

## “THE MASTER STORYTELLER”

Imagine Meeting Christ Series #5

Psalm 107:1-32, Mark 4:1-20

We are a people who love stories. Adventures, dramas, westerns, mysteries; libraries are filled with true accounts or made up stories that capture our attention, glue our minds to the pages of the book, and delight us for hours on end as we investigate the lives of people of many different times and countries, occupations and situations. We are creative people who love to invest ourselves in the stories of life. That’s why television is so addicting. It is why social media is so popular. It’s why movies are made, all to satisfy our craving for stories.

Storytelling is a part of our human nature. When we come back to the office after a busy weekend, we tell the stories of what happened since the last time we saw the others. At school, we share the latest saga of what’s taking place in our lives as we interact with folks from different parts of the community. Many times we can hardly wait to tell our friends of all the fun we had, or the frustrating things that happened at the hardware store, or the joy over our favorite sports team winning the game over the weekend. We even tell those in our families what happened during our day when we gather around the dinner table.

Our lives are built around the sharing of stories. It’s how we relate to one another. It’s how we interact. It’s the way that we communicate. Without stories in our lives, we are dull people, going through life “machine-like,” with nothing to excite us, or stir us, or concern us, or move us into action. Try to hold a conversation that doesn’t involve storytelling, and I can guarantee it will be a short one! Without stories the conversation turns into a lecture, giving detailed information, but has little emotion, little spirit, and likely has little attention.

And depending upon how well the stories are told will determine how well they are remembered in the lives of those who are listening. Someone who is very good at telling stories captures the attention of their listeners, engaging their lives for the moment with information that draws them in and fascinates them to the point that they are totally engrossed in that story. They are spellbound by what happens to those being talked about. They are captivated by their imagination that puts mental pictures

into their minds as the story is told. Great joy or tremendous sadness can be generated as the storytellers work their way through the account. Compassion can be built into the hearers as they relate to someone in the story. Great anger can be spawned as the listeners hear about injustice or unrighteousness being done to another. Great motivation for direct action can be created as the listeners respond to what they are hearing. A story in the hands of a master storyteller can create great change within a population of people as they listen and respond to what they have heard.

As we take a look at Psalm 107 today, we see that the writer used the recollection (stories) of God's goodness given to His people, to help the listeners (readers) come to understand the differences that were made in the lives of those people as they trusted in God. The psalmist tells how "*some wandered in the trackless desert and could not find their way to a city to live in,*" but God "*saved them from their distress. He led them by a straight road to a city where they could live*" (107:4-7). He goes on to tell that "*some were living in gloom and darkness, prisoners suffering in chains, because they had rebelled against the commands of Almighty God,*" but when "*they called to the Lord...He saved them from their distress. He brought them out of their gloom and darkness and broke their chains in pieces*" (107:10-14). Do you feel the emotion set in these words – rescue from danger by the Lord!

The writer tells how the Lord God saved some who were "*suffering because of their sins and because of their evil...*" when they called out to Him in their trouble. He tells how some were saved by the Lord God from the deadly waves of the seas as He calmed the storm that threatened the sinking of their boat, keeping them safe. The stories of these people continue as the writer reminds them of many situations when the Lord God intervened in the lives of the people when they called out to Him for help, and He rescued them and provided for them.

These short stories encourage those hearing them to trust in the ways and will of the Lord so that they might not face the terrible times of life alone, but depend upon the guidance of the Lord God for all things. And the writer shares that in every time of rescue, or healing, or provision, it was right for the people to give thanks and praise to the Lord for His great love for them. The stories told the history of

the people as they came to understand the power of the Lord God. The stories then challenged the hearers to let the Lord God be the One that they follow with all their heart, soul mind and strength.

In our Gospel lesson today we see how Jesus used stories to teach us about the kingdom of God, to open our hearts and minds to the truths of God's love for us. His words and His teachings invite us to reconsider things in our world. He challenges us to look deeper into how we are living so that we might find God's direction in our lives. His use of stories calls us to evaluate our opinions and thoughts about others so that we see them in a proper perspective. As we look at the stories of Jesus, we see that He was a master storyteller who had the ability to attract the attention of many with the use of parables, stories that teach lessons of importance.

Jesus used parables to tell us about the Kingdom of God because we relate to stories. Robert Rasmussen puts it like this. "The parables of Jesus sort out humanity: They draw (us close) or they repel (us away). Those on the way to Christ find in His stories reasons to keep coming. Those deciding they don't need Him find in His parables more evidence to go it alone.

"Why do Jesus' stories divide people into these two camps? It's not because they're so difficult or mysterious that only superb minds can figure them out. Nor is it because their meaning is found only by those holding special information. The meaning of the parables is available to anyone.

"The key is in the wanting to (understand them). The needing to (learn their meaning).

"The heart of a king or a child **can** be drawn to Jesus instead of repelled. Faith is the only requirement. Which is why so many people during Jesus' day found in His stories reasons to reject Him: Their hearts were dull (as explained in Matthew 13:10-17. They had no faith). If you were in a crowd listening to Jesus and His eyes met yours, what would He see in you? Growing distance or a look saying, 'Tell me more'?"

"His parables are still sorting people out. So make sure you hear them. Be sure your eyes invite Him in. Come and look afresh at Jesus the storyteller."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Robert Rasmussen, *Imagine Meeting Him*, [Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1998] pg. 61)

Jesus put the lessons of life into stories so that we could more readily receive them and believe them, comprehend them and learn from them. The first part of our Gospel lesson today gives us one of Jesus' parables, which many know as the Parable of the Sower. I prefer to call it the Parable of the Soils, since it is more about how each soil type receives the seed put out by the Sower.

As you heard, the seed of the Sower lands on four different soil types; hard ground, rocky ground, thorny ground, and good, cultivated ground. Each soil type received the seed differently, producing differing results. The hard ground refused to receive the seed into it, so it just sat there on the solid surface where birds and animals could easily eat it or carry it off.

The rocky ground offered little more, though there was enough protection for the seeds that they could at least sprout. However there was little life because the sun came up and cooked the plants since the roots had not enough depth to provide adequate water supply to the plant. Those seeds died quickly.

The thorny ground provided better soil, allowing the seeds to germinate, sprout and grow into seedlings. But because of the competition with the weeds and the thorns already within the ground, the good seeds got strangled because the other plants were so thickly rooted around them. There was no productivity to the seeds because they never reached maturity.

However the seed that landed upon the good, well cultivated ground, was received well. The soil had all the nutrients needed to allow the full growth of the seed. The ground was soft enough to provide a well-established root system, and the lack of competition allowed the development of roots that could take advantage of the nutrients and produce considerable fruit to the joy of the sower.

It's a simple story, yet it has great implications for us if we begin to look at how WE receive the seed of the Word of God. Listen to the explanation of the parable. This is Mark 4:13-20. (READ Mark 4:13-20)

Hearing the explanation from Jesus, which of the soil types are you? Could the hardness of your hearts have caused you to reject the Word of God for your life so that you don't even know what it looks like or sounds like? Could you have rejected Jesus to the point that you want nothing to do with Him?

Or maybe you came to learn about Jesus as a little child, and at that time got really excited about Him. But as you grew up, the limited exposure to God's Word left you vulnerable to the attacks of those who ridicule and belittle Jesus. You may have gotten so beaten up about your young faith in Jesus that you decided that He wasn't worth the hassle, so you gave up.

Or maybe you grew deep in your faith, having learned well the faithfulness of the Lord. However, as you got older, there just didn't seem to be the time or the energy to keep learning. The job, the family, the hobbies, the social clubs, the vacations, the special interests, all demanded your time and dragged you away, leaving you completely at the world's beckon call. So your faith in Jesus failed.

But maybe, just maybe, the little seed that was sown within you took root deep inside of you, so that in all of the things that life dished out at you, you allowed the Word of God to grow in you, guiding you, preparing you, and maturing within you, so that it lives in you and you can share it easily with others, thereby touching the lives of many more. And your faith produces much as you live for Jesus.

You see, in that one story, Jesus describes the condition of all people. What each person does with Jesus Christ is described by one of those four soil types. What each person does with Jesus determines their spiritual growth, if any, and governs what their life will look like.

You see, it's not so much what we know about Jesus that matters, but rather **what we do with Jesus** that determines our fate. It all depends upon what type of soil you choose to be, and that determines how you will respond to Jesus in your life.

So let me lay it out to you a little bit differently. Here's another version of the parable.

"One morning four neighbors walked out of their homes only to find that during the night a nicely decorated package had been left by the door of each house. The packages were identical, even down to the notes affixed to the outside. Each simply read: 'This is a gift to the resident of this house. You may do with it what you will. The giver will return in one month from tonight if you would care to meet him.'

"When the month had elapsed, the gift giver revisited each house. He arrived quite late, and all

the residents had gone to sleep. But before doing so, each one had left something on the front step in case the gift giver came during the night.

“At the first house, the gift giver found only a note. It read: ‘Dear sir, I thank you kindly for the gift you left me. Unfortunately the very day I received it, I had to rush off to work. When I returned home, I found that someone had broken into my house and stolen the package. I thought at first that I had simply misplaced it, but having searched the house, I’m convinced it was taken. So sorry!’

“The second house held a different response. The package was laid by the door exactly where the gift giver had placed it a month earlier. It was unopened. Attached was this message: ‘Thank you! Thank you! How lovely of you to leave a gift for me. I was simply overjoyed to receive it. The wrapping paper is the most exquisite I have ever seen. I savored the present for days, waiting for just the right time to open it. I finally decided to do so when my relatives were over for a visit. But as I explained the circumstances of my receiving it, they expressed grave concern about the wisdom of opening it at all. They thought it ill-advised to accept a gift from someone whose identity I didn’t even know. So I return it to you with thanks and regret. Again, thank you, but please understand.’

“Withdrawing the package, the gift giver proceeded to the next house where he found the gift lying in its place, unwrapped. It, **like the others**, was a book, and on its flyleaf was a note saying, ‘To the giver of this gift. This is a splendid book on building model ships. I thank you kindly for presenting it to me. When I first opened it, I thought to myself this was just the hobby I had searched for. In fact, I wondered if I might build models to give as presents to my friends. I’ve come to realize, however, that I haven’t got the time for such a pursuit. I’m afraid I just have too many other things I’m responsible for. Please accept it back, with the hope you will find another who will have some use for it.’

“Disappointed, yet seemingly unsurprised, the gift giver moved on to the final house. What he saw delighted him. He was relieved to find the step was not empty, yet it did not hold the book either. Instead, he saw one carefully built model ship, complete with sails. He reached into his pocket and extracted a small piece of cloth. Reaching down, he placed it as a flag on the tallest mast. It read: ‘Well

done.”<sup>2</sup>

The stories of Jesus make us think, cause us to look at ourselves and see where we really are. Instead of looking at us and shaking His finger in our face and command, “Straighten Up!” Jesus uses stories with lessons (parables) to engage us so that we might discover where we are in life.

The stories affect us at different levels, however, depending where we are in life when we hear them. To some, they inspire greater commitment, because they see in themselves the danger of not following Jesus. The parable of the weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43) tells of the fate of those who become weeds, those who reject God’s ways and become unfruitful.

Some of Jesus’ parables change attitudes, the hearers being challenged to look at others differently that they might be able to accept the goodness of each person. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) highlights the need for compassion in each person toward those who are hurting and are dispossessed.

In some of Jesus’ parables, He challenges stereotypes, inviting the hearers to see how faith can make a difference in the life of a person so that they might change. The parable of the two debtors (Luke 7:40-50) demonstrated the value of repentance and forgiveness, regardless of who the person is.

Jesus used parables to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, giving the hearers the understanding of the value of holding on to the truth of God. The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:44-47) encourage us to put great value to Jesus’ teachings so that we ready to give up everything else in our life to have them in our life.

And some of Jesus’ parables confronted the actions of the leaders in order to correct their inaccurate interpretation of Scripture. The parable of the landowner (Matthew 21:33-41) confronted the Pharisees who were rejecting Jesus as the Messiah and sought to kill Him. Jesus used the story to explain exactly who He is and what the Pharisees were doing to Him.

Some of the parables encouraged others to grow in their trust and faith in Jesus, since He invited

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<sup>2</sup> (Robert Rasmussen, *Imagine Meeting Him*, pg. 69-70)

them to see life from God's perspective. Some of the parables confronted the wrongs of the day, seeking to get people to respond differently. Some of the stories exposed the goodness of God in the way that He loves us and forgives us. Each story was used to a specific purpose in order to enlighten and expose the thoughts and intentions of the people and help them change their ways.

**But it is what we do with these stories** of Jesus that determines their value for us. In each parable we are urged to continue to grow in our faith, but if we reject them, we lose any meaning of the story and forfeit any possibility of change from happening. If we reject the power of the stories of Jesus, we relinquish our lives to the fate of the world. Then we find ourselves like the seeds falling onto the hard ground, the rocky ground and the thorny ground in Jesus' parable of the soils.

However, if we receive the stories of Jesus, learn from them and accept the discipline of them, we have the potential of growing deeply in our faith. When we let Jesus guide our lives through the use of parables, He opens up brand new avenues to seeing the work of God in our world. When we let the parables change how we see others, we are blessed in new relationships and new depths of love for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. When we let the parables of Jesus touch our hearts, we find that there is hope for ministries that bring the Gospel of Jesus to the people of the world. When we let the stories of Jesus expose our sinfulness, we have the opportunity to find new life in Him.

How will you receive the stories of Jesus today? What you do with His teachings will determine your life's direction, now and forever. Hear them, and be changed by them.

Let's pray: Father, thank You for making us people who love stories. Thank You for the great lessons of faith and hope found throughout Your Word, the Bible. Give us the desire to read them so that we might become influenced by them and changed by them. Father, thank you for Jesus using stories and parables to catch our attention and become drawn to You. Open our ears to hear them. Open our hearts to receive them. Open our lives to let them live in us so much that we begin to share them with those around us who need to hear them, too. Let us be storytellers for You to continue the work of Jesus in our world today. This we pray in Jesus precious and holy Name. AMEN.