

“THE POWER OF STORY”

John 5:24

Messiah April/May Series

May 13, 2012

Pastor Nathan J. Thompson

This morning I am going to say a word and then I want you to say the first thing that comes to your mind. The key, of course, is to go fast and not to give it lots of thought. Make sense? So the first word is, “Mona...” That’s right, Mona Lisa.

The second word is, “Super...” Yes, I’m sure many of you are thinking about whether the Vikings will even be in Minnesota in order to win a Super Bowl. Another word is, “Ice...” Yes, most of us would say cream, but some may say fishing, or hockey. Another word is “Pepperoni...” Now you’re hungry for pizza.

And yet if I would say “Christian,” or “evangelical Christian,” or “Lutheran Christian,” or “born again Christian,” what words would you think of? What thoughts do these words bring to your mind? And yet the real question is what do you think would happen if we showed these words to a hundred people who are not Christians, and who are living far from God?

I’m sure that we would get an earful. Someone might say, “Oh, I’ve come across a few Christians and the ones I know are, how should I describe them...they’re just so uptight...rigid.”

“I know a Christian...what a turn off she is. I feel judged if I even inhale the wrong way. She’s so self-righteous and egotistical.” Or someone may say, “Christian? Classic simpletons. They simply live in la-la land if you know what I mean. They throw little Bible verses at very complex issues. They really can’t think very deeply.”

Now please understand I would hope that these kinds of impressions aren’t out there. But in reality we know they are. We know that many non-believers have all kinds of negative ideas about those of us who call ourselves Christians and about the church of Jesus Christ.

And yet wouldn’t it be great if we asked someone to tell us about a Christ-follower they know and the first thing that would come to mind would be something like, “Hmm, Christians...the ones I know are just filled with integrity.”

Or someone might say, “Wow Christians, the ones I’ve come across are so filled with compassion...they are really kind and forgiving people.” Or they might say, “Christians, they tell the truth,” or “they have a concern for the poor,” or “they’re always walking across rooms to encourage others.”

You know, my friends, this is what I wish people would say about Christians and the church. I wish they would say that Christ-followers are so passionate about loving others and they are so clear when they talk about God. They are so humble and interesting to listen to.

Now is that also a wish that you have? If your answer is yes I want to affirm that this is what I am going to talk about this week. I’m going to focus on how you can walk across a room and talk about God with clarity and passion, and how you can convey your faith story in a way that’s humble and interesting.

As we have talked about, and as the book *“Just Walk Across The Room”* points out, as you decide to walk across a room it’s important to first of all develop a friendship rather than trying to wedge your own agenda into the conversation. And it’s absolutely critical that you listen to the Spirit’s guidance about the appropriate steps you should take.

And yet let’s say that you have walked across the room and have built a friendship by listening to the other person’s story. And because that person now feels comfortable with you and knows you are trustworthy he says to you one day, “You know, we’ve been friends for awhile now and you’ve been really good about not forcing your God-stuff on me.”

“Well, I just want to tell you that things have gone a little south in my marriage, and my wife and me...well, we were talking about maybe trying out church...sort of an effort to see if we can work out our problems. So before I go I’m wondering if you could explain this whole deal to me? Do you think that God can help my life?”

Now that, my friends, is what you would call an open door to share with another. And I guarantee if you walk across a room, be a friend to another, don’t force your faith on them, and stay open to the Holy Spirit that you will have many doors opening like this. And yet what are you going to say to that person?

There’s a tried a true way of explaining God’s story that you should consider committing to memory. It’s called, “The Bridge,” and I’m sure some of you may heard me when I’ve used this illustration before. It’s a very simple yet powerful way to illustrate what God through Jesus Christ did for humankind.

The next time you’re in a conversation with a person who wants to know who God is and what he has done, grab a piece of scratch paper or a cocktail napkin and ask them permission if you can sketch out a bridge.

On the one side we have people, and the other side God, with a large chasm in between. This chasm demonstrates the division that exists because of people’s rebellion against God. People want to go their own way rather than God’s way—in the Bible this is called “sin.”

The dilemma people face, of course, is that we want to get to God but we can’t leap over the chasm. So we often try using our own human effort, or other religions, or whatever, hoping to get the bridge built. And yet all the human effort in the world is not enough.

But thankfully God saw our dilemma and he loved us so much that he intervened so that we would have a way of being close to him. His solution, of course, was to send his only son, Jesus, to die on the cross to forgive our sins and thereby to be the bridge to God.

If you remember nothing else remember this. Jesus Christ came to earth to be our bridge and whoever makes the decision to trust, and rely on him by faith, will live with God forever. John 5:24 says, *“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged, but has crossed over from death to life.”*

Now, my friends, not only does God have a story but you have a story as well. In fact, if you have a relationship with God through his Son, Jesus Christ, then you have a redemption story to

tell. Regardless of how you came to faith, or have grown in your faith, hopefully you have seen changes in you through God's grace and mercy.

Just like the Bible story of the leper who was made well, or the blind man who could see, there is something life-changing and wonderful about truly knowing Jesus by faith. You may say that you were striving to earn your own salvation by your good works but now you are at peace living in God's grace.

You may say that you were doing lots of destructive behavior but now through Jesus you are living a healthy life. Or perhaps you may say that you were feeling lots of guilt, lots of shame about your sins or the hurt you caused others, but now you feel forgiven and free.

Or perhaps you were once fear-stricken and afraid but now through Christ, and caring Christian friends, you're now more confident. Or perhaps you were feeling lots of despair where the glass was always half-empty, where now through faith in Jesus you are more hopeful about life.

Another faith story that you may resonate with is that you have always pretty much known you are a believer in Jesus. And through the years you haven't had any real big life change story, or any terrible failure made right. Rather you have worshipped and been part of Christ's church all these years—you believe, pray and walk with Jesus each day.

A faith story like this is just as powerful as a major conversion—because it bears witness to God's grace and sustaining power. If this is your story it is a great story to share. This is my faith story in 150 words or less...(share).

The reality, of course, is that faith stories can be as simple as that, or as simple as telling a before and after story. And yet where we run into problems is when a Christ-follower talks too long, or is fuzzy about how God is the core, or uses lots of insider theological words, or makes the listener feel like you are superior to them and have your life all together.

So what I am encouraging this week is that each one of you write down your faith story in 100 or 150 words or less. Take some time to think about how God is working in you, and how you are growing and changing through God's grace and power. What positive difference is your faith making in you?

This past week many at Messiah were excited to read the Faith Statements written by those young people who were confirmed last Sunday. Read their statements for inspiration. Look at the "Guidelines for Faith Statements" attached to your bulletin.

And if some of you would be willing to read your story sometime in church I will add a "Faith Story" time to the service. We had many people over the years share faith stories at my previous church and it was a great and faith strengthening thing for the one sharing, and an even more encouraging witness to all who heard it.

So, my friends, we aren't going to get rid of all those negative perceptions that are out there about Christians. There is a lot of damage already done. And yet if we as a congregation do our part to ensure that our caring outreach and stories of faith are filled with grace and patience, perhaps we will then help some of these people to want our loving God to be part of their lives.