PREACHING AND STORY

LOUIS W. BLOEDE

At a surprisingly early age, a child will say, "Tell me a story." Often the child will want a familar story re-told or read. As the father of two boys, I remember well the evenings before bedtime when one of the boys crawled on my lap to hear a story. Usually I read to them, but occasionally I shared some incident out of my own life. Invariably their interest quickened when the story was a personal one. Sometimes weeks afterward my son would say, "Tell me again about when you were a boy" or "Tell me again about when you worked on the railroad."

I. How Stories Function in Human Life

What is it about a story that makes it so appealing? Certainly in the story telling about myself I revealed aspects of my life that probably helped my children understand me better. They could see me not only as a young man who was their father but as a child like themselves. In the story telling they learned about other people, about their problems and joys, about how life is lived, and about the kind of world in which we live.

Before we go further, we need to define the word "story." James B. Wiggins considers the word to be synonomous with "narrative discourse."[1] A helpful definition of story given by Webster's Collegiate Dictionary is "a connected narration of past events."[2]

One of the distinguishing marks of a story is the way in which the story links us to the whole human race. In the opening chapter of the book *Religion As Story,* which he edited, James Wiggins discusses this matter. Wiggins calls attention to the remarks of Sam Keen who says, "The more I know of myself, the more I recognize that nothing is foreign to me. In the depth of each man's biography lies the story of all men."[3]

Wiggins affirms what Keen says but cautions that "What one most desperately wants to discover in one's life story is not that the story is everybody's story.... What one needs precisely is to come to the conviction that out of the myriad possibilities of a human life

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[1]Wiggins, James B., ed., *Religion as Story.* New York: Harper and Row, 1975, p. 1.
[2]*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary,* based on *Webster's New International Dictionary,* Springfield, Mass.: G. C. Merriam Co., 1953, p. 836.
[3]Keen, Sam, *To A Dancing God.* New York: Harper & Co., 1970, p. 103.

there is embodied in one's own story sufficient particularity to mark one as an authentic *individual* human being who does not simply replicate some inevitable round of existence. At the same time one longs to discover the universal dimensions embodied in one's story to a degree that marks one's life as an authentic individual *human* being."[4]

In other words, for one's story to be satisfying to oneself, there must be a feeling that there is within the story both distinctiveness and commonality. If this statement is true, as I believe it to be, it can be applied to our understanding of Christian vocation. As Christians we believe that we are all called to be Christians. There is a universality to the Gospel, but there is a particularity as well. Niebuhr, in his book *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* says that in addition to the call to be a Christian, some people sense a secret or inward call which often leads them into a church-related vocation.[5]

For all Christians there must be a working out of the Gospel in a specific place and time and with certain persons. There is a uniqueness to each person, as we know from fingerprints and even voiceprints, even though we share much in common with other persons of the human race.

There are other ways that stories, not necessarily biograpical, function in human life. Stories can lift us out of the "routineness" of life. We sometimes get discouraged or bored with what seems to be a "hum-drum" existence. Through a story we can vicariously live the exciting life of the hero or heroine in the story. The housewife, bored with household tasks, turns to the "soaps" on television to escape her messy kitchen or pile of mending.

Stories stretch our imagination. To really appreciate a story one has to be able to exercise one's imagination. Perhaps children enjoy stories so much because their imagination is less inhibited than that of some adults. The world of "make believe," in which animals talk or a handsome prince turns into a frog, is readily accepted and enjoyed by the child.

A story can kindle awareness of things we would otherwise miss in life, perhaps evoking a strong response on our part so that we vow to right some wrong. A story thus can move us to action. A story can inspire us or anger us. Stories often illuminate depth dimensions of experience. They help us identify with larger themes. A story can provide a clue to another person's inner life, thus enabling us to better

[4]Wiggins, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
[5]Niebuhr, H. Richard, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry.* New York: Harper and Row, 1956, p. 64.

understand that person as well as one's self. Stories are a vehicle of revelation, as witness the revelation of God through the Christ event.

The list could go on, but enough has been said to underscore the importance of story in human existence. Now we want to look more specifically at the relation of religion (or Gospel) and story.

II. Gospel and Story

Someone once remarked that "the Jews are people of a book and Christians are people of a Person." One has only to visit a modern synagogue service on a Friday evening or Saturday morning to know the truth of that statement. The sacred place in which the Torah is kept, the reverence with which it is handled, the use of it in the service, all speak to its importance. The stories of the past give a sense of identity to the Jewish people of the present. Tradition is not taken lightly.

In a somewhat similar way, Christians are also persons of a book, or "people with a story." The service of the Word remains as a significant part of Christian worship. The book is larger for the Christian, and the story comes to its climax in a Person, Jesus Christ. As the Author of the Gospel of John puts it in the prologue, Christians believe that the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us."[6]

The Bible is really a storybook—the story of God's involvement in the universe, in human history, in inter-personal relations, and in the inner life of individuals, Individual stories unfold in the Bible to reveal such themes of *the Story* as creation, estrangement, grace, reconciliation, a new creation, a new community, a vision of a new world. One explanation of the agelessness and relevance of the Bible is that the Bible does deal with these great themes that still touch our lives.

In his provocative book, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story,* John Dominic Crossan helps us appreciate the importance of story by stating his belief that story actually creates world "so that we live as human beings in and only in, layers upon layers of interwoven story."[7] Crossan suggests five fundamental modes of story based on the relationship between story and world.

> Story establishes world in *myth,* defends such established world in *apologue,* discusses and describes world in *action,* attacks world in *satire,* and subverts world in *parable.*[8]

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[6]John 1:14.

[7]Crossan, John Dominic, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story.* Niles Illinios: Argus Communications, 1975, p. 9.

[8]*Ibid.*

Although Crossan briefly discusses all five forms, he gives major attention to parable. He sees myth and parable as opposites, with myth bringing about reconciliation and parable resulting in a feeling of contradictions. The parable raises questions in the mind of the hearer and often "attacks and undermines the hearer's structure of expectation."[9] In explaining the difference between myth and parable, Crossan uses an interesting analogy. "You have built a lovely home, myth assures us; but, whispers parable, you are right above an earthquake fault."[10]

In his book Crossan analyzes the structure of the parable and then looks at specific parables in the Hebrew Bible, as well as some modern cases. He gives major attention to the parables of Jesus and notes the connection between the message of the kingdom of God and the stories of Jesus.

> Parables give God room. The parables of Jesus are *not* historical allegories telling us how God acts with man-kind; neither are they moral example stories telling us how to act before God and towards one another. They are stories which shatter the deep structure of our accepted world and thereby render clear and evident to us the relativity of story itself. They remove our defenses and make us vulnerable to God. It is only in such experiences that God can touch us, and only in such moments does the kingdom of God arrive. My own term for this relationship is transcendence.[11]

In his concluding chapter, Crossan talks about how the parables become parabler. "Jesus announced the kingdom of God in parables, but the primitive church announced Jesus as the Christ, the Parable of God."[12] This statement underscores the importance of story for the preacher.

The story image of the Gospel sets it in contrast to other images of life such as rat race, treadmill, or cog in a machine. In a story there are characters in actual situations. There is some kind of a plot. The Gospel story has all these.

One way that we can understand the Christian life is as a *retelling* of the story. What the Christians does is to appropriate the Gospel story as one's own story—to identify with it so strongly that the persons of the Bible almost become an extension of one's own ancestral family. This is certainly true of the Jew in relationship to

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 86.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 57.
[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 124.

the Old Testament. For the Christian, the person of Christ becomes a living reality whose Spirit can literally transform someone. The Christian life thus becomes a process of creation or re-creation. For some persons it means being born anew.[13] The Christian life is the creating of one's own unique story, shaped and understood by the Christ story (the Gospel).

The current emphasis on writing journals indicates that we are beginning to appreciate the uniqueness of our story. It is interesting to note that there is a parallel emphasis in the U.S.A. on discovering our "roots" as well. In the keeping of a journal one sees an unfolding of one's life story that is exciting and revealing.

James Wm. McClendon, Jr. believes that the way to approach theology is through biography. He says that what is needed today is an ethics of character and he believes that "convictions as well as traits are integral to character, and to the existence of (Christian) community."[14] He states further that "All convictions are at bottom theological, i.e. of theological concern."[15] He goes on to say that in any community "there appear from time to time singular or striking lives, the lives of persons who embody the convictions of the community, but with new scope or power; who exhibit the style of the community, but with significant differences."[16] Such persons have great influence on the community and their lives provide significant data for the Christian thinker. McClendon summarizes his point of view as follows:

> By recognizing that Christian beliefs are not so many propositions to be catalogued or juggled like truth-functions in a computer, but are living convictions which give shape to actual lives and actual communities, we open ourselves to the possibility that the only relevant critical examination of Christian beliefs may be one which begins to attending to lived lives. Theology must be at least biography.[17]

As McClendon points out, "Christianity turns upon the character of Christ. But that character must continually find fresh examplars if it is not to be consigned to the realm of mere antiquarian lore."[18] This explains why Christianity has taken notice of those people whom

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[13]John 3:3.
[14]McClendon, James Wm. Jr., *Biography as Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974, p. 34.
[15]*Ibid.*, p. 36
[16]*Ibid.*, p. 37.
[17]*Ibid.*
[18]*Ibid.*, p. 38.

it calls saints. This, it seems to me, is why contemporary theology must always include incarnational theology. The Gospel story must always become your story and my story before it becomes a living reality.

III. Stories and Preaching

While we have thus far spoken of story as something positive and even essential to one's religious development, there is a negative understanding of story that must be acknowledged. The words "You're telling a story," can be an accusation, as if to say, "You've made that up. It isn't really true. It's a fib."

Our understanding of myth is involved here. Often people are aghast when some portion of the Bible is referred to as myth. Use of the word "myth" seems to imply a falsehood, as though one was being tricked into believing something that is not true. Ian Barbour broadly defines myth as "a story which is taken to manifest some aspect of the cosmic order."[19] Barbour says that "unlike a fairy tale, a living myth is highly significant in personal and corporate life."[20] Myths, he says, 1) offer ways of ordering experience, 2) inform man about himself, 3) express a saving power in human life, 4) provide power for human actions, and are 5) enacted in rituals.[21] Certainly in preaching one must deal positively with myth.

We have acknowledged the fact that for some people in some circumstances story can be seen negatively. What about preaching? Must we not also acknowledge that preaching can be viewed negatively? Surely the answer must be "Yes."

One of the definitions of preaching found in Webster's Collegiate Dictionary says that preaching is "an annoying harrangue."[22] That statement keeps me humble and reminds what I must guard against as I preach or try to teach others to preach. For me, this is where story and preaching come together, because I believe that seeing preaching as story keeps preaching from becoming an "annoying harrangue."

In every congregation there is great diversity in the capacity of people to appropriate religious resources. The work of J. B. Fowler in suggesting stages of faith development is instructive in this regard.[23]

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[19]Barbour, Ian G., *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974, p. 20.

[20]*Ibid.*

[21]*Ibib.*, pp. 20-21.

[22]*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, p. 663.

[23]Fowler, James B., "Faith Development Theory and the Aims of Religious Socialization," 23 page paper prepared for the Section on Religious Socialization, the annual meeting of the Religious Research Association, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 24-26, 1975.

We know that many people cannot, or at least do not, do much abstract, conceptual thinking. However, virtually all persons can hear and identify with a story.

A preacher may spend many hours preparing a carefully worded sermon designed to challenge mature adults. He may spend a relatively short time preparing to tell a simple story to be given as "the children's sermon." As the worshippers leave and greet the pastor, he may be thanked by the adults for his sermon, but to his surprise and dismay, it may be the children's sermon that was most appreciated.

A single main idea contained in a simple story told in an interesting way may be the explanation of why the children's sermon is so well received. This is not an argument for preaching sermons that lack intellectual content, but it is an argument for trying to state in a simple way that which is profound. As Jesus illustrated so well in his parables, a story may often be the best vehicle to do that. Notice how Jesus took the common stuff of life, the familiar, and used the story form to proclaim the Gospel.[24] The simplest definition of a parable that I've heard is that it is "an earthly *story* with a heavenly meaning." Effective illustrations are often stories. The most powerful illustrations are what I call "people illustrations." As noted earlier, we identify with the "dramatis personae" in the story. That is why watching a melodrama is so much fun. We can hiss or boo the villain, sigh with the heroine and applaud the hero. We can give outward expression to our identification with the characters in the drama.

People remember illustrations even if they forget most or all of the rest of the sermon. Months or years after a sermon has been preached, a parishioner will remark "I remember a story you told once . . ." and tell the story back to you—perhaps slightly modified. Harry Emerson Fosdick recognized the value of illustrations. He once said that finding good illustrations was the hardest thing he did.[25] Many a preacher, especially one with limited experience as a pastor, would surely agree.

The relationship of the story teller (preacher) to the story (sermon) being told (preached) is worth noting. Marshall McLuhan's phrase "The medium is the message," comes immediately to mind.[26] We have already noted how Jesus incarnated the message he proclaimed. When we preach today, people want to know how well we

[24]The parables recorded in Luke 15 would be examples among many that could be cited.

[25]This remark was quoted to me by Harvey H. Potthoff, a colleague on the Iliff faculty, who graciously shared ideas with me on the theme of this paper.

[26]McLuhan, H. Marshall, *The Medium is the Message*. New York: Random House, 1967.

have appropriated for ourselves the message which we proclaim. Helmut Thielicke said that one of the problems today in preaching is that preachers do not want to drink from the same cup they offer to others.[27] A French layman is quoted as saying to his priest "Sir, your words terrify me, but your life reassures me."[28] We who would share the Gospel story must ask ourselves, "Has the Gospel story become my story?"

In preparing a sermon one needs to identify the purpose or purposes of that particular sermon and then note how stories may function in relation to those purposes. What aspects of the Gospel story relate to this specific sermon? What individuals, past or present, are examples of the re-telling of that story? What is involved in the living of that story today? What specific suggestions can you as preacher make to help people live the story more fully? What connections can you make, implicit or explicit, that will connect the Gospel story with the individual stories represented in the congregation? What form can my sermon take that will allow the story to be told and heard? (In one of the parishes I served, I did a narrative sermon in which I imagined I was Judas telling my story. It probably received more attention and appreciation than any other sermon I preached.) Those are but a few of the questions that pop into mind.

People want to know where the preacher (or teacher) stands on some of the issues being considered in the sermon. As a teacher, I may try to fairly represent two or more sides of a controversial issue, but invariably someone will say, "But what do you personally believe is correct or right?" It's almost like Jesus turning to the disciples after they had reported what others were saying about him and asking, but what do you think?[29]

This raises the matter of personal or autobiographical illustrations. The rule that I was taught was that you avoided personal illustrations in which you came out as the hero. Like any rule, it has exceptions. But as I've lived a bit longer, I find it much less objectionable to share something of my own story. Biography, and even some autobiography, is not only legitimate but even essential sermon material.

Some implications for the teaching of preaching emerge from all of this. The importance of persons knowing each other as persons and relating to each other as persons seems apparent. The size of the preaching class should be limited (I prefer no more than twelve).

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[27]Thielicke, Helmut, *The Trouble With the Church*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965, p. 3.

[28]I cannot recall the source of this quotation.

[29]Mark 8:29.

Time at the start of the course needs to be given to some sharing of each other's story (including that of the instructor) so that acceptance and trust develop. This allows later on for criticism to be much more freely given and received. The individual preacher has to be helped to accept one's self and one's own story. It is my conviction that until one has come to at least partially accept oneself one cannot give self away. Effective preaching involves a willingness to give oneself away, to risk a significant amount of self-disclosure. The preaching class has to deal with that and perhaps one way to get into that is through dealing with the relationship of biography and theology, of story and preaching.

Preaching and story are inseparable, for without a person named Christ and a Story called the Gospel, there could be no such thing as the Christian sermon. Although we don't sing the old Gospel hymns very often in the church I attend, People are still saying in other ways, "Tell me the old, old story." The preacher today still must know, and live and effectively tell that story.