

In the Habit of Sharing Your Story

Mark 1:40-45

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Hey, there's this new Thai restaurant in Burnsville on County Road 42 near County Road 5. It's got some of the best Thai noodles and curry I've ever had. And they serve it mild or hot enough to melt your face off! If you like Thai food, you should definitely check it out the next time you want to treat yourself.

Oh, and I read a book recently about managing anxiety that was awesome. With everything going on in the world and with all the changes and challenges that churches are facing, I thought it would be a good study for some of our staff. And it's been excellent. I've really found it helpful to better understand and manage my own anxieties. The author's name is Steve Cuss...with a "c." You might want to read it.

And as long as I'm rambling here...you have heard that we're traveling to Scotland and Ireland in 2022, right? Prince of Peace members and friends are traveling with our friends at Peace Lutheran Church in Gahanna, Ohio again, and this time we're exploring the roots of Celtic Christianity. I was just reviewing the itinerary and I'm super excited about some of the things we're going to see. There's still room on the trip and it's not too late to register. You should think about coming along. There's more information on our website. It's going to be a blast.

Do you know what I've just done? I've just evangelized you. I've told you the story of something I've experienced or something I'm excited about. And because it was meaningful for me, I extended an invitation to you. No pressure. Not a ton of detail. I just planted a seed. What you do with it is up to you. And that, my friends, is what evangelism is all about. The word evangelism literally means "good news." It's nothing more than sharing a story of good news with others. But since the word "evangelism" carries so much baggage, it's the last time you're going to hear me say that word today. Instead, we're going to talk about sharing your story.

And to get into that I want to tell you a story...from Mark's Gospel. It's a story that will illustrate from

several angles what it can look like to share your story. Let's read it together from Mark, chapter 1:

A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed. "If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean," he said.

Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. "I am willing," he said. "Be healed!" Instantly the leprosy disappeared, and the man was healed. Then Jesus sent him on his way with a stern warning: "Don't tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed."

But the man went and spread the word, proclaiming to everyone what had happened. As a result, large crowds soon surrounded Jesus, and he couldn't publicly enter a town anywhere. He had to stay out in the secluded places, but people from everywhere kept coming to him.

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

I want to start with the story before the story. And it begins with a simple question, "How did the man with leprosy know to come to Jesus for healing?" That's a part of the story that Mark doesn't tell us, but we can safely assume that the leper heard about Jesus from someone else. In other words, someone else had an experience with Jesus. Perhaps they saw Jesus heal someone, or perhaps they themselves had been healed, and so they shared their story with the leper. They planted a seed of hope that perhaps the leper, too, could experience healing.

And he did! Leprosy was so much more than a physical ailment in the first century. Lepers were societal outcasts, separated even from their own families. Can you imagine how grateful this man would have been to be healed, grateful not just to Jesus but to the person who told him about Jesus? That simple act of sharing their story changed the leper's life.

And what does the leper do? He does what comes naturally. He goes out and shares his story with others – first with the priest and then with anyone who will listen to him. He shares his story about Jesus and about how he was healed in the hopes that someone else might be blessed as he was. This is what we do when we have a great experience. When we see a great movie, eat at a restaurant that blows us

away or take a vacation somewhere that exceeds all expectations, we tell others about it. We share our story.

Except when it comes to our faith life. Studies show that less than 10% of Christians talk to anyone outside their church about their faith or their experience with God. And according to those same studies, the primary reasons given for why they don't share their stories are:

1. Fear of rejection
2. Wouldn't know what to say
3. Assume that people aren't interested

Do any of those sound familiar? Here's my response to those concerns. First, there's nothing to reject. You're not trying to convince anyone of anything. You're merely sharing your experience, sharing what you're excited about. Second, it is your story, not a bunch of Bible verses or theological doctrine, so you will know what to say because you were there! And finally, people are, in general, quite interested. Spiritual hunger in America runs deep. People may not agree with your perspective. They may not share your experience or excitement. But they do tend to be interested, and you just never know what the Holy Spirit will do with the seed that you plant when you share your story.

As an aside, you may wonder why Jesus told the leper in today's story not to tell anyone about his experience. "Aha," you think to yourself. "That's why I never share my story. Because Jesus said I shouldn't!" Well, not so fast. Jesus didn't want to be known as a healer. He knew that the fullness of his identity couldn't be known until his death and resurrection. That's why he often told people whom he healed not to tell others. Nice try, though.

Scripture says, "Always be ready to share the reason for the hope that is within you." That's another way of saying, "Always be ready to share your story." So, how do we do that? I want to challenge you to take a small, medium or large step in this direction this week. Here's what that looks like.

The small step might actually be your first step, and that's to know your story. Actually, it would be more accurate to say, "know your stories." The goal here isn't to chart your entire spiritual history...though there's nothing wrong with that. The goal is to think through your spiritual journey and choose a few moments that stand out to you. You might think about it this way. If you ate three meals a day, then you ate

1,095 meals in the last year. But no one really wants to hear about them all! However, I'd be willing to bet that there were a few meals that stood out. Maybe it was the quality of the food, or a meaningful event, or a spectacular location. Those highlights are worth sharing. And that's true in our faith journey. God is always with us – every moment of every day – but there are moments when God's presence becomes so real, so imminent and impactful, that they stand out.

Have there been moments in your life when you felt that amazing "peace that passes all understanding" in the middle of a chaotic or challenging time?

Have you experienced seemingly miraculous healing of your body, mind, emotions or relationships?

Have there been moments when you've been overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude for something that God has done in your life?

Have there been moments when a faithful friend said just the right thing at just the right time that helped you to move through a difficult situation?

Those moments become the spiritual highlight reel of your spiritual story. Become aware of them. While I'm calling this a "small step" it's really a big deal. It's such an encouragement to our faith to think about the number of times we've become more fully aware of God's love and grace and presence in our lives.

Here's a medium step: write your story. Or, again, it would be more accurate to say, "Write your stories." As you think about those "highlight moments," write them down in detail. What was happening in your life at the time? How were you feeling? What were you thinking? What happened to make you aware of God's presence and activity in your life? There's something about writing down your reflections that draws out more of the details that we might otherwise forget.

In a way, that's what Matthew, Mark, Luke and John did. They not only reflected on the highlight moments that they experienced with Jesus; they wrote them down. They shared their stories. And for two thousand years the Holy Spirit has used those stories to plant seeds of faith into the lives of countless people, just like you and me. So, moms and dads, grandparents, when you write your stories put them somewhere where your children and grandchildren will be able to find them in the years ahead. You never know how the Holy Spirit might use those stories in their lives.

Finally, the large step: share your story. By now I hope you know what that doesn't mean. You're not trying to talk someone into believing. You're quoting

bible verses or spouting doctrine. You're doing what the leper did. You're sharing a brief story of your experience with God.

Math has never been my strong suit, which is why I'll never understand why I took Accounting 101 and 102 as electives in college. The day of my final exam I was in a panic, so much so that I hit that point when your brain begins to feel like Teflon – nothing sticks anymore. Suddenly I couldn't remember even the basics. In a moment of sheer panic, I closed my eyes and prayed, "God, I need help." Instantly it felt as if a warm blanket had been placed on my head, and then slowly covered my body, right down to my toes. My pulse and breathing slowed and I felt this extraordinary sense of calm. I closed my books, walked to the final and took the exam. I didn't exactly ace it, but throughout the exam I felt totally at peace. It was one of the most extraordinary and instant answers to prayer I've ever experienced.

I just shared my story with you. Simple, right? And I'm guessing you have a story or two like that...a story of sensing God with you and God at work in a special way. I want to challenge you to share a story like that with someone this week. Someone shared a story like that with a leper 2000 years ago, and it changed his life. And you just never know how the Holy Spirit might use your story in a powerful way in someone else's life. Let's pray...