in the moment. Some say of the telling, "I felt that I was *there*."

- The "felt time" of the reading is longer than the felt time of the telling, although the telling actually take two to three times longer.

- Stepping out from behind the lectern, making unbroken eye contact with the audience, and being "unshielded" by the book (which in the reading can be both barrier and shield) results in an intimacy and immediacy that is lacking in the reading. This reality entails a certain vulnerability both for teller and audience as the only thing that comes between them is the air that vibrates with sound.)

- The telling feels interactive, the reading monological.

Peoples' reaction to first hearing the biblical story told in way that the way that we have come to appreciate telling it (that is, within the orbit of and faithful to text that has been traditioned to us) is "I can't believe it's the Bible!" The Bible is supposed to sound flat and lifeless and "churchy." It should be as we have always heard it: like a dead, dusty relic---in the delivery of which we have come to mistake expressionlessness for veneration and have accepted a bland monotony as the appropriate way to "play the music" written on the page for us by God. That many in the church have come to expect the text to be dead on arrival should come as a surprise to us who claim to be a resurrection people. Nor may we delude ourselves by tellers to think that the text as something that WE must bring to life.

I like the deliberate ambiguity of the phrase "faithful telling." It implies on the one hand fidelity to the text: that we really do take seriously our responsibility as servants of the word, as

tellers in the sacred story tradition of Israel/Jesus/the Early Church, held by the gravitational pull of the text within its “orbit”—free not to do it “by rote,” but responsible within that freedom to honor the text by keeping our telling close to its center. (In the Network we have used as a kind of quantitative, objective standard a goal of 95% content and 75% verbal accuracy.) We understand this goal of fidelity to text (as it has been traditioned to us in translation) as an element of the spiritual discipline of biblical storytelling.

And this is the *other* sense of the phrase “faithful telling.” We tell these stories as people of faith. We tell them *from* faith *to* faith *for* faith. Paul reminds us that “Faith comes by hearing.” As tellers we are first hearers, then tellers, then hearers again. I believe that we cannot faithfully tell what we have not faithfully heard and do not continue to faithfully hear. The spiritual discipline of biblical storytelling requires that we be attentive, that we listen to the text again and again. As a preacher, I have learned to preach first to myself: to address *my own* fears, insecurities, faithlessness; to express *my own* joys and struggles and experiences of grace. This has generally proved to be a successful way of preaching to others. So, too, as biblical storytellers, we tell first to ourselves. We hear the evangel. We tell the evangel. We hear ourselves telling the evangel.

Having already coined the term “storyvangeling” as a verb in order to rescue what used to be called “evangelism” from its Babylonian captivity, so let me engage in some further minting of coinage and suggest that, as biblical storytellers, we are *evangels*---what used to be called “evangelists” before the term got hijacked into cultural disrepute. As Christian faith understands its practice, message and messenger are bound together. We know as storytellers that we hear these stories in the living voices that tradition them to us, in the resonances and timbres of the voices that intone them, in the personalities of the people that breath with them as they tell them to us. When one hangs around biblical storytellers long enough, one cannot help but remember certain inflections, gestures, tones of voice associated with particular tellings. Phrases and even whole stories come to be linked in the memory with the faithful people whom we have heard tell them. I can never hear the birth narrative from Luke without remembering how Thomasina Ponder parsed the word “glory” into four syllables: “And the guh-uh-lo-o-o-o-o-ry of the Lord shone around them!” I can never hear the story of the raising of the paralyzed man without thinking of Tom Boomershine’s terrible accident and the grace God gave him to take move from that experience into the founding of this Network.) I cannot tell “the Daughters of Zelophehad without seeing the smiling faces of the girls in the Palestinian Christian youth group in Bethlehem for whom Tracy Radosevic and I told the story in tandem. In a very real sense, what happens in these moments is something incarnational: The word becomes flesh and dwells among us full of grace and truth.

I intend for us biblical storytellers to come to understand ourselves as evangels who have experienced something like a vocation to biblical storytelling—no, not “something like,” but, indeed, a very palpable vocation. Many of us feel that if we did not do this biblical storytelling thing, then, like Jeremiah, the fire of God’s Spirit in our bones would compel us to do it!

Fred Cradock in his book *Preaching* observes that it is usually not the preacher’s task to say what the people want to hear, but it is often the preacher’s task “to say what the people want to *say*.” Cradock’s sense is that the preacher is the *voice* in some sense the voice of God, but also the voice of the community as it speaks to God and as it speaks aloud to itself in the presence of God. The preacher is the designated “spokesperson” of/from/to the community. His/her job is to articulate the longings, questions, fears and hopes of the community and address them on their

behalf in the liturgical/rhetorical art and spiritual discipline of preaching. I think Cradock's notion is apt for those of us who practice the liturgical/rhetorical art and spiritual discipline that we call biblical storytelling as well. When we tell faithfully, we *are* the church telling its story aloud to itself in the presence of God.

I think sometimes we tend set up a false dichotomy between biblical storytelling as performance and biblical storytelling as spiritual discipline. Frankly, I am getting tired of coining new terminology, so I will suggest that we simply reclaim the kidnapped word "performance." We will ransom it from its negative connotations. (Some quite reputable, well-intentioned and knowledgeable people have done so, among them Robert Belah Wilhelm, one of our keynoters several years ago. Even Norma Livo and Sandra Rietz in their classic manual, *Storytelling: Process and Practice* declare, "The effective storyteller is a transparent medium and negotiator for the construction of the story, not an actor using the story to support a *personal performance* [italics mine].") Faithful tellers understand that performing is not "showing off." Do we think that the surgeon is "showing off" when she performs an emergency appendectomy on us? Do we think that the priest is "showing off" when he performs a wedding ceremony? Do we think that our Buick is "showing off" if it performs well in a safety test? To "perform" the text is to offer it to our audience and to God "fully formed" (or formed at least as fully as we are able according to the gifts that God has given us as tellers). Part of the spiritual discipline of "storyvangeling" is the desire to per-form the text, to midwife it in its fleshy fullness, to deliver it alive and not stillborn.

To perform the story faithfully, well and right, we need observe three basic rules, it seems to me: 1) Know the story. 2) Love the story. 3) Trust the story. I mean by #1 that we should *know* the story in the biblical sense of *yada*—an intimacy like that of a sexual relationship. You heard it here, friends: Biblical storytelling is better than sex! As practitioners of biblical storytelling, we know that we stand in a different relation to the text when it is inside us. Taking its life into us, it dwells in us in our deep places and interacts with us. As the jazz musicians say, we "breathe with" the text. It ceases to be an object "out there" (silent print on a page) and becomes a *subject* that engages with us, taking on a life "in here" in our heart, in the center of our being. Showing off? To paraphrase one of my favorite hymns:

When in our telling God is glorified,
And adoration leaves no room for pride,
It is as though the whole creation cried: Tell it!

It took me some years of pondering the contradiction---hearing myself say in workshop after workshop that we must take the stories inside us and that we must ourselves be inside the story---to realize that this Zen-like paradox is the matrix of the spirituality of biblical storytelling. Like Alice through the looking glass, when the story is deeply in us, filling us in our deepest places, when we are steeped in it, permeated by it, or (to use Tim Coombs' phrase) marinated in it, then, paradoxically, we discover ourselves to be deeply inside the story! Again, Livo and Rietz's manual expresses for secular storytelling something of the same sort:

The story and the circumstances of the telling own and manipulate the

storyteller.... [But] Paradoxically, a story is most powerful in the hands of a storyteller who also owns and manipulates the story.... The storyteller who has not come to a sufficient degree of conscious intimacy, ease and comfort with the story through study, preparation and development often has difficulty allowing the story its own unselfconscious and separate existence.

We need to be steeped in the story, to be saturated in it, if we are to tell it faithfully. I read recently of chess champion Bruce Pandolfini, who, determined to improve on his natural talent for the game bought a two-volume set (in Russian) of the 500 games played by Soviet chess master Mikhail Botvinnik. He spent a year studying these games, and then decided to commit to memory sixty games, move for move. He said:

If I lost a position in my mind, which was quite common at first, I started again from the first move. To remember the moves I would create a story line that tied all the logic of the game together... And then you develop an intuitive sense of how to handle similar positions, and your moves flow naturally. ("The Pandolfini Defense" in *The New Yorker*, 06/04/01, p. 67.)

Something like this "intuitive sense" that Pandolfini describes is what happens when we have rehearsed the story "inside." This is what Ignatius discovered and later developed in *his Exercitia Spiritualis*. This is, perhaps, akin to something like the education Jesus had. Of course, we cannot know for sure how Jesus was educated. Ken Bailey speculates that Jesus' aptitude was recognized early on, perhaps by age four, that he was set apart for study with the *haburim* in Nazareth. The teaching was primarily a matter of recitation and response. Something not unlike what we are practicing here this week. He would have been relieved of the responsibility of working in this father's contracting business to spend all day, each day internalizing the scriptures, the oral torah, and the teachings of the elders. So that by the time we see him in the temple at age 12, "Everyone was surprised at how much he knew and at the answers that he gave" (Luke 2:47).

What Jesus knew, he knew by heart. That was the commandment of Deuteronomy after all: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (6:4-5). Following this "shema" come five urgent suggestions concerning how this love of God is to be perpetuated generation up generation. Most can remember #5: "Write these things on the door posts of your house and on your gates" (6:9)—we might call this "evangelize." Most can remember #4: Bind them as a sign on your hand and as an emblem on your forehead" (6:8)—in other words, wear them like jewelry (and I am tempted to call this "accessorize," but we might better say "symbolize"). Many will also remember #3: "Talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (6:7b)—we might call that "theologize." And nearly everyone can remember #2: "Recite them to your children" (6:7a)—"catechize." But the one that no one seems to be able to remember is #1: "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart" (6:6)—"internalize."

Heart learning is different from head learning. It is "memorizing" but creating deep

memory. Daniel Goleman in his book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* writes:

The emotional/rational dichotomy approximates the folk distinction between “hear” and “head”; knowing something is right “in your heart” is a different order of conviction—somehow a deeper kind of certainty—than thinking so with your rational mind. There is a steady gradient in the ratio of rational-to-emotional control over the mind; the more intense the feeling, the more dominant the emotional mind becomes—and the more ineffectual the rational. (p. 8f)

The heart in Hebrew physiology and anatomy is the center of the person, the symbol for the whole of human conscious and unconscious work: feeling, thinking, deciding and willing. And so, when we commend the practice of learning by heart, we are talking about something that is much, much more than memorizing—more than the mechanical recitation of rote text. I believe that the best learning of these stories involves a deep internalization in our very musculature, nervous system, endocrine system and circulatory system! The story claims all of us: heart, soul, and strength (and throw in “mind,” too, as the tradition does by the time of Jesus).

I have in mind for a book on biblical storytelling a chapter which we will be titled: “Biblical Storytelling as a Bodily Function.” Gene Rooney in his handbook *Metaphors for Metamorphosis* writes:

Story is much more than words. It is even more than a mental construct. It is also muscle patterns and a complex set of tensions and movements. When you have different perspectives about yourself and about the world they affect your thinking, of course, but they also affect the way you feel and move. Your feelings respond to message from your brain just as your brain responds to messages from your body.... Physiology, psychology and spirituality not only interact, they are intricately interconnected.... Each major mental and emotional state has corresponding postures as well as thought patterns.... Thus your Story is told not only in what you believe and say, but also in how you move and stand. To fully affect change in one’s Story, then, one must not only change the Story’s verbal content, the change must also be integrated into behavior. (pp. 12-13)

Maybe we should talk about “bodyvangeling,” because faithful telling requires that we be at home in our own skin, and that the story be similarly accommodated.

What difference does it make to have the stories deeply resident inside us? It means that they are always available to make connections---always “running” in our awareness. It means that by internalizing the stories in our deepest places, we are changed. We start to become what we have. This kind of learning entails a deep, deep intimacy in which the stories are no longer objectified as something “out there,” on paper, apart from us, but “in here” where we live. Taking the stories into us shifts them

from “there and then” to “here and now.” Instead of asking “what does it mean,” we become more concerned with how it feels, why it was told, and how does it sound? Having the stories by heart opens us to grace.

Daniel Goleman, whose book *Emotional Intelligence* I have already cited, describes that condition in which athletes and artists and virtuosos—and I would add biblical storytellers—perform at peak, a condition called “flow” of which he writes:

Flow is a state of self-forgetfulness, the opposite of rumination and worry: instead of being lost in nervous preoccupation, people in flow are so absorbed in the tasks at hand that they lose all self-consciousness.... Paradoxically, people in flow exhibit a masterly control of what they are doing, their responses perfectly attuned to the changing demands of the task. Although people perform at their peak when they are in flow, they are unconcerned with how they are doing, with thoughts of success or failure—the sheer pleasure of the act itself is what motivates them. (p. 91)

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, and especially for that blessing we know up close and personal as biblical storytellers, as storyvangelists: the flow of the story in us, through us, among us.

I once heard a story that I believe to have originated in the writings of Elie Wiesel, a story that tells of the day of the festival of *Simcah Torah*, when the custom is to dance around the Torah scroll in joy for the story it tells of God’s grace. Of course, because the people are in a Nazi concentration camp, there is no Torah scroll in the camp. And so there is no joy. But an elderly rabbi sees a boy whom he recognizes as having studied for his bar-mitzvah. He asks the boy if he knows the *shema*, and the boy replies, “Yes, my rabbi. I know the *shema* and much, much more. The old finds the strength of God in his arms as he lifts the boy high in the air, and the people dance around “the Torah.”

Wherever the story is lovingly learned and faithfully told, there is the evangel. And there is the vocation to storyvangeling from Spirit of the living God. You are biblical storytellers. You are storyvangelists. Know the story. Trust the story. Tell the story.

¹George Hunter III’s *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again*

² Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*

³ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: WW Norton and Company: 1999), pp. 72f

⁴ Herbert Kelm, *Oral Communication of the Scripture: Insights from African Oral Art*, (p. 39)

⁵ Herbert Kelm, *ibid.*

⁶Walter Brueggeman’s *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, (p.8)

⁷ Walter Brueggeman(p. 11)

⁸ Walter Brueggeman(p. 8)

⁹ John Paul II, *Springtime of Evangelization*, p. 55

¹⁰ Catherine Wallace,