The Stories We Tell

Human beings like to tell stories. Granted, some people are better at it than others, but we all do it. We all tell stories. In fact, it’s a big part of who we are, and the stories we tell are probably more revealing of who we really are than almost anything else we do. By stories, I don’t just mean tales of things that have happened to us or that we’ve made up. I mean anything that we’ve seen or heard about or read somewhere, and then want to pass along to someone else. Because stories are how we communicate, how we communicate something more than just the bare facts.

One of the interesting things about the stories we tell is that every time we tell a story, it changes. To paraphrase an ancient Greek philosopher, one can never tell the same story twice, because no matter how many times you tell it, it’s never exactly the same story. You may use slightly different words each time you tell the story, or put the emphasis on a different facet of the story than you did before, all depending on when and why and to whom you’re telling the story. To say nothing of the fact that the story that someone tells is never exactly the story that someone else hears. In fact, if you tell a story to a roomful of people, every single person there is likely to hear a slightly different version of that one story. If I were to ask all of you to write down what you remember of our gospel lesson this morning, a story that’s one of the most familiar stories in the whole Bible, a story that we all know, still I suspect we’d have close to as many different versions of that one story as there are people here today.

Because that’s so, because stories—even stories that are written down—do change every time they’re told, stories that are told over and over again accumulate many layers of meaning. To borrow a musical term, they gain overtones that are present in our memories of the stories, whether anyone else hears those particular overtones or not. Not surprisingly, this is especially true of Biblical stories, stories that have been told over and over again for thousands of years now, and many of which we ourselves have heard dozens of times, if not more.

Since most of the stories in the Bible were passed down from generation to generation for years, in some cases maybe even for centuries, before ever being written down, those stories as they’ve come down to us very often reflect multiple layers of meaning. Even in the New Testament, the stories of Jesus’ life and accounts of his teachings, including the parables he told, were passed down in the church for a long time (perhaps 30-40 years) before they were written down, which is why we have different versions of what is obviously the same story in the various gospels. Nothing surprising about that. In fact, it would be surprising, even a little bit suspicious, if that were not the case. That’s just the way stories work. Because they’re not set in stone.

I’ve been reading a new biography of U. S. Grant, and I’ve gotten as far as the account of the battle of Shiloh, a battle that took place in April 1862 along the Tennessee River about a hundred miles east of Memphis. It’s a story I heard often growing up, because Shiloh was the closest major battlefield of the Civil War to us, and I visited the site on several occasions. One visit, though, that I remember in particular was going to Shiloh with my family when I was only 10 or 11 years old, and that day my father and I walked all over the battlefield. I remember very vividly my father pointing out to me the sunken road, and the bloody pond, and a place called the “hornet’s nest,” all places that played important roles in the battle, places where more Americans died than in any other single battle in our nation’s long history.
I remember, too, my father telling me about the death of Albert Sidney Johnston, the commander of the Confederate army there, who was killed on the afternoon of the first day of the battle and who died because he’d been badly wounded but no one could find the wound before he bled to death. He was replaced in command by a general named Beauregard, whose subsequent direction of the battle left much to be desired, both according to my father and every other account of the battle I’ve ever heard, including this new book.

I was reading this book, all that came back to me, all these things I hadn’t thought about in years, all the stories about Shiloh my father had told me now fifty plus years ago. But what really struck me is that, until just the other day, I’d never really thought about why or and how my father knew so much about Shiloh. I guess I just assumed that he must have read about it in a history book at some point, and no doubt he did. But why Shiloh instead of some other battle? What had never occurred to me is that he probably heard all these stories about Shiloh, about the sunken road and the bloody pond and the hornet’s nest and all the rest, from his grandfathers, both of whom had fought at Shiloh. If not from them—both of whom died when he was nine or ten years old—then from others in the family who had heard those stories from them.

I realized—fifty years after first hearing these stories—that my father’s stories about Shiloh were more than just stories about that one particular battle in the Civil War. They were for him the story of the entire war, in fact, for my father they were the story of the course of human history, which for him was simply the story of Shiloh writ large. Because the stories about the sunken road and the bloody pond and Johnston’s death were not just stories about one battle; they were my families’ version of the tragedy of so much of human history, the high cost of human pride and arrogance and ineptitude.

The same is true, though thankfully in a far more positive sense, of our gospel lesson today which is, as I mentioned earlier, one of the most familiar of all Biblical stories, the account of Jesus famously feeding a large crowd one day with only five loaves and two fish. It’s a wonderful story in and of itself, but the more you read this story, the more you begin to sense that there’s a whole lot more going on here than just Jesus feeding a lot of people one day a long time ago. I don’t doubt but that this story was told whenever Christians gathered for worship from the very earliest days of the church, even before they began scattering throughout the Mediterranean World, one of the reasons—I suspect—why it is the only one of the miracles of Jesus that is found in all four of the gospels. Because everyone had heard this story.

No doubt, as this story was told and re-told over the years, it changed, just like all stories do. It took on extra layers of meaning, those overtones I mentioned earlier, that are generated every time a story is told and reflect the circumstances of when and where the story was told. Most of the time we can only guess what those circumstances were when such stories were told in the church, and try to imagine why, but here, there’s a clue, a very strong clue, as to how this story was used. A clue, because the language that’s used here in the story echoes the language that was used on a particular occasion in the early church, language in fact that is still used in the church even today.

Do you remember the story? Jesus was preaching to the crowd on a hillside in Galilee and it began to grow late, and his disciples urged him to send everyone home so they could find something to eat. And Jesus says, “No, don’t send them away. You find them something to eat.” “But all we’ve got is five loaves and two fish,” they say. Then Matthew tells us that Jesus, taking the loaves, “looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the bread, and gave it to them…” He blessed and broke the bread and gave it to them... That sound familiar? It’s the language of the Lord’s Supper, of course, and how did the language of the Lord’s Supper find its way into
Matthew’s account of this story? Likely because this story was told over and over again at the Lord’s Supper, until slowly but surely everyone’s memory of this story included the language of the Lord’s Supper. That’s what stories do.

Which is why for us, like those early Christians who told this story over and over again, it’s a lot more than just the account of an incident that took place years ago on a hillside in Galilee. It’s a story that continues to take place and unfold among us here today, both the story of a miracle that happened long ago and the miracle that continues to happen among us even now, every time someone says, “But we can’t do that,” and someone else replies, “Oh yes, we can,” in that sure faith that the Lord will provide, just as the Lord has provided over and over again. And how do we know that the Lord provides? Because we’ve all heard the stories!

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,*

*to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever…*