

Telling Our Own Story

On this fourth Saturday in Lent, I feel as though we have a direct invitation from the Holy Spirit to consider the power and gravity of storytelling. We can consider the risks and benefits of attempting to tell our own story, attempting to tell someone else's story, listening as someone else tells their story, and listening as someone else attempts to tell another's story (or our own). God's love knows we have each experienced all 4 vantage points.

Let's be together in a moment of prayer, closing our eyes if it helps open our awareness to God's steady loving presence. Holy Loving Spirit, we are grateful for freedom to gather this morning – on the live stream and on this land, which has been loved by First Nations and others across time and where we are now weaving a way of community. God, we've just heard a story about a man whose neighbors grilled him about his experience and refused to believe his testimony. Open us to recognize opportunities for our own growth as sharers and receivers of stories. We ask this in the name of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

What a story the gospel writer shares with us today! It is important that we acknowledge up front that the gospel writers were fallible humans just like us. Each of them was a generation or more younger than Jesus. While they likely set out to relate stories about Jesus in ways that were true to the generation of storytellers on whose shoulders they stood, these writers surely added their own spin (one example of which we will examine this afternoon).

Let's dive in, open to what we can learn from the vibrant characters in today's story. I offer again our opening words from our neighbor – African American literary critic, historian, filmmaker and professor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

He stated prophetically: *“If you don't tell your stories, **other people will tell their story about you.** It's important that we nurture and protect these memories.”* Let's explore this compulsion we humans have to try to tell the other's story.

We heard Jesus' disciples articulate the age-old longing to be able to explain the existence of some of the toughest challenges in human life – including disabilities. Often the assumption that a disability is bad and only bad is layered on top of a non-disabled posture of wanting to explain why disabilities exist.

“As [Jesus] walked along,” we heard, “he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.’”

Jesus was of the mind and spirit that both blind and sighted neighbors are fully dignified people. God's works of love and justice can be revealed through each of us.

This story illustrates another aspect of ableism – an intrusive fascination for self-serving cognitive purposes. While it can be humanizing to directly ask one another about our experiences and identity, we sometimes need to check whether or not we might be seeking to understand another's story in order to calm our own mind by arriving to a place of setting that person's identity and situation in a neat little box with a bow on top inside our own brain.

We heard, *“The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am he.” **But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?”**”*

Good grief. I wish someone would have piped up to ask the religious leaders why they were so intent on arriving to an explanation that they could accept.

Here is the part of the story I find most powerful for good: *“The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’*

His parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son and that he was born blind, but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’”

I tend to think the man’s parents understood inspirational speaker and lawyer Iyanla Vanzant’s wisdom when she wrote: *“It’s important that we share our experiences with other people. Your story will heal you and your story will heal somebody else. When you tell your story, **you free yourself and give other people permission to acknowledge their own story.**”*

And herein lies some of the power of our weekly Lenten Vespers during which we are hearing from a different member of our community a story of struggle and growth each week of this season.

One of the writers or editors of the gospel of John couldn’t leave the parents’ integrity alone. They felt compelled to add spin in this aside: *“His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’”* But did anyone actually ask the man’s parents why it was important to them that their child have opportunity to tell his own story in his own voice?

I find it sadly fascinating how both the man who experienced healing and the religious leaders demonstrated the truth of our opening words from Kennedy School of Government author and lecturer Marshall Ganz, who wrote, *“When we tell our own story, **we teach the values that our choices reveal, not as abstract principles, but as our lived experience. We reveal the kind of person we are to the extent that we let others identify with us.**”*

And we hear what each of them reveals of themselves in some of the final grilling in the story. *“So for the second time they called the man [Jesus] who had been blind, and they said to him, ‘Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner... Then they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’ The man answered, ‘Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes... If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’ They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.”*

What did they reveal by sharing their perspectives? The man seemed to reveal himself to be open and brave in speaking exactly what he experienced. And, in part, the religious leaders that they were impervious at that time in their lives to the beauty and possibility in teachings beyond their own – which they held very dearly.

In today’s contemporary reading, Phiwa Langeni offers such lucid insight about the stuckness of the man’s neighbors (possibly our stuckness as well). So I invite you to close your eyes if you’re comfortable doing so and hold yourself open to wondering: With whom in my life do I need my powers of vulnerable sharing and receiving to come forth out of some of my stuckness. Let’s hear this spoken to us – some bits from Phiwa Langeni:

“...the people around him can’t make sense of what they see. They start questioning everything: his identity, his story, their memories of him... Their words circle around him without ever landing. They speak about him like he isn’t there. Like he’s never been there... Now, he stands in the center of their confusion. He hears their voices, their doubt, their unwillingness to look him in the eye. He speaks plainly: “I am he.” They’d grown used to knowing him by a single trait. When that changed, their certainty collapsed. He became unfamiliar. Easier to dismiss than to accept. Healing often moves faster than community. The person shifts while others cling to old narratives. The healed man’s presence challenged their comfort. His clarity disrupted their categories.”

In the relationship that comes to mind for you, may you be opened by the Holy Spirit to shifting - to more fully receive your own and others’ stories, because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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John 9:1-34, "Unrecognizable"