

Can You Relate?

March 27, 2022

Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

Pastor David Labuhn

In 1748, the British politician and aristocrat John Montagu, the 4th Earl of Sandwich, used a lot of his free time for playing cards. One of the problems he had was that he greatly enjoyed eating snacks while he played cards. It was messy and cumbersome to eat and still keep one hand free to hold the playing cards. So he came up with an idea. He placed slices of beef between slices of toast and was able to eat and play cards at the same time. Eating his newly invented "sandwich," the name for two slices of bread with meat in between became one of the most popular meal inventions in the western world.

Now you are not very likely to forget the story of who invented the sandwich because I related it to you as a story. Or at least, you are more likely to do so than if it had been presented in bullet points or another purely information-based form. For over 27,000 years, ever since the first cave paintings were discovered, telling stories has been one of our most fundamental communication methods.

Tonight, the film industry will be honoring the films and personnel who make those films at their annual Academy Awards Ceremony. This is the 94th time that they have done this. They do so to recognize the best products and talent in their line of work. And, their line of work is one form of that age-old craft, telling stories. Now, they tell stories through the means of film using a lot of technical support, but it still amounts to telling a story. And the

actors and actresses are the ones who portray that story. And just like my illustration for the invention of the sandwich, who could forget some of those stories that have been honored with an Oscar? Well, maybe you forgot the plot lines, but you remember the titles and some of the characters of those stories. Remember Mutiny on the Bounty (vicious Captain Bligh), Gone With the Wind (Frankly, I don't give a darn), West Side Story (Maria, Maria), Patton (There he goes, old blood and guts... his glory... our guts), The Sound of Music (The von Trapp family), Dances with Wolves (Lt. John Dunbar and the Lakota Sioux), A Beautiful Mind (John Nash and his wife Alicia and a Nobel Prize), The King's Speech (overcoming a speech impediment), Schindler's List (a story of salvation in the 1930s), Forest Gump (life is like a box of chocolates), and Titanic (a love story that ends tragically in the sea). In fact, I would dare say that you may have even gone back to look at those film stories more than once. We all enjoy a good story, whether it's a novel, a movie, or simply something one of our friends is explaining to us that they've experienced. But why do we feel so much more engaged when we hear a narrative about events? Why are we so attracted to stories? It's really quite simple.

When we hear facts, the data processing centers in our brains are activated. If we listen to a PowerPoint presentation with boring bullet points, certain parts of the brain get activated. Scientists call these Broca's area and Wernicke's area. Overall, it hits our language processing parts in the brain, where we decode words into meaning. And that's it, nothing else happens. When we are told a story, things change dramatically. When we hear stories, the sensory centers of our brains are activated. Not only

are the language processing parts in our brain activated, but other areas in our brain are stimulated with the increase in the production of a hormone called oxytocin. Oxytocin is a “feel good” hormone. It boosts our feelings of things like trust, compassion, and empathy. It motivates us to work with others and positively influences our social behavior. Because of this, stories have a unique ability to build connections.

Neuroscientists at Princeton University studied this phenomenon. They found that speakers’ and listeners’ brains exhibited joint, temporarily coupled response patterns while listening to a well-told story. What that means is that when listening to a well-told story, the exact same area of the brain light up on an MRI in both the storyteller and the listener. In other words, when you hear a well-told story, your brain reacts as if you are experiencing it yourself. It means that you are in the story yourself. We respond to stories because they cultivate emotion and a sense of togetherness — a connection. Good stories are appealing and cause us to desire to hear or see them repeatedly because we are in those stories. This even happens with the simple personifying and humanizing of a cartoon character. A connection with the audience is made. It causes the release of oxytocin and makes the audience place themselves into that character’s story, connecting on a deeper level. Do you remember a scene in *The Lion King*, when Scar forces Mufasa off the cliff into the sea of trampling wildebeests? And believing it was his fault, Simba, his son exiles himself out of shame! The audience felt that same remorse and shame.

And, whenever we hear a story, we want to relate it to one of our existing experiences. That’s why metaphors work so

well with us. Our daily lives are sets of stories all run together as one big story our biography. We keep all those experiences in our brains. When we hear a story, our brain begins to search for a similar experience in our brains. This activity takes place in a part of our brain called the insula, which helps us relate to that same experience of pain, joy, disgust, or something else we have experienced. When we hear a story, we automatically link up the metaphors with literal happenings from our experiences. Everything in our brain begins to look for the cause-and-effect relationship of something we've previously experienced. We look for our place in the story based on our previous experiences. The connections become real to us.

In our modern era, stories come to us in a variety of forms. We have plays, novels, movies, music, and one that isn't so modern but is always there – The Bible. And there are countless storytellers who are renowned, names such as Moses, Homer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Tolkien, Twain, Poe, King, Rawlings, among many others. But the name that tops the list for great storytelling is Jesus. He told stories in a unique way which was His genre, the parable. The simple definition of a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. And, you have no trouble remembering His parables. He is best known for His stories of the Good Samaritan and the parable from our Gospel today, the Parable of the Lost Son. In fact, Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel, is often called the "Lost Chapter," because there are three lost stories.

Up to this point in His ministry, Jesus has been preaching the good news of the kingdom. He has been calling sinners to repentance so that they would receive forgiveness for their sins. He is a popular teacher because He is giving

people hope, in comparison to the legalistic Pharisees who have caused them to be despairing, for not being able to live up to the myriad of rules which the Pharisees created as the means of salvation. Most of these people who are following Jesus are not always the best and the brightest. They are the poor and downtrodden. They are the least, the last, and the lost. They are people who the religious elite of Israel looked down on, as failed and worthless sinners. But Jesus even had meals with these people, these public sinners, and that was shocking to the religious elite. Now, Jesus was not condoning or approving of their sin. He was offering them a safe haven to come to – to come back to God. So sinners troubled in their conscience were flocking to Jesus, because they knew that's where they could find forgiveness and restoration. And Jesus pointed out that this was cause for celebration in heaven.

In the two parables about the sheep and the coin, Jesus tells of temporal rejoicing at finding what was lost. Then, He adds there is rejoicing in heaven over a repentant sinner. You all know this story and we heard it read this morning, again. Two sons, one father. One son is hard-working, dedicated to his father and to the family farm. A real ideal type of guy. The other son a rebellious upstart who takes his inheritance and ends up in the slop with the pigs. I am sure all of you have heard sermons about the integral parts of this story before.

Today, remembering what I told you earlier, about the emotional ties that a storyteller has with his hearers, I want to know, which of these characters do you identify/connect with? Are you more like the father who is so generous and forgiving? (Some of you have children and grandchildren.) Or are you like the good son/daughter who

is always reliable and upright and never gets in trouble? Did you honor and respect your mother and father? Or are you like the son/daughter who is prodigal, that is, wasteful, reckless, extravagant, uncontrolled, and impudent - a true sinner in every sense of the word, bringing shame and embarrassment to your parents and family?

The good son was always at work, wasn't he? He was always doing what he was supposed to be done by helping his father. He never asked for a party and didn't even ask for a tough old goat to have a party with his friends. He was a model child.

The not-so-good son was a hell-raiser. He wished his father was dead so he could get his inheritance. When he got it, probably to his surprise, he squandered it and lost all of it. He was reduced to rags, feeding pigs and eating their food. Then, he had the audacity to come crawling home further embarrassing his father and family in front of the whole village.

The father looks like a sap. He gives in to his disrespectful, insolent son and gives him his inheritance. He seems to ignore the other son who is dutiful and respectful of his role as a son who helps his father maintain the family business. Then, he takes no umbrage at the squandering of his hard-earned wealth by this brat of a son.

Which one of these do you associate with? Are you, the prodigal son who realized his shameful and disgraceful behavior and sought forgiveness and reconciliation with his father for it? Is that you? Or are you the "good son?" The good son was so full of himself that he couldn't bring himself to forgive his wayward brother even though his brother sought forgiveness. The son was unable to see that

his obsession with work and duty was his sin. His focus on being right and correct led him to despise others who were not like him. A person who held a grudge won't let go because there is no punishment for a sin committed that would satisfy him. Is that you?

Or do you associate yourself with the father? A good and loving father who grants the desires of a son knowing that this may be a mistake but is willing to take a risk that good may come of it. A father who aches when he learns the depths to which a child has fallen and the need to show mercy, compassion, and support when his child has fallen from grace and is now bottomed out in despair and shame. A father who celebrates the return of his son to the family bruised but not dead. Lost but now found. Is that you? Really?

Jesus is the best storyteller the world has known. His story was directed to the Pharisees and the poor, sinful people of His time. But His story is applicable to us in our time just as well. His story applies across the ages and you and I are in His story. If truth be told, I can see myself in each of these characters – the prodigal son, the other lost son, and the father. But more importantly, I can see my God at work here too. Not only as a loving and forgiving father who has accepted me as I am – a sinner – and granted me forgiveness and reconciliation, but also as the one who continues to forgive and reconcile not only my sins but the sins of others. In so doing, He shows me and all of us how we are to treat each other as fallen and saved children of God in the same family with the same father. Heaven rejoices for those who repent and heaven rejoices no matter who the sinner is or what their sin maybe when they repent. We can do no less.

As the consummate storyteller, Jesus often doesn't tell the ending of a story. Jesus didn't tell the end of the story last week either. We never learned if the fig tree bore fruit or if it was cut down. This week, like last, Jesus didn't tell us what happened to the second lost son. Did he ever forgive his brother or did his anger and contempt eat at him for the rest of his life? Maybe Jesus' purpose was for us to see ourselves there. Maybe Jesus was connecting with us as sinners, as His brothers, and as children of our Heavenly Father. The story causes us to think about ourselves from three perspectives during this Lenten season. I hope you do so. Jesus told this story to connect with us, each of us. He is speaking to you today.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, in the name of Jesus. Amen.