

Entertaining Stories

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Preachers are frequently embarrassed that their listeners remember the stories they tell but have misplaced the messages those stories were meant to convey. We craft carefully thought-out and theologically proper sermons but what everyone remembers is the story about the black child eating his ice cream cone on the steps of the Mississippi courthouse. No wonder some preachers have suggested reducing preaching to storytelling. And no wonder still others have demanded that preachers curb their stories, make them heel and come under control. It is frustrating to stir a sermon together and then watch someone pick all the raisins out of it.

We can take some grim comfort in recognizing that the same thing seems to have happened to Jesus. Though he may have gone “about all Galilee . . . preaching the gospel of the kingdom,”¹ what everyone remembered were his stories. Jesus’ followers remembered the metaphors he spoke and the things he did, but they were most powerfully affected by the stories he told. Some of his followers went so far as to say that the stories were all there was to his public preaching.² If “preaching the gospel of the kingdom” was a univocal platform of social and political reform, as some interpreters would have it, we must sadly conclude that the sermon has been lost, only the stories remain, and the Kingdom of God is as mysterious as ever. Twenty centuries of church history bear testimony that the architectural drawings which may be reconstructed from the parables of Jesus are exceedingly hazy. What social policy shall we derive from the parable of the workers in the vineyard? What economic strategies does the parable of the dishonest steward counsel? It is not surprising that when Paul and his followers went to the Gentiles they straightaway abandoned preaching the kingdom and preached instead “the gospel . . . the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith.”³ Even then, however, the church of the New Testament communities did not forget the stories Jesus preached but told them again and again and hammered them into different shapes to retell them. Whatever might have been misplaced in their memory of Jesus, whatever they transfigured in the process of interpretation, the church remembered the stories.

Finding Traction

What is it about stories⁴ that causes them to be remembered when everything else sloughs away? And what is it that causes preachers to be embarrassed by this phenomenon? The answer to both questions is one and the same: stories entertain. They amuse us. They capture our attention beyond even our conscious interest in the story. This happens and that happens. “And what happens next?” we want to know. Even when we do not like a story we

may find a certain stickiness that keeps us from putting it away before it is through entertaining us. We delight in stories, but we do not delight, however, in the notion that stories entertain. Preaching is far too serious to consider trivial matters like entertainment. Our goals in preaching, as variously we may define them, are more substantial than merely entertaining our auditors. Indeed, in some circles there is a deep suspicion of entertaining sermons and a dismissal of preachers for pandering to the taste of the congregation. The good sermon is known by its ponderous stolidity, a sure sign of serious theology and uncompromising attention to the Scriptures. Preaching, therefore, has a divided mind about stories: we, no less than others, are enchanted by stories, but we are not quite certain we should allow ourselves such luxurious (and perhaps even sinful) entertainments.

More careful investigation of the entertaining quality of story may salve our guilty misgivings. "Entertain" comes from the Old French, *entretenir*, "to hold together," and so do our stories "hold together" the basic "stuff" of human experience. The powerful appeal of the story, that is, its entertaining quality, rests in the story's closeness to immediate human experience. Experiential/existential psychotherapists suggest that the language which facilitates personality transformation is a language which stays close to the surface of human experience. One of the theoreticians of that most praxis-oriented school, Eugene Gendlin, offers this definition of experience:

. . . by experiencing we mean a *felt* process. We mean inwardly sensed, bodily felt events, and we hold that the concrete "stuff" of personality or of psychological events is this flow of bodily sensing or feeling.

Experiencing is the process of concrete, bodily feeling, which constitutes the basic matter of psychological and personality phenomena.⁵

Understood in this way, the basic verities of human experience are pre-narrative and inarticulate. Our experience is raw and naked, physical and sensate. In order to articulate our experience and reflect upon it, we speak in the shape of story, joining one thing to another in time.⁶ Stephen Crites has argued persuasively that "the formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative."⁷ Carol Christ has written:

In a very real sense, there is no experience without stories. There is a dialectic between stories and experience. Stories give shape to experience, experience gives rise to stories.⁸

However we may conceive of the relationship between human experience and story, we can see that the story's power "to entertain" is generated by its very closeness to the raw, unformed energies of human experience. Michael Novak has written evocatively of this generative power:

Religious studies derive from roots sunk in the concrete earth: from dance, exultation, song, despair, pain. At the origins of all great religions are sweat, sperm, a woman's cry, soil, grapes, tears, blood. No matter how "spiritual" language about religion may seem, an effort to discern the root, earthy experiences which lend it human authenticity will invariably be repaid To be sure, the great religions have tried to seize and

shape the great psychic energies that spring from earth. When their tie with earth is cut, they die.⁹

To “seize and shape” these energies and to appropriate and to come to terms with their power, people tell stories. And when we listen to a story the tensions and ambiguities of the narrative replicate our own efforts to make sense of our living. Whenever we attempt to give voice to our experience in any language more articulate than a gasp or a scream, we almost inevitably wind up telling a story. “Only narrative form,” says Crites, “can contain the tensions, the surprises, the disappointments and reversals and achievements of actual temporal experience.”¹⁰ Therefore, says Barbara Hardy,

. . . we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories. . . .¹¹

Stories entertain because they derive from and so powerfully engage human experience.

If there is anything the church has viewed dubiously, even more than entertainment or stories, it is human experience. Tom Driver has written:

. . . the Christian religion has often (most often) betrayed itself by subordinating experience to the “higher” aims of salvation and obedience. Indeed, I find in the churches very often a deep suspicion of experience, as if life were bound to lead one into error and has to be tolerated out of necessity.¹²

Given our mistrust of experience, our hesitancy to entertain and our ambivalence about stories, preachers are tempted to solve the contradictions by taming stories into something manageable.

We tell utilitarian stories. We shave away the tensions and sand down the ambiguities until the story comes down to one neat little point. The story becomes something useful. As it comes to its conclusion listeners do indeed get the point (that is, the reason the story was told in the first place) and the story is conveniently disposable. The story slips away, leaving only the point it was meant to score—or so we should very much like to believe. The presuppositions for this kind of storytelling embody a theology and an understanding of personality most preachers would find difficulty affirming: that faith is generated by transmitting propositional messages and that growth occurs by simply rearranging the furniture of the conscious mind. A neat, propositional point, however true and good it may be, does not profoundly engage our experiential world. Using a metaphor that sounds remarkably familiar, Bruno Bettelheim speaks of a story’s probing of the unconscious:

Listening to a fairy tale and taking in the images it presents may be compared to the scattering of seeds, only some of which will be implanted in the mind of the child. Some of these will be working in his conscious mind right away; others will stimulate processes in his unconscious. Still others will need to rest for a long time until the child’s mind has reached

a state suitable for their germination, and many will never take root at all. But those seeds which have fallen on the right soil will grow into beautiful flowers and sturdy trees—that is, give validity to important feelings, promote insights, nourish hopes, reduce anxieties—and in doing so enrich the child's life at the moment and forever after.¹³

Jay McInerney's novel, *Bright Lights, Big City* provides a text for preachers to contemplate:

On your desk is a short story that you have been wanting to read. You follow the lines of print across the page, and it's like driving on ice with bald tires; no traction. You get up and fix yourself a cup of coffee.¹⁴

The story told solely to make its point begins slipping away even as it is being told. No traction. Listeners sense an "off-taste," like those individually wrapped processed cheese slices that taste more like the plastic they are wrapped in than the cheese that was used to make them. The story which "illustrates perfectly" has exactly that problem to it: it illustrates perfectly. First, it illustrates, it is not robust with the "stuff" of human experience but is an abstraction from and an adulterant to human experience. And second, it does so perfectly. In a notoriously imperfect and ambiguous existence the story which fits "perfectly" may be too slick to ever claim traction in the life of the hearer. Though it may satisfy for a moment it will not travel far. Robert E.C. Browne spoke of "the essential untidiness of the gospel."¹⁵ We have it in us to preach sermons and tell stories so slick that they are even more certain than the gospel itself. We may occasionally need such disposable and useful stories to illustrate this or make that point, but even more we need stories which purchase traction in our experience by mirroring and interpreting the complexity and ambiguity of our living.

To plead for more ambiguity and shadowed meanings in our sermons and stories sounds like the most hopeless of tasks. Are we not plagued enough by the vagaries of communicating even the clearest message from one person to another?¹⁶ Certainly we do not want to exalt confusion and enthrone fuzziness. But just as certainly there always remains that "essential untidiness of the gospel" which evades even our best-intentioned efforts to straighten it up. Nowhere do we see this more clearly (or more ambiguously) than in the stories Jesus himself told.

Learning from the parables

The modern history of critical scholarship on the parables may be instructive for preachers. The allegorical interpretation developed by Origen and so artfully employed by Augustine¹⁷ reigned as *the* hermeneutic for understanding the parables until one hundred years ago (1888) when the first volume of Adolph Julicher's *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* appeared. "In his study Julicher was strongly influenced by Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and viewed the parables primarily as rhetorical devices rather than poetic ones."¹⁸ While the allegorists had found a plethora of meanings in each detail of the stories, Julicher argued

that a parable had but “one point of comparison and that point had to be the one with the widest possible application.”¹⁹ The single points Julicher proposed for the parables “read like a manifesto of nineteenth-century German liberal theology.”²⁰ Though Julicher’s specific points failed to convince, his insistence that the stories had one and only one point of comparison “became a dogma of parable exegesis only slightly less rigid than the dogmatism that earlier allegorical exegesis had buttressed.”²¹ Even when scholars could come to no agreement what the single points of the parables were, they were convinced that each of the parables preached but a single point. Like everything else in the 1960’s, parable scholarship began to shake loose. Robert Funk spoke of “The Parable as Metaphor”²² with meanings not reducible to points and ordinary discursive language. Or, as Sallie McFague puts it, “Metaphors cannot be ‘interpreted’—a metaphor does not *have* a message, it *is* a message.”²³ Amos Wilder brought the tools of the literary critic to bear on these stories and was heard to be saying things like:

Jesus, without saying so, by his very way of presenting man, shows that for him man’s destiny is at stake in his ordinary creaturely existence, domestic, economic and social. This is the way God made him. The world is real. Time is real. Man is a toiler and an “acter” and a chooser. The parables give us this kind of humanness and actuality. There is no romance or idealization here, no false mysticism, and no miracles, no impulse toward escape into fantasy or into sentimentality. We have stories, indeed, but they stay close to things as they are.²⁴

Other scholars began to speak of the meanings of parables using terms like “polyvalence” and “plurisignificance” and “multiple interpretations.”²⁵ Far from preaching a single discrete “point,” parables seem to trace a trajectory of possible significances. The “meaning” of the parable is not found by Gnostic investigations of the text in isolation from the distractions of human life but comes to light as the story becomes incarnate in the experiential world of the reader/listener.²⁶ The entertaining quality of the story, that is, its power to excite, challenge and perhaps even transform human experience, far from being merely a vehicle for a message, has come to be understood as intrinsic to the mission of the parable.

Acknowledging the final ambiguity of such stories could drive preachers to a kind of careless despair: “no one hears the meaning I’m trying to convey, it’s all a matter of ‘well, what it means to me is . . .’ Why bother?” Or it can challenge preachers to a more thoughtful crafting of the stories they allow to roam the sanctuary. How should we tell our stories? And what kind of stories should we tell?

Telling stories

Taking cues from the stories Jesus told and from contemporary literary critical scholarship we may think of several things worth striving for in our stories.

First, we shall want to stay close to human experience. As Wilder pointed

out, our "destiny is at stake . . . in ordinary human experience." In our stories we bump against the hard, tangible artifacts of our living: people, things, moments. Certainly in our preaching we will need to think on these things using discursive language and theological reflection, but our analytical musings will follow from the narrative rather than imposing themselves upon it. Our language will be like John Updike's description of the writings of Herman Melville and Walt Whitman: ". . . the words sing, burn and live; they have the exciting difficulty of reality itself, and the pressure and precision of things that exist."²⁷

Second, we shall not bear false witness against the world God has given us by paring away every tension and ambiguity in our stories. A single reading of the gospel of Mark will tell us that our need to banish tension and ambiguity from our preaching has more to do with our understanding of our calling than it does about the gospel we are called to preach. Tension is that "what comes next?" quality of a story that some homileticians call for when they ask for a sermon to be "story-shaped." Not every sermon can be or should be story-shaped but it is not too much to ask that every sermon summon listeners forward to "what comes next?" as they seek a resolution of tension. Because reality does not always offer soothing resolutions we are left with an inevitable residue of ambiguity. Preaching loses traction when it fails to account for the sheer difficulty and complexity of our world. Announcing "the biblical view of" and "the Reformed perspective on" may diminish or clarify this ambiguity but it by no means demolishes it. As a matter of fact, a heavy-handed use of authority may only convince listeners of what they have always feared: that Christian faith truly is remote from the world in which they live and the experience of their own humanness. We can tolerate the tension and ambiguity as long as we can somehow believe that in the very midst of it our experience does have transcendent meanings. Our stories can point to precisely that.

Third, we shall seek to allow character, motivation, and meaning to emerge from the stories we tell. In his studies of the parables, Rudolf Bultmann noticed: "only seldom are the characters portrayed by some attribute. . . . For the most part people are characterized by what they say or do, or how they behave."²⁸ The story that begins "John Evans, a fine Christian businessman," is as predictable in its course as the encounter of Christian and Mr. Money-love in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Both are allegories at heart. Jesus' parables, on the other hand, required listeners to engage themselves in making decisions about the character, motivation, and meaning of the actors in the story. Our stories gain traction as they invite listeners to enter into the plot and draw their own conclusions.

Fourth, we shall want to tell stories that not only score points and provide answers but also stories which raise questions and are open-ended in their very indeterminateness. Jesus' parables are known for their provocative disruptions. Indeed, reading the Gospels, we come to the odd conclusion that the communities of the New Testament retold the stories of Jesus not because they satisfactorily understood them but because they did not. Though enigmatic koans and Gnostic riddles may be quite out of place in preaching, surely there is room for the story which haunts us in its very indeterminateness. Elie Wiesel's

recollection of the hanging of the “sad-eyed angel” of Auschwitz has become scarcely less than canon for much of post-Holocaust Judaism.²⁹ In Christian preaching the story has most often been either trivialized to score christological points or spread out as a dark background on which to cast bright jewels of faith and hope. No matter how that story is “used,” however, its telling generates an evocative power beyond any discursive language to explain it.³⁰ One of the incidental blessings of storytelling in preaching is discovering a fresh humility: we are called to tell stories larger than our ability to “use” them, larger even than our ability to “grasp” them fully.

Finally, we shall seek (and be sought by) stories which replicate the richness of the faith to which we witness. Southern Presbyterians may remember from *The Book of Church Order* this rubric for preachers:

Preaching requires study, meditation and prayer. Ministers should prepare their sermon with care, and not indulge themselves in loose, extemporary harangues, *nor serve God with that which costs them nothing.*³¹

The most telling indictment of so many stock-in-trade “preacher stories” is not that they are somehow “bad,” but that they are essentially cheap goods. They cost us nothing. Perhaps the best and final test before allowing a story entry into our worship is just this: does it cost us something to tell this story? No matter whether the story came from Tolstoy or homiletical helps or even someone else’s sermon; no matter whether it is factual or fictional: does it cost something to tell it? (This is by no means to shrug away the serious ethical questions of “stolen stories” and uncited sources but simply to state the prior question, “is this story worth stealing?”) The usable illustration that slips through our consciousness without purchasing traction in our experience or spirituality may have a great deal less to recommend it than the odd-fitting story that somehow compels our attention. Our listeners want to know what is valuable and what matters. The tinny ring of cheap goods discourages them. They want and they deserve the treasures of which they have heard rumors. If we cannot exactly hand them that treasure we can at least tell stories costly enough to suggest we understand all that is at stake.

“Entertainment” seems too blithe a word for stories like that. But perhaps it is our notion of “entertainment” which is in need of rehabilitation. Some biblical literary critics are at work on that very project and have suggested that the storytellers of the people of God have always been about this suspicious business of entertaining. Richard Pervo, in his aptly titled *Profit With Delight*, suggests the author of the Acts of the Apostles actually intended to entertain his readers while converting them to Christian faith.³² Describing the narrative of David the King, David Gunn has written:

The purpose of the story, I have argued, is entertainment. . . . As with art, entertainment can mean different things. There is entertainment designed for simple amusement, to fill an idle hour and be forgotten and there is entertainment which demands the active engagement of those being entertained, which challenges their intellect, their emotions, their understanding of people, of society and themselves. It is in this

latter sense that I would speak of our narrative as a work of art and *serious* entertainment.³³

If preachers can entertain in such a daring and faithful way as that, who knows?: we may even be able to overcome our guilty embarrassment when a worshipper pumps our hand at the church door and says, "I really *enjoyed* that sermon!"

NOTES

¹ Matthew 4:23.

² Mark 4:33-34.

³ Romans 1:16.

⁴ A great and almost impenetrable debate goes on among literary critics as to the meaning of "story." At the same time writers of stories are "jazzing around" with the possibilities of story forms (to use John Gardner's phrase from *The Art of Fiction* [New York: Knopf, 1983], p. 94). In this essay, for heuristic purposes, I accept E.M. Forster's rather minimalist definition of story: "A story is a narrative of events arranged in time sequence." (E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* [Harcourt, Brace and World, 1954], p. 51.) Thus: "She stood at the corner and waited." is a perfectly adequate, though perhaps unsatisfying story.

⁵ Eugene Gendlin, "A Theory of Personality Change," in *Personality Change*, ed. Philip Worchel and Donn Byrne (John Wiley & Sons, 1964), p. 111.

⁶ We also seek out appropriate metaphors and symbol systems, but the limits of this essay do not permit an explication of their relationship to narrative.

⁷ Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 39, no. 3 (September, 1971), p. 291.

⁸ Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Beacon Press, 1980), pp. 4-5.

⁹ Michael Novak, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 24.

¹⁰ Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," p. 306.

¹¹ Quoted in Brian Wicker, *The Story-Shaped World: Fiction and Metaphysics: Some Variations on a Theme* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p. 47.

¹² Tom F. Driver, *Patterns of Grace: Human Experience as Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 169.

¹³ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Random House/Vintage Books, 1977), p. 154.

¹⁴ Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (Random House/Vintage Books, 1984), p. 102.

¹⁵ Robert E. C. Browne, *The Ministry of the Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), pp. 58-71.

¹⁶ See, for example, Clement Welsh, *Preaching in a New Key* (Pilgrim Press, 1974), pp. 11-46.

¹⁷ For an appreciative rehabilitation of Augustine's allegorical exegesis, preachers do well to read: William A. Beardslee, "Listening to the Parables of Jesus: An Exploration of the Uses of Process Theology in Biblical Interpretation," in *Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and Early Church Fathers*, ed. W. Eugene March (Trinity University Press, 1980), pp. 202-204.

¹⁸ John R. Donahue, S. J., *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. 7.

¹⁹ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, p. 8.

²² Robert W. Funk, "The Parable as Metaphor," In *Language, Hermeneutic and the Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 133-62.

²³ Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p. 71-72.

²⁴ Amos Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 74.

²⁵ See, for instance: Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations*, and Susan Wittig, "A Theory of Multiple Meanings," *Semeia* 9 (1977), pp. 75-103.

²⁶ Wittig, "A Theory of Multiple Meanings," p. 89.

²⁷ John Updike, "Emersonianism," *The New Yorker*, (June 4, 1982), p. 112.

²⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, quoted in Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition*, (London: S. P. C. K., 1966), p. 13.

²⁹ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (Avon Books), pp. 74-76.

³⁰ Indeed, preachers misjudging the power of this story from Elie Wiesel have often found it to be a "black hole" sucking both sermon and preacher into its collapsing spiral and allowing no light to pass beyond it.

³¹ *The Book of Church Order*, #207-3., The Presbyterian Church in the United States. Italics mine.

³² Richard Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). In a similar vein, see also: David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, Library of Early Christianity, ed. Wayne Meeks, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987).

³³ David M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 6 (1978), p. 61.