

3 Pentecost 2021

Each one of us is a gospel written by God's hand. May we have spiritual eyes to see heavenly meaning interwoven amidst the mundane tasks of our everyday existence. Amen

When it comes to storytelling, some are exceptionally good at it and others, like me, have not mastered it at all. Spinning a good yarn is an art. This is especially true if one is telling a tale that is not based upon actual events. If you tell someone a story about 9/11, for most of us, it elicits all kind of memories and emotions. Not so much if told at a high school graduation today. But the details can be easily fact checked. A great storyteller can weave those facts into a tale that draws the listeners in and invites them to consider how **they** may have reacted in a similar situation. It can also allow us to consider what the story might mean in our lives today. It makes sense that many preachers use storytelling in their sermons.

An example of this, is a sermon that was given by Bishop Bevel Jones at the 1996 United Methodist General Convention in Denver. The facts of the story are well known and can be found on the Internet, in the movie 'Invictus', as well as in books. This is the story that he told:

“Andrew Young, former ambassador to the United Nations, tells this story, this parable of power, about an experience he had in South Africa when he was visiting at the invitation of Nelson Mandela. For years Mandela was a leading opponent of apartheid, South Africa's official policy of racial segregation. In 1964, the white establishment locked him up for life. But as his legend grew, so did the worldwide campaign to set him free. He was released in 1990. When apartheid was abolished, and South Africa held its first democratic elections in the spring of 1994, Nelson Mandela was elected president.

Thirteen months later, Mandela invited Andy Young to be his guest when South Africa hosted the Rugby World Cup Tournament. Now rugby is a white man's game. The South African team, like most rugby teams, is entirely white. And South Africa is about 80 percent black. So, even though the world championship was being played right there in Johannesburg, there was a deliberate absence of support for the team.

As the tournament approached, a heated debate broke out about the South African team symbol -- a leaping gazelle called a "springbok." Most of the white Afrikaners said, "The springbok has been the symbol of every rugby team we've ever had." Most black South Africans said, "Exactly! It reminds us of South Africa's racist history, and we want it changed." It was an explosive situation.

Now, Nelson Mandela has impeccable political sensibilities. More importantly, he understands the saving power of grace. A few days before the opening game, Mandela visited the South African team. After the visit, he called a press conference. Mandela showed up wearing a rugby jersey and an athletic cap with the team mascot, a springbok, on it. The newspaper and TV reporters were there and recorded it all. Mandela said that until the elections, he and most other black people in South Africa had always supported whoever was playing against the Springboks. "But regardless of the past," he said, "these are our boys now. They may all be white, but they're our boys, and we must get behind them and support them in this tournament."

The next day, the Springboks' coach sent word for his players not to show up in their practice gear. He told them to wear their suits and ties. He took them out to Robben Island, to the prison where Nelson Mandela had spent nearly three decades of his life behind bars. The coach and every player on the team walked into Mandela's cell.

As they stood there, the coach said, "This is the cell where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. He was kept here for 27 years by the racist policies of our government. We Afrikaners tolerated his imprisonment for all those years, and yet he has backed us publicly. We can't let him down."

The tournament opened, and the Springboks played above their heads. To everyone's surprise, they won their first game. In fact, they made it into the final game against New Zealand, a perennial power in rugby. It was like Slippery Rock playing Notre Dame. And yet, at the end of regulation, the game was tied.

President Mandela was in the stands, wearing a Springbok jersey. During the timeout, he brought a South African children's choir out of the stands. They sang an old African miners' song which to them is sort of like Swing Low, Sweet Chariot was to the slaves in this country. Within minutes, 65,000 people in the stadium were standing and singing this black African miners' song. Andy said, "I don't know anything about rugby, and I don't understand the words of the song, but I was in tears."

When the Springboks took the field, they were unstoppable. They won the World Rugby Championship. And for the next 24 hours, whites danced with blacks in the streets of South Africa. One of the most divided nations on the planet was united by something some people consider insignificant -- a rugby match. But God used it to help heal a nation. (--As told by Bishop Bevel Jones)

Many will say that this is a heart-warming sports story that happened in another country. Others will say that this is a story about life in South Africa. Some will say that they don't **like** Rugby, so what is the point? Well, these are understandable considerations, but they all miss the point of the bishop's sermon.

Hopefully for us, the story means much more than that. Did the Bishop explain the point of using this story? I am fairly sure that he did. It is a story with an important meaning behind it. But not the meaning is not same for everyone. Delegates at a Methodist Convention vs those at a Proud Boys gathering will likely have quite different interpretations. Hanging on every word may clash with reality in 1996 vs 2021.

Certainly, it should cause us to consider how it impacts our lives today. But is this a parable? I don't think so.

A parable is a fictitious or made-up story designed to teach a lesson through comparison. Many times, the explanation of the parable is given at the end. Hopefully, the listener will be able to relate to it. The following is offered as an illustration.

One day two frogs were hopping in and out of a watering hole and accidentally hopped in an extremely deep hole. They tried to leap out, but had no success, so they began to yell and croak until other frogs heard them and came to help. The other frogs looked over into the hole and said the hole was too deep for them to help, but both frogs kept leaping up the sides of the hole. The other frogs, leaning over the hole and waving their front legs, began to yell to the frogs to just give up and die and that there was **no** hope of them getting out of the hole, but both frogs kept leaping and trying to get out. They leaped for hours and one of the frogs just gave up. He was too exhausted and died. The other frog in the hole kept leaping, and the other frogs, leaning over the hole, kept yelling, and waving their front legs for him to stop and give up, but the frog kept leaping trying to get out of the hole. Finally, the frog leaped so high that he was able to leap to the top of the hole and used his back legs to push himself up out and out. The others said: "even though we told you to give up and there was no hope of you getting out of

the hole, you kept leaping". The frog that got out, thanked the other for egging him on. - they did not realize that this frog was deaf.

Lesson: Sometimes you must turn a "deaf ear" to what others tell you is impossible.

There you have it. Message explained. Nothing to unravel.

Jesus was not so clear with his stories. We have two parables today. Obviously, Jesus would have used examples that his audience could relate to. Most of the time, Jesus gave no solutions or easy answers. Even the disciples asked for explanations as to what the parables meant. This is part of a series of several parables about the Kingdom of God. Society today, being what it is with technology, and the speed at which life happens, wants Jesus to get to the point. The Kingdom of God is this, this, **and this**. One Bullet point after another. No need for explanation because it is clear, concise, and we are free to agree, or not, and move on with our lives. We have heard about the mustard seed many, many times. As well as multiple sermons as to how small a mustard seed is and how big it would grow. But one of three things usually occur for us. Either we hear further explanation from the priest as to what Jesus might have been saying, or we do some research on our own and think about what it might mean for our lives at that point in time, or we hope that the sermon will mercifully end soon so we can still make the kickoff. I am not so sure what Jesus was trying to say with the first parable. It pretty much encapsulates all that I know about growing anything. You throw seed on the ground, and it grows. I know not how. Which is why I skipped right over it and went directly to the mustard seed.

By preaching to his followers in parables, Jesus let each listener make the Good News become her own story, her own experience. As we are swept up in the story, we ourselves become part of a new parable -- the parable of our lives. Taken all together,

our individual experiences of the kingdom, our personal stories of God's work and witness in our lives, end up creating a new gospel.

But it does not just happen, we must help.

Each of us has our own living gospel story. It changes day by day based upon our Christian experience. Like any vital way of life, there will be ups and downs, successes, and failures. This is part of being human. Our gospels develop within a community of believers.

It is the job of all of us, as Jesus' disciples, to come together, and plug into the parable power running through each other's lives. Our gospels are to be shared. Because we know the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John -- the gospels of Augustine, Aquinas, and Avila -- the gospels of Luther, Calvin, and Wesley-- the gospels of our grandparents, our Sunday school teachers, our fellow Episcopalians in the Diocese of Michigan-- we, as a community of faith, work together to discern in what new direction each week's parable power will take us. Like any Christian storyteller, our job is do the telling to whoever might listen. Plant the seed and let it grow.

Amen!