

Everybody Loves a Good Story

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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When I think about a story worth telling I think about Edwin Booth. Now you may know that last name because he's the brother of John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin. But before that, he was known as a great Shakespearean actor, and the son of the greatest Shakespearean actor in America. But Edwin was known as the greatest in the English speaking world at the time – his hamlet was known to be the greatest of the 19th century. A household name, but all of that of course changed when his brother decided to assassinate Lincoln. Never mind the fact that he famously saved Abraham Lincoln's son from certain death when he slipped and was almost run over by a train – one of those strange series of coincidences that the universe tends to throw us for. Ironically, Robert Lincoln of course recognized Edwin by his face – being a very famous actor. After the assassination, Edwin held up in his house, sure that no one wanted to see him act ever again, connected as he was to our nation's deep period of mourning for its leader. He was coaxed out of retirement briefly to play hamlet after an actor got sick, and he was sure he would be booed off the stage, but as he took his place to hear from Horatio about his father's ghost, he starts to utter his first line, but is stopped. The crowd is on its feet applauding, and applauding, and applauding for the greatest actor they had ever known. Now, if you want a story with an arc, a story with dips and turns, depressing moments and good, you want a story about Edwin Booth, about a man immortalized in a statue not of himself, but of himself playing Hamlet. You want people on their feet for one night only. You want self-doubt, limitation, and the great expanse of skill on display. You want real life in grandiose style.

Because we've all got stories don't we. Our lives are lived out as stories, the stories we tell aren't just words – they are how we make meaning of our lives and our meaning and place within this wild and wonderful world. They are important – these stories. No wonder that the rabbis and Jesus turned to stories when they wanted to talk about God. Jesus' famous introduction to stories, often called parables, is “the Kingdom of God is like...” IT's an image, a simile, an imperfect story about how the love of God is like someone who lost a coin, and has found it again, about a shepherd searching for sheep. That story about the lost coin isn't Jesus' alone by the way. Anyone who has lost something important and finally found it again knows that story. It is a story we've experienced and that's why it matters.

We make subtle advance on how we talk about God through stories. So the question is what kind of story are you telling? And I don't mean with words, I mean about how you're living your life. Are you telling a story about love that is stronger than death with how you live your life in these deeply troubling times? Are you spurred to acts of selflessness in a selfish world? Do you take time to listen to others? Talk is cheap, but

our actions in this world are telling a story that others are seeing played out in real time. An often repeated line in evangelical circles growing up is “Your life is the fifth gospel – what do people find out about God through observing you?” It still rings true. If faith is to matter today, it is because people of faith are different – they are compassionate, caring, and merciful.

Now, those are the stories that you are telling, but stories also fundamentally shape how we understand the world. They give us the tools to make sense of the world we live in. I am a Christian, because with all of the difficulties, ellipses, failures, and spectacular inadequacies of the story, it gives me a way to make sense of what I do in the world and why I do it. It forms a web of support for how I make meaning. Regardless of if that’s the story for you, there is some story that you have that is giving you meaning. That can be a religious story, a Buddhist story, for instance, or that can be a political story, or a personal story, but regardless we are narrative creatures. We have been telling stories – speculative stories – stories that are not real, or have no tangible reality for at least 15,000 years. So we’ve gotten quite good at it. What are the stories that empower you to make meaning of this brief, wondrous life that you have been given?

There are times that those stories may prove inadequate to hold the meaning of our lives. We change the story then – it may take years or decades to find a story again that makes meaning, but we usually do find some sort of story again. We usually come back to a way of making meaning of our lived experience. This week I lost two people close to me, and the story of course feels inadequate, heaving at the seams, the stitches stretch and either break or hold. That’s the beauty and complexity of life, isn’t it? We will always face things that stretch our stories and force us to rethink long held beliefs and principles. My faith has seen me let go of much and lay claim to much that I thought I had let go of long ago, but on new terms. At one point, I put away resurrection as a sort of fantastical idea of the early church, but I picked it back up again because I meet people in this line of work who have literally come back from the dead to talk about it, and so I believe in a God who is calling life from dead places, sometimes kicking and screaming.

One thing I am certain of, our lives do have an arc, a bending towards love and justice and completeness, a bending towards the sacred even in times of great difficulty. We sometimes lack the words for it – imagine that, a church that lacks the words for what it wants to talk about, but so it is. Better to be honest about the inadequacy of some words than to say something hollow. Better to be authentic about where we are than to pretend. I encourage that honesty as we try to find our individual and corporate arcs together. Honesty and vulnerability are the only path forward in life, especially the spiritual life. The good news that I can proclaim is that we do not do the work alone, never alone. And that is as good news as there can be in a world filled with loneliness. You are not alone.

Blessed Be.