

“Telling Our Stories in the Light”

Matthew 10:24-39

June 18, 2017

Proper 7A

Rev. Courtney E. Allen

Dave Isay opened the first StoryCorps booth in New York’s Grand Central Terminal in 2003 with the intention of creating a quiet place where a person could honor someone who mattered to them by telling their story. Since then, StoryCorps has evolved into the single largest collection of human voices ever recorded.

In 1998, Isay made a documentary about the last flophouse hotels on the Bowery in Manhattan. Guys stayed up in these cheap hotels for decades. They lived in cubicles the size of prison cells covered with chicken wire so you couldn't jump from one room into the next. Later, Dave wrote a book on the men he met there. He remembers walking into a flophouse with an early version of the book and showing one of the guys his page. The guy stood there staring at it in silence, then he grabbed the book out of Dave’s hand and started running down the long, narrow hallway holding it over his head shouting, "I exist! I exist."

"I exist" became the clarion call for StoryCorps in a lot of ways, Dave says. In Grand Central Terminal they built a booth where anyone can come to honor someone else by interviewing them about their life. You come to this booth and you're met by a facilitator who brings you inside. You sit across from, say, your grandfather for close to an hour and you listen and you talk. Many people think of it as, *if this was to be our last conversation, what would I want to ask of and say to this person who means so much to me?* Questions like who has been the most important person in your life? What was the happiest moment of your life? The saddest? What are you proudest of? When in life have you feel most alone? Do you have any regrets? How would you like to be remembered? At the end of the session, you walk away with a copy of the interview and another copy goes to the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress so that your great-great-great-grandkids can someday get to know your grandfather through his voice and story.

Dave Isay has worked to shine a light on people who are rarely heard from in the media. Over and over again, he saw how this simple act of being interviewed could mean so much to people, particularly those who had been told that their stories didn't matter. He says he could literally see people's back straighten as they started to speak into the microphone.

To be known and to tell our story is something we long for as humans. This is one of the reasons Storycorps has been so successful. People who have never been listened to have that opportunity through Storycorps. And that experience has been transformative for both the listener and the story teller. We are hardwired to create and tell stories. Stories have a way with us. We long for them. We make meaning out of them. We define ourselves by our stories. We tell stories to learn more about one another.

This morning's gospel from Matthew comes from the middle of Jesus' sending instruction about mission. The verses follow Jesus' instructions to the disciples of what to take (or rather what not to take) with them on mission—take no money, no bag, no sandals, no staff. Proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Cure the sick. Raise the dead, cleans the lepers, cast out demons. This discourse focuses on the realities the disciples will encounter in the world, and he says to them:

“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”¹

It seems God, too, loves stories. And Jesus knows that telling our stories and listening deeply to the stories of others is holy. Even transformative. As Jesus prepares the disciples for all they will encounter as they go into the world proclaiming the gospel, he exhorts them to tell their stories—stories of how their lives got intertwined with Jesus and how their world has been turned upside down because of his good news. Stories of how the kingdom of heaven has come near. Stories of what they've learned about God by sitting down with lepers, centurions and tax collectors, the sick, the tormented, and the paralyzed. Stories of how following Jesus led them to see God in the stories of the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. Of course, stories of this kind upset all the systems of the empire and the order of the day. But in the Jesus movement, again and again and again room is made for those on the margins to be fully known, to tell their stories and to say, “I exist!” And most importantly to know and believe, “I exist to God!”

And this is such good news that it can't be held back or kept a secret. Because the mission Jesus has in mind for us is not remain a tight-knit, closed off community. No, not at all...“Go and share your story. Tell it like it is in my kingdom.”

And I wonder, too, if Jesus knows that sharing some of our stories in the light can be really difficult. We long to tell our most authentic stories and yet we also fear telling our stories. As Frederick Buechner says, “We run the risk of losing track of who we truly and fully are and little by little we come to accept the highly edited version which we put forth. So it is important to tell our stories and our secrets....”

“Tell it in the light,” Jesus says. Even the parts you fear, tell in the light—the things you fear people will know about you, the things you've tried so hard to keep locked up and hidden away so that no one will ever know the depth of your struggles—your anxiety, your failings, your pain, your wounds, your addictions, your hangups, your questions....”

¹ Matthew 10:26-31

And as soon as Jesus says, “Tell it in the light” he says, “do not fear...” and speaks of how even the sparrows are of value to God, and so too, are YOU of great value to God.

This is the “God of the sparrows”—this God cares deeply for even those small creatures that are sold for half a penny. God loves you more than these. And God loves you more than anything. In fact, God will stop at nothing to make sure you know you are loved and valued beyond measure. For you are created in the image of God. The *imago Dei*. The very imprint of God is at your core. And you do not have to be afraid. Because God has counted your every hair, your every wrinkle, your every cell. And you are LOVED! No matter what has been done or left undone in your life thus far, your story can be told and new life can be found. You are ultimately a child of God. This is your truest identity and everything else stems from it. Flows out of it. And if we know our truest identity to be “child of God,” we can tell our stories and hear the stories of others in the light of God’s love. Without fear.

Jesus sends the disciples out with few if any supplies, but he sends them out everything they need: the power of story and the assurance of God’s love and care.

One of the great preachers and storytellers of the last century, Fred Craddock says this:

Our stories must be trusted to carry the message. The greatest difficulty in storytelling is the matter of whether or not we trust a story to carry the freight. Do you trust the Kingdom of God, the message, to something as fragile as a story? Some believe that telling stories to change the world is like trying to break up concrete by throwing light bulbs against it. I've been present when someone threw light bulbs against concrete walls, and the walls cracked and fell.

May we find spaces in which we can be brave enough to tell our stories in the light. And to proclaim from the rooftops that all of our hope is in the love of God—redeeming and reconciling love. Love powerful enough to cast out fear. Love radical enough to reorder our world. And God entrusts all of this to you and me and something as fragile as a story. Amen.

—*Courtney Allen Crump* © 2020