

Matthew 5:14-16

"Storytellers"

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One of my former professors, Doug Ottati, once told a story about how he was baptized in a Lutheran church in Indianapolis, but shortly thereafter he and his family moved to New Jersey. There, he says, "my parents delivered our entire household to the Presbyterians." He recounted a conversation he and his mother had at the time, which went something like this:

"If we had stayed in Indiana," he asked his mother, "we'd probably be Lutheran now. Right?"

She responded, "Yes, probably."

"If we had moved to Brazil, we probably would be Catholic," he said.

"I expect so," she answered.

"And if we were in Thailand, we might be Buddhist."

"Maybe," she said.

"So, why are we Presbyterians, then?" he asked.

"Well, Douglas," she said, "I wanted to pass on to you something that I find valuable."

I like that answer very much, because it's different from what many Christians would say about why they practice their faith in a particular way. We could go stop people on the street and ask, "Excuse me sir, but why are you Methodist?" or "Ma'am, I was wondering why you're Baptist," or "Tell me why you're Catholic, or Lutheran, or Pentecostal." I have a hunch that more than a few people would say something like, "My family has always been Baptist," or "I'm Lutheran because I come from a Lutheran family," or, "I'm not really sure why I'm Presbyterian, and now that I come to think of it, my church does some really strange things. Do you think I could come worship with you sometime?"

For a lot of people, practicing your faith is something that you do, even if you don't know why you do it, and even if you don't have to think a whole lot about what you're doing. That's fine, and I don't mean to make light of families who have practiced their faith consistently for generations upon generations. I do wonder, however, if there are Christians for whom faith has become something that's too easy, something that you just wear on the outside, without really experiencing that parts of faith that are really valuable, and really worthwhile. "I wanted to pass on to you

something that I find valuable," she said. Maybe for every Christian, there should be times when we pause for a moment and think about what that is. At some point in your life, someone passed that on to you. Someone gave you an element of your faith that is incredibly valuable. What was it?

If I think back on my own faith journey, it's pretty clear that a valuable part of my faith was passed on to me from someone else. I grew up in a family that did not attend church regularly. I can probably count on one hand the number of times that I went to church before I graduated from high school. Though my family was not a churchgoing family, we were a religious family. Every Sunday we would sit down together in the living room and read from the Bible, say prayers together, and talk about how we could apply what we read in scripture to our everyday lives. We read stories from the Bible every week. We read about Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Aaron, Joseph and his brothers. My parents told me the stories of Jacob and Esau, King David, and of course, Jesus. I like to tell people that just like a lot of children were home-schooled, I was "home-churched". It's because I was home-churched that my faith was an open faith, unafraid of asking questions and especially

considerate of differing beliefs and viewpoints. The faith that grew within me sitting on my living room floor every Sunday was anything but dogmatic, and in the absence of a typical doctrinal system I had to make do with simply knowing simple things like the fact that God loved me, the fact that God was always with me, and the fact that God expected me to love others. That was it. That was my faith in a nutshell.

Right around the time I graduated from high school, and again just before I graduated from college, my family suffered the tragic deaths of several family members. Those were very trying times for my entire family, and for me the stresses of grief and depression were added onto the difficulties of navigating my way through my college years. There were times when it felt to me that the whole world was crumbling. Everything I knew was falling apart, and nothing could be trusted. Nothing... except the presence and the love of God. Even when all else in my life seemed to be disintegrating, I knew quite simply that God loved me, that God was always with me, and that God expected me to love others. Miraculously, the home-churched faith of my childhood sustained me in the midst of some very difficult times.

Now I say that was miraculous because it's something that I didn't fully understand at the time. I had never been to church. I had never been a part of a traditional faith community in any meaningful way. My parents had never taught me the Apostle's Creed or the answers to the Shorter Catechism. Looking back on it now, it seems that my parents did something very simple but very effective: They told me the story of Jesus. It was simple and it wasn't exactly your traditional Christian upbringing. But it was valuable, probably more valuable than I know even now.

I used to consider my nontraditional upbringing something of a weakness, as if my faith wasn't "real" faith because it didn't fit the mold. But as I've grown older I've been able to appreciate it, and understand it as a gift. It shaped my faith and made me who I am today. And it happened because even though my parents didn't take us to church, they took seriously their role as storytellers. They passed on something valuable to me. It was compassion. It was understanding. It was love. And yes, it was faith.

To some degree, my parents imitated the way that Jesus taught his disciples. So often when Jesus preached the gospel, he did so by telling stories. We call the parables, but that's just

another word for a story. They were stories that came alive, stories that touched people deep down, stories that meant something and revealed the character of God. Jesus went from place to place telling his stories, and then when his physical time on earth had ended, he left his disciples with a command to go and teach people just as he did. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you," he said. In other words, you all, the followers of Jesus, will be the teachers, and the whole world will be full of disciples. You are the storytellers now.

Jesus calls us to be teachers and storytellers, but so often we assume that others should be doing the teaching and we ourselves have no story to tell. We've become so used to seeing teaching as merely an occupation that we've forgotten what it's like to practice it as our Christian vocation. We minimize our own stories, and become unwilling to share our journey of faith - our story - with others. God's relationship with the world doesn't end at the last page of the Bible. The story continues, and it continues in our lives even today. In our own lives we see reflections of the greatest news

the world will ever hear, but there are times when we're simply afraid to tell it.

Jesus saw that in his followers. He knew that those first disciples and all who would follow them would be capable of reflecting his grace and love outward, into all the world. "You are the light of the world," he said. Yet, Jesus also knew that it would be hard for us to be perfect reflectors, he knew that we would be fighting against our own tendencies to keep silent, to remain complacent, to look for someone else to do it. "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house," he said. "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." In other words, let your story be told. Share it with others. Teach others about God by talking about what God has done in your life. Don't just keep the miraculous and valuable parts of your faith to yourself - put them out there for others to see and hear and experience. Let the story be told.

God's story is still going on. You can find it all around us. It's in the celebrations of life-changing moments and in the whispered

prayers of the dying. It's in sanctuaries full of people who share their worship, and on crowded buses where people simply share space. It's in songs of praise and cries of anguish, in fellowship halls and hospital rooms, homes and schools and waiting rooms and churches. Everywhere around us God is meets people right where they live, all around us people are being formed and shaped by the gospel to go out and be the light of the world, and the story is being written so that it may be told.

Here in church is one of the very best places for that to happen. We gather here to worship, to share, to teach, to be reminded of our part in God's great story as well as our duty to tell it, to pass on to future generations something good, and miraculous, and valuable. Jesus called us the light of the world. So brothers and sisters, let your lives reflect the radiant grace and love of your Lord and Savior. Let God's story be told as we teach each other what God has done in our lives. Let your light so shine before others so that they may see... and give glory to your Father in heaven.

To God be the glory! Amen.