

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON from Aug 22: "I Love to Tell the Story" Matthew 19:21-24, Romans 16:1-2, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, John 6:53-58, 60, 66  
This week we consider the hymn "I Love to Tell the Story". It was written by Katherine Hankey in England during the mid 1800s. It actually traces to the movement within the Anglican church started by the Wesleys decades prior and egged on by the powerful preaching of George Whitfield. At its outset, Methodism was primarily embraced by the common folk of the time. The affluent and influential didn't gravitate much towards it.

In Katherine's time, this changed. The upper class came to engage this more active faith that blended personal and social holiness in a way that encouraged the development of spiritual disciplines to deepen faith and at the same time live that faith out in acts of compassion and service to those around them. The wealthy and powerful took to it so strongly that one historian noted that there had never been such an influential group in the history of the Anglican church.

In London, there was a particularly influential group in the Clapham area. This became known as the "Clapham Sect". Katherine's father was a wealthy banker, and the family was part of this group. For her part, she organized Sunday School programs around her area and it was known that these projects exerted a strong influence in the region.

At 30 years old, Katherine became very ill. The recovery period took a long time. As she recovered, she wrote. Specifically, she wrote a poem that was broken into two parts, each 50 verses long. The first was called "The Story Wanted", and the second "The Story Told." From this second half she pulled these verses to create a hymn that stands the test of time. Being a musician herself she composed the original tune, however at a service at a YMCA another composer was moved as the evangelist closed the sermon citing the words of this hymn. He composed his own tune, which is the familiar one used today.

As we consider this hymn, there are certainly many things we could draw from it. For our part, we will focus on two. The first comes from the backstory, and the second from the hymn itself.

The story reminds me of a conversation with Dan Snyder, a classmate of mine in seminary. About six of us were having lunch at the Pita Pit when Dan shared an epiphany he'd had. Recently he'd heard a sermon that very much demonized and criticized the wealthy. The assumption was not new, and it presumed that to have wealth carried with it character defects of being greedy, stingy, prideful, and so forth. This sentiment is often bolstered by the familiar passage that it's "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God", and that you "can't serve two masters...you can't serve both God and money."

Dan's point was that it made no sense for preachers to handle the wealthy in this manner. The stereotype was not applicable to all people of means. There are and always have been many people of affluence who are marvelously generous and faithful. We see the case of Phoebe in the book of Romans who was said to be a benefactor of a great many people and causes. Phoebe is considered to have been a well-off woman who was quite generous in support of the early church and its ministry. Rather than criticizing and bashing, we should be encouraging those who have an abundance of resources to embrace their unique position and opportunity to give freely into the ministry and mission of the church.

When we consider the three "Ts" of stewardship, Time, Talent, and Treasure, if any of these are in abundance in our lives it gives a unique position and opportunity to use that abundance to further the gospel. Those who don't have that abundance have their own giftedness and role as well. All are called upon to use their individual situation in service to God.

Sadly, the stereotypes that pervade the world do creep in to the church. In this case not only are there the stereotypes we've noted that those who have little might hold towards those with much, there are also stereotypes that those with much might hold towards those with little. There are assumptions that those with little are somehow deficient, lazy, or lacking in motivation. Just like those other assumptions, these too do not hold true in many if not most circumstances.

One of the pitfalls of these assumptions talking hold is that it tempts us to engage in the all too human habit of comparing ourselves to one another. Comparison sets us on shaky ground regarding God's calling in our lives. If I compare myself to another, I can become harsh with myself feeling inadequate or puffed up feeling like I'm doing so much more than another. In the end, it's actually futile, because God isn't worried about how I'm doing relative to someone else. Our lives are so complicated and a unique blend of all we are and have been through that comparison is pointless. What is God concerned with? Whether or not I am living into my calling to the best of my ability and is fully as possible.

The truth is that when we get sucked into this kind of trap, and focusing on the material, we take a sharp departure from what matters in God's economy. The story of the widow's mite is the perfect illustration of God's idea of wealth.

The church was taking the offering, and it was in a time when the giving was very public. Everyone could see what everyone else was giving. Many gave substantial sums, but the poor old widow who had nothing to her name put in a meager offering. Those who gave much more must have been sneering at this "pitiful" offering because they were immediately scolded. "You gave out of your abundance, she gave out of her need. Indeed she gave everything she has." What the wealthy gave they wouldn't miss, but the widow, that gift hurt. In this we see the measure of wealth in God's economy.

God's economy isn't about the material things we have, it's about our willingness to sacrifice. It's about the compassion and love we have in our hearts and share with the world. These are the things of value and things that last. God's economy is far less about what we have and far more about how faithfully we use what we have. How do we use these things to tell the story?

Looking into the hymn itself, this becomes a relevant question. How do we tell the story? We know what the story is but do we

communicate it in a way that it can be heard for all its power? If we listen to the verses, we see that the message is that telling the story is more than just repeating what we know of the gospel. It's also about how the gospel story intertwines with our own story. Too frequently the story is told in ways that are uninspiring and even alienating to those not familiar with Christianity, particularly the lingo we use. Try to separate yourself from the assumptions held that allow us to hear the story and the language used in a way that is assuring and hopeful. The message truly is this, but imagine hearing it told as we so often do and how you'd react.

Are you washed in the blood? "What?" Are you washed in the blood? "First, ew. Second that's disgusting and horrifying. I prefer soap and water thank you." No no no. That's just an expression we use. It means that our forgiveness was secured by all the blood that Jesus shed when He was crucified. Sin is seen as having made us dirty, and forgiveness washes that away. "Jesus was God's son right?" Yes. "So what you're telling me is that the only way this "loving" God would forgive us is to offer up His own child as a blood sacrifice?"

To not be privy to what we already know and many of us have been raised with most of our lives makes that story sound fairly mad. It can repel rather than compel. Particularly in our day and age where so many self-instruct with the mass of information at our fingertips, there must be a better way to get the message across.

Jesus Himself fell into this trap. In John 6 He is addressing the mass of people and repeatedly using language like "eat my flesh" and "drink my blood", and that to not do this means people have no part in His Kingdom. Over and over again He repeats this. The result? With the exception of very few, the masses head for the hills. Why?

They likely headed out because the language used is communion language. The problem? Communion hadn't been instituted yet. There was no symbolic reference point to soften the edges of the message. Without that reference point, those words sound like an invitation to cannibalism. Whether or not later those masses understood in hindsight, we don't know. We do know that the message fell flat. So what makes the difference? The difference is context.

How did the early church try to persuade the Jews? They expounded on scripture that both they and the Jews agreed was authoritative. The words inspired by God had foretold the coming of Jesus. This was a bedrock reference point.

With the Gentiles it was different. They didn't have that reference point. Paul famously used an idol to that "unknown god" as a vehicle to offer his perspective on God and Christ. In Corinthians he also pens the familiar words that he "becomes all things to all people so that by all means some might be saved." While in John we saw Jesus fail to persuade, what were His most effective tools in ministry to teach? Parables. He used the experiences and wording that were familiar and understandable to get His point across and inspire.

The early church persuaded through their example. The way that loved one another and supported one another was unique and inspiring. It demonstrated that there is another way to exist together, and that community when modeled on Christ brings a piece of heaven to earth.

It wasn't just telling the story of Jesus, it was telling it in a way that was visible in how they lived, explained in the context people found themselves, and intertwined with their own stories. We call this our Testimony, and scripture lifts up the effectiveness of the message is linked to the power of our Testimony.

Our Testimony is our story. We share our experiences of God because they are inarguable. We know they happened. These stories are intimately personal and often have points of contact with which whomever we are speaking can relate. This also is something that takes a great deal of courage.

It takes courage because the most compelling parts of our story are often the parts that involve vulnerability, pain, tragedy, and brokenness. To the non-believer, it's easy to hang on to our faith when things are rosy and wonderful. Of course we praise God when life is grand. What about when the bottom drops out? Where is God then? How does God pull us through? We share the Spirit that was with us in our hearts, and how God uses those around us, especially other believers, to see us to the other side of the circumstance.

What about the questions though? "I know lots of decent loving people that don't believe in God. How do you know it's God and not just that those folks are naturally decent and just attributing it to God?" For us, 1 John tells us that "God is love." Every act of love is a reflection of God. Every act of love is prompted by the Spirit of God, whether or not someone recognizes that it's God is another matter. Just because I don't recognize something doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

"What about all the evil in the world? How can a loving God allow this?" That evil exists is actually a testimony to God's love. Ultimately that evil is the result of poor choices that we make. That we have the ability to choose is an act of love. To be in relationship with God requires authentic choice. To love God isn't genuine love if it's forced rather than freely given. In order to allow us to love, despite the pain it causes, God gives us the gift of freedom of will.

Putting things in context and sharing our story allows for conversation. We're not talking at someone. We are talking with someone. The connection of sharing our story grows because often as we share ours, the other begins to share theirs. It becomes a conversation. Even if we don't make a convert, perhaps we make a friend. If we make a friend what does that do? It gives us more opportunities to have our story intersect with theirs, and we share what God has done for us and through us in both word and likely far more frequently in deed.

This is your homework. Reflect on your story. Where have you experience God and how? No one has a story just like yours. You own it, and it contains great power to shine Christ in the world. Keep it right at the forefront of the mind. Sometimes we get caught off guard and later think of all the things we could have said in a given situation. Knowing our own stories because we've sat with them keeps it fresh and at the ready.

The hope is that taking the time is empowering and encouraging. There may be treasures you haven't thought of in a long time that will come back and inspire all over again. The encouragement is that little by little, if we tell the story in a way that can be heard, the world will change by the power of our Testimony.