

The Evangelist as Storyteller

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He taught them many things by parables [stories]. Mark 4:2

Binx Bolling is the improbable name of the main character in Walker Percy's 1960's novel *The Moviegoer*. Binx is a young stockbroker in post-World War II New Orleans who loves fast cars, girls, beer, beaches, and movies. But Binx has another side to him, a sense of longing that is not easily seen. One week before his thirtieth birthday he is on a search. On a bus he sees a fine-looking girl and begins to fantasize about meeting her. If this were a movie, he thinks, he would just have to wait and it would happen. Just then the idea of a search comes to him. He becomes so absorbed that he forgets about the girl. What is the search? It is, he says, "what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life." To be aware of the search is to be *on* to something; not to be *onto* something is despair. "The movies are onto the search," he says, "but they screw it up. The search always ends in despair." "What do you seek— God?" he imagines being asked, and says,

I hesitate to answer, since all other Americans have settled the matter for themselves ...Who want to be dead last among one hundred and eighty million Americans? For, as everyone knows, the polls report that 98% of Americans believe in God and the remaining 2% are atheists and agnostics—which leaves not a single percentage point for a seeker....I cannot even answer this, the simplest and most basic of all questions: Am I, in my search, a hundred miles ahead of my fellow Americans or a hundred miles behind them?¹

The Moviegoer was Percy's first novel, winning the National Book Award for fiction in 1962, and beating out J.D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Percy was one of the first of the new crop of Southern novelists in the mid-century. A dropout from a Presbyterian church in Birmingham, Alabama, he went to medical school and trained as a psychiatrist, but never practiced medicine because he contracted tuberculosis and had to spend many months in a sanitarium.

During that time and after, Percy began to be painfully aware of his own spiritual search. An epiphany of some sort happened to him on a trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico, setting his life on a new course. He decided all at once to get married, to become a writer, to live in New Orleans, and as he told his amazed traveling companion, the writer Shelby Foote, to give up his scientific agnosticism, take Christianity seriously and become a Catholic! Several years later he was published and a new star rising in the literary sky. *The Moviegoer* was applauded by critics for its sly poking at accepted mid-America values and for its wacky humor.

* This is an edited version of one of three lectures on the theme, "Fresh Images of the Evangelist," given by Ford, Columbia '55, at the seminary's April 2005 Colloquium.

Yet Percy was a writer with a mission. Binx Bolling represented some of both Percy himself and America in the fifties: unapologetically materialist, out for a good time, yet with a deep sense of longing for something more. This sense of longing ran like an underground river through Percy's characters, like Tom More, the lapsed Catholic psychiatrist in *Love in the Ruins*, who sits in a sand trap on a golf course, musing about being ten years old and in love and full of longing: "The first thing a man remembers is longing and the last thing he is conscious of before death is exactly the same longing. I have never seen a man die who did not die in longing."²

By this time some critics were put off that this talented, ironic, stingingly funny writer was now turning out enchanted religious fairy tales! His biographer Jay Tolson complained that even his religion was missing something. "We need to hear from the Christian ironist before the novel ends; but we don't." Tolson points out that "during the last decade of his life, he would become a forceful defender of orthodoxy."³

So we have in Walker Percy the novelist becoming evangelist. Percy's church recognized that this storyteller was becoming one of the church's most effective missionaries to late twentieth-century American culture. And in fact, he was invited to be a key speaker on Culture and Evangelization to the Pontifical Council in Rome not long before his death. Speaking between a British Lord and a Nigerian feminist, he cited all the usual cultural suspects for the spiritual decline of his nation. But he did not conclude that secularism would win. Rather he boldly predicted that evangelization would have a better chance of succeeding in a "thoroughly secularized United States in the year 2000" than in a society "nominally and perhaps superficially Christian"!

His reasoning? That the promises of secularism would have exhausted themselves by the new century, and the anonymous consumer would have "exhausted the roster of 'needs-satisfaction' ...whether...the manifold goods of a sophisticated consumer society, or the services of four hundred or so different schools of psychotherapy." And how should the church then serve society? "By remaining faithful to its original commission," said this novelist/evangelist in 1988 to the Pontifical audience. Surely his words are prophetic to us years later. I highlight the influence of Walker Percy not to suggest that preachers should become novelists (though I wish that those who do could be as deft as Percy!) but to ask: if a novelist can have a spiritual vocation, then should not we evangelists take to heart the power of story?

The Gospel as Story

Storytelling is both a *gift* that we may covet and a *craft* that all preachers should learn. My wife has always reminded me that people will remember the stories I tell long after they have forgotten the statistics I quote. True, there are outstanding preachers who hardly ever tell stories. On the other hand, perhaps you have heard sermons that simply strung together anecdotes (and often secondhand ones at that) with little biblical meat.

My point is not only that as evangelists we need to *tell* stories; I am advocating that we see the gospel *as* story, and that we understand evangelism as living and *telling the Story* of the One who has entered and changed *our* story and will do so with *theirs* who also encounter his story. Barbara Mutch writes, "Through the telling and receiving of stories – family stories and family of faith stories we become 'storied' ones." Let me propose a few reasons story is crucial to evangelism, always, and especially today

when in many ways this is a world that has lost its story.

Story Follows. It follows Jesus! “Follow me,” he said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” Matthew tells us (and so do Mark and Luke) that when Jesus preached the kingdom he told the crowds “many things in parables [stories],” and then declares that actually “*he did not say anything to them without using a story*”! He explained to his inner core that he had a double reason for using stories: to light up the truth for those who were ready to receive it, and to hide it from the spiritual dilettantes and curiosity-seekers who were not. If Jesus told nothing without a story, then if we are going to follow him and become “fishers of people” we had better be storytellers!

Story Feeds. It feeds a basic human hunger. The novelist Reynolds Price asserts that next to food and drink, our most basic human need is story. We might quibble that touch is even more basic. Yet his assertion is born out, for storytelling is a growing form of entertainment. It’s estimated that in San Francisco on any given weekend forty storytelling sessions take place in bars and clubs, not only by professionals but by “normal” people who have a story to tell. Who would have thought that people would go to bars to hear and tell their life stories? Why not, we might wonder, to church?

But the nurturing power of story is nothing new. The British scholar Marjorie Reeves has written,

The Bible has been the main source of spiritual story throughout the Christian centuries ... it was story rather than doctrine that nourished the spirituality of many generations because it fed the imagination. Story came first; doctrine afterwards.⁴

Reeves points out that while scholastic minds in medieval times did the important work of relating theology and philosophy, “story influenced a much wider range of the devout. From the *lectio divina* of monastic community to the visual representation of sculpture and painting in churches, sacred story was ‘read’ by the many.”

Story Bridges. We have moved (as Neil Postman said a generation ago) from the Age of Exposition to the Age of Entertainment. Once many ordinary people read books, gave rock star-like welcomes to writers like Charles Dickens, and went to presidential debates that lasted up to seven hours (during the Lincoln-Douglas campaign)! Today even the so-called evening news is in entertainment format. How does the church respond? By our becoming entertainers? God forbid! But story can be the entry point into jaded minds and imaginations.

Story Draws. This postmodern world rejects all efforts to claim absolutes (except of course the absolute claim that there are no absolutes!). Dare to quote Jesus’ claim to be the Way, the ideological door slams, and you are dissed as a bigot. How then to communicate the truth we know and treasure in Jesus? I believe the authentic sharing of our own stories can get under the protective radar screen, like the blind man who said, “I don’t know the answer to all your questions, but I do know that I was blind, and that man made me see.” People usually can’t or don’t argue about firsthand experience. And if we will listen to their stories, and if they can hear ours and know that we are almost as “normal” as they are, that can be the first step to their listening to the story of Jesus.

Story Heals. There is therapy in story, as Daniel Taylor has written in *The Healing Power of Stories*.⁵ Taylor believes that story is already at the center of our lives, and

if we do not notice that, it is because story is as all-pervasive as the air we breathe. “There is no story without a telling,” writes Taylor, who believes that “Everyone without exception, should be allowed to tell his or her own story—even God let Adam try to explain.”

At Bellevue Hospital in New York, medical students are learning the importance of using story in their practice. “Just tell me a story,” Dr. Danielle Ofri admonishes them. Doctors often speak and write as if “there are no people there,” she tells her students on their rounds. “Think of the way we make presentations. We say, ‘The spleen was palpated.’ Who palpated whose spleen?” At the core of every patient’s history, she emphasizes, is a mystery story, a narrative full of surprises. So to humanize their work she tells her students, “Just tell me a story. Don’t read from your notes.”

Story Teaches. I have a friend who is the son of two immigrants, a Jewish father and Ukrainian mother. When he was growing up in Cleveland, he was sent both to synagogue and an Orthodox school. One taught in Hebrew, the other in Ukrainian. So he could understand virtually nothing of what was said. Dick is a highly ethical person, so I asked him how he developed his sense of morals and ethics with no religious basis. “Through the radio,” he said, to my astonishment. As a boy he listened to the daily serial programs on radio—and in hearing stories about Jack Armstrong, the All-American boy, or the Long Ranger and Tonto fighting the bad guys, he learned courage, honesty, the difference between right and wrong, and a lifetime virtue of doing right.

The director of the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, told me the center’s research shows that corporate values are most effectively taught not through slogans or policies put on a wall but through what he called “value parables,” stories of people in the company whose principled actions, undertaken perhaps at risk to their careers, made a difference.

Story Redeems. “Tell me the old, old story” runs the old gospel song, for the old story is ever new! Much of the early life-changing preaching—the kerygma—of the apostles was just a telling of the story of Jesus and the kingdom. Indeed the “gospel” itself is story. When you say the word over and over until it begins to sound like nonsense, you will start to hear the very heart of the word:...gospel...goooo-spell...goooo-spell...gooood-spell...God-spell!

“Godspell” is the old English form of gospel. It speaks to us of a “good spell,” something very good from God. “Spell” is equal to a good talk, discourse, or “spiel,” a *good* story. And “spell” also means a charm, an influence, a fascination. So the “good spiel” is the good story, the story of God. And the “good spell” is the good charm—the spell of God. So the “gospel” is a “story to tell” by those “LUI” – living under the influence of Jesus.

Evangelism as a “Collision of Stories”

My point is not just about telling stories but about seeing the gospel as story, and evangelism as a collision of stories. The Bible contains a vast and sweeping narrative, God’s Story with a capital “S.” Narrative evangelism is living this Story and sharing this Story with others—and inviting them to be part of it. Think how the story of Jesus collided with the lives of his early followers as the gospel narrative spread through the encounters of Acts. His story collides with Peter, and Peter’s with Cornelius; it collides with Stephen, and Stephen’s with Saul; it collides with Philip, and Philip’s with the

Ethiopian treasurer; and so on through the centuries, until Jesus' story collides with someone else whose story collides with yours, and yours with—on it goes.

Each of us has a story – a story with a small “s” – the story of our own journeys. At the point where our story collides with the Story of God – the story with a large “S” – we choose either to be written out of the Story or to become part of it. So evangelism means living and telling the Story of the One who has changed our story.

Storytelling and Evangelism

There are three stories which are vital in storytelling evangelism, and which we need to weave together as we tell the gospel story. First, of course, are the Bible stories themselves. When I wrote *The Power of Story* a critic took me to task for not taking time to establish the power of story more thoroughly from the Bible. Since a single criticism usually obsesses me more than several dozen compliments, I thought, “Shoot, I blew it.” Then it dawned on me: proving that the Bible teaches story is like trying to prove the air I breathe. The Bible *is* story, isn't it? It is the story of God and God's creation and redemption and his people.

Check the table of contents. At least half the pages of the Old Testament are pure narrative, and narrative is the backbone of many of the Psalms. Over half of the New Testament is story. And for the rest—how could we understand the prophets of Israel or the letters of Paul without knowing the story line against which they wrote?

The philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff says our lives are “story-shaped,” as by the stories we heard as children that shaped our imagination. The issue he is says is not *whether* we will be shaped by stories, but *which* stories shape our lives.⁶ Knowing this, is it any wonder that God has chosen to be the Great Storyteller?

We Christians are indeed a People of the Book. But our book is not magic. It is the authentic and living witness to the Great God-Story, the God-Spell. The stories of our Book are more than a series of tales. They reveal the great overarching story: the story of God the Father and his steadfast love; the story of God the Son and his strong and redeeming grace; and the story of God the Spirit and his living breath. There are two grand themes, writes Barbara Mutch, which shine forth in the Bible stories: *stories of separation – of brokenness, exile, longing, plight – and stories of transformation – of healing, returning, discovery, light!* Behind all our stories is One at work rewriting our stories into his script.

The early Christians knew the power of story. For the most part, the first preaching was not debate or argument, but the telling and retelling of the mighty acts of God in Christ. If biblical evangelism means anything, it is that God the Evangelist is God the Storyteller, writing our lives into His Great Story. Our part as evangelists is to be shaped by the Story, tell the Story, and invite others to live in the Story.

Our personal stories are also an integral part of our ministry of evangelism. In becoming a storyteller I need to pay attention to how His Story has touched and changed my own story. Have we recast our own theology in terms of narrative? How long has it been since we reread the Bible asking, “How is this story our story?” and let ourselves be grasped again by the wonderful story of salvation history—the story of Father, Son, and Spirit, and of God's people?

If it's time to do that, then listen to Jesus' story again in fresh words, as in Peterson's *The Message*. Or through a cross-cultural exposure, as Catholic priest William Donovan did working with the Masai in East Africa, powerfully recounted in

his *Christianity Rediscovered*. Or read Kenneth Bailey's accounts of what he learned when he told the parables to middle Eastern villagers in *The Cross and the Prodigal*. Or read prayerfully and reflectively Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal*. If I am paying attention to my own life in the light of Scripture, I will see how the Bible stories connect with my own history and the stories of those with whom I am sharing the "God-spell." How often have you and I felt like Abraham, called to leave the familiar and go into the unknown? How often have we found ourselves, like Jacob, wrestling in the middle of the night with our own fears and limps, aware of the mystery that is attached to our names and God's? How often have I, like Jonah, been rebuked for my narrow-mind and small-heart until God lets me be swallowed up in my own seas, and taught to care for my own Nineveh! And how often have you and I, like Peter, wept our way to the cross in search of a fresh start?

Authenticity is very close to topping the list of qualities for effective evangelism. Few have put this more eloquently than the writer/preacher Frederick Buechner. In *Telling Secrets*, he opens up some of the secrets of his own life, and then makes this searching charge:

Sad to say, the people who seem to lose touch with themselves and God most conspicuously are of all things ministers.... Ministers give preeminence to of all books the Bible whose absolutely central and unifying thesis is that God makes himself known in historical experience. In other words, a major part of their ministry is to remind us that there is nothing more important than to pay attention to what is happening to us, yet again and again they show little sign of doing so themselves. There is precious little in most of their preaching to suggest that they have rejoiced and suffered with the rest of mankind...what it is like to love Christ, say, or to feel spiritually bankrupt....Ministers run the awful risk...of ceasing to be witnesses to the Presence in their own lives....Their sermons often sound as bland as they sound bloodless....⁷

When have you had the opportunity to tell your own story without hurry, without interruption, without much editing? That opportunity does not come often, unless it's in some kind of therapy. Most of us are so full of our own thoughts and concerns that we find it difficult really to attend to another, or we are so concerned about how we will appear to be that we find it difficult to tell our story.

I was asked not long ago to write an appreciation for a friend who was retiring as a seminary dean. I asked him to come by for coffee and tell me not only about his academic career but about his life. For two hours we listened together to the story of his pilgrimage and of those who helped him on the way. At times he was in tears. I say we listened "together" because he was listening to his own voice relating his own full story for the first time. And we were listening together to God's voice. At the end he thanked me and said, "No one has ever asked me to tell my story this way before, and taken the time to listen." If I gave him a gift I also received one, as I heard his sacred story in all its joys and scars. So I urge you: if you have neither received this gift, nor offered it, then find a soul companion and listen to your own soul adventures!

A Caution, a Question, and a Biblical Model

Here a caution is in order: you and I can become so wrapped up in the details of our own stories that God's story is eclipsed. Our witness then become an exercise in self-indulgent narcissism. Marjorie Reeves suggests a helpful distinction: Whereas "my experience" spells out the ego-centered feelings of an *individual*, "my story" assumes the involvement of the *person* in relationships over time. What distinction is there between telling stories between friends, or at a bar, and telling stories in the context of our faith sharing?

Psalms 99 offers a good biblical model. After referring to the stories of Moses and Aaron and Samuel, how they called on the Lord, and how the Lord spoke to them, and forgave his people (while holding them accountable for their sins) the Psalmist concludes:

Exalt the LORD our God
and worship at his holy mountain
for the Lord our God is holy. (Psalm 99:9)

Based on this psalm, we preachers ought to ask, when we use a story of ourselves or others: Do these stories exalt God or ourselves? Do they lead to worship God or to self-flattery? Do they create a hunger for holiness or just bring a good feeling?

There is also the story of God's people, the stories of our faith families. The late Henri Nouwen wrote a beautiful small book about praying with icons. Describing the fifteenth-century icon of the *Descent of the Holy Spirit*, which depicts the apostles and evangelists, hands folded, the community of faith waiting for the promised Spirit, he remarks how this stands in contrast to the hyper-individualism of the Western church:

That God reveals the fullness of divine love first of all in community, and that the proclamation of the good news finds its main source there has radical consequences for our lives. Because now the question is no longer: How can I best develop my spiritual life and share it with others? but Where do we find the community of faith to which the Spirit of God descends and from which God's message of hope and love can be brought as a light into the world?⁸

Evangelism, especially in the West, usually calls up images of a gifted individual, a charismatic preacher or a relational lay witness who passes the message on to others. And it has always been true that the Risen Lord—the Evangelist—gives to the church some who are especially gifted in faith sharing. For them we give thanks and pray God will increase their number even as we relearn that the church of Christ is itself the missional body: that the community of God's people is also a crucial part of God's story! The Friends Missionary Prayer Band in south India often evangelizes by going to people of other faiths, asking to use their home for a service of worship. As they pray and praise, rehearse the story of God and worship, the very real presence of the Spirit of God in this small worshipping band has a powerful way of attracting others to the God-spell. Here is liturgical evangelism and communal evangelism indeed!

How can we faithfully use story in the context of worship? Or perhaps we could ask: how can we *not* use story if we know and live and preach our Bibles? How can

we recognize that every time the Word of God is read and the sacraments are observed, we have a gospel opportunity for the Story to be seen and heard, and a perfect time for the invitation to become part of the Story?

A group of us were puzzled when an Episcopal bishop asked us to cite the most often told story in the Bible. We mentioned the obvious ones: the story of the prodigal, of the good Samaritan, the feeding of the five thousand. He kept shaking his head and then we were chagrined when he quietly said, "And Jesus took bread and broke it." Of course! We had missed the most obvious. For what is the liturgical life of the church except the retelling and the reliving and the re-inviting to all of us to enter more fully into God's story! If we pay attention to the church year we will not have to search for stories: they are already there in Advent and Lent and Holy Week and Pentecost.

We All Have a Story to Tell—and a Gracious Way to Tell It

My wife has two brothers. One is Billy Graham, the preacher. The other was her younger brother, Melvin, the farmer, who died with a heart attack two years ago. He was a down- to-earth, straightforward layman and Presbyterian elder who liked to say, "I'm just a nobody, telling everybody, about Somebody who can change anybody"! I could not put it more memorably. And there is not a follower of Jesus, ordained or not, who cannot tell The Story in his or her own way. How then are we to be storytellers?

We Tell the Story Honestly. Of course we need to speak honestly out of our own struggles. I am moved by the words of Episcopal dean Alan Jones: "I name him Jesus because I know of no other name that so adequately fits the wide range of human experience...When I am honest, I experience myself as a mass of contradictions...I am an artist, an authoritarian, a bigot. I am rich. I am poor. I am gifted. I am useless. I am cruel. I am loving. In Christ, nothing has to be left out or sanitized. All my many 'me's' meet in him."

Jones' words reveal something like the transparency we see in Nouwen's writings, the light Nouwen allowed to shine through his own human sensibilities. Have we all not discovered the power there is when God's treasure is revealed in our own frailties? When our son Sandy died during heart surgery at the age of twenty-one, and when I was able to speak with tears and questions and the deep disappointment of a bereaved father, I found people listening with their hearts, because they were hearing not just a preacher, but a father with his own doubts, hurts, and unresolved questions.

We Tell the Story Humbly. Among the greatest stumbling-blocks for evangelism in our culture is the perception that evangelists are arrogant people who think we have all the answers and are trying to force them on others. I have told my evangelical friends I think we might take a moratorium for a while on laying too much claim to absolute truth, not only for tactical reasons but for reasons of humility. God is absolute. True. God is also the Great Mystery. Jesus is the Way. True again. But there are many ways to Jesus. The Scripture is God-breathed Word. This too I believe. But I know I receive and filter God's truth through the lenses of my own culture and prejudices, and my own wounded and one-sided self. Yes, there is Absolute Truth. And that Absolute Truth is a Person who has me—but I do not have it!

My wife and I were at the annual Renaissance where a diverse group of people, leaders in all fields come to talk about everything under the sun. I was on a panel moderated by Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *Why Bad Things Happen to Good*

People. Harold knew that we had lost a son, as he and his wife had also. He threw me a question I had not encountered before. “Leighton,” he asked, “do you know why it is that some people go through hard things and lose their faith, and others go through the same and keep theirs? Do you have an explanation?” I thought quickly of a half-dozen partial responses, none of which, however, really spoke to the mystery his question posed. So I finally sighed and said, “No, Harold, I do not.” He shook his head and said, “Neither do I.” Later a woman wrote me a note of thanks to say, “Thanks for your honest answer. I have hardly ever heard an evangelical leader admit there was something they didn’t know! You helped me.”

We Tell the Story Courteously and Responsively

As Peter counseled the early Christ-followers on how to share their faith in the face of hostility: Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15 NIV). Does this mean we never take the initiative in evangelism? Of course not. It does mean that we usually listen before we speak and that we ask permission. Effective evangelists learn to listen attentively. Keith Miller has said that when we listen deeply and carefully and lovingly to another, it is as if we put a gentle finger into the rim of the soul of the other, as into a precious cup, and feel along the rim until we come to a broken place, which may be the entry point for the words of grace.

Jesus was the Great Listener. Read carefully his encounter with the Samaritan woman by the well. Count the quoted words. She says twice as many words as Jesus does! If we are going to be evangelists like Jesus, we had better learn to listen. God gave us two ears and one mouth, but many of us—especially preachers—act as if we had just the opposite: two mouths and one ear. What a compliment when someone says, “That pastor listened to me as if she was really interested!”

And we learn to listen to the culture. A gifted young evangelist told me he tried to listen with “three ears.” He said, “I listen to new Christians because they put their faith in fresh words, not jargon they have absorbed. I listen to liberal theologians—I may not agree with their answers but they are asking important questions. And I listen to secular novelists to hear how they portray real human beings.” Another friend says evangelism means “loving the hell out of people—literally.” If so, then part of that love is caring enough to listen both to the hell and the heavenly longing that is in them.

In *Speaking of God*, Ben Johnson has helped us think of evangelism as “initial spiritual direction.”⁹ I like that. When we evangelize, we are not first on the scene. God has already been at work in the lives of those with whom we are able to share the good news. It helps me to know that this “spiritual direction” is not first of all telling them what they have to do, but pointing out the clues as to how God has been busy seeking them. But to do that we must listen well first!

We Tell the Story with Proper Confidence

Telling the story with proper confidence means, of course, confidence in Christ. In Paul’s magnificent words,

We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his life shine in our hearts to give us the light of the

knowledge of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (2 Corinthians 4:5-7 NIV)

In our evangelism we know that God has gone before us preparing the way. God works with us even as we preach Christ. And God is the one who will make the light of Christ shine in others as he has done in us. Being written into His Story—with the Capital S—is what gives meaning and life and hope to your story and my story—the stories with the small s’s. If your story and mine are incomplete without God, then others, like Binx Bolling and Walker Percy, may find the longing in their own stories fulfilled in God, too.

Whether you are primarily a preaching evangelist, or a personal evangelist, ordained or lay—you have the Greatest Story Ever Told to tell again and again—and it is worth learning to do it well—with attentiveness, imagination, authenticity, and faithful patience.

A Story About a Bird

Have you read novelist Anne Lamott’s *Traveling Mercies*—her “coming out” as a Christian?¹⁰ If not, then buy it and laugh and pay attention. Her language may shock you awake! Also get her *Bird by Bird*, everything she knows about writing, so she says, in one slim volume. The title comes from her father, also a writer, who told Lamott’s brother when he was struggling with a term paper, “Son, just write it bird by bird.”¹¹

You could tell about a bird. I could. The hummingbird that flew into our open garage on a Saturday last fall. I found it frantically beating its wings, flying over and over up to and all over under the roof trying to find an escape. When it got tired it would rest a moment on the metal frame of our garage door opener. Then up it would go again, flying, flapping, beating, searching. Finally I opened every window and door in the garage. I got a long broom and an extended light-bulb changing pole, and used them to stir the little bird, to try to scare it enough to make it move toward one of the open windows or doors below where it could fly out. But to fly out the bird would have had to fly down. And its only instinct was to fly up and up and up where there was no way out. By nighttime it was perched drooping on one of the door struts. Sunday morning when we left for church the bird sat exhausted on a windowsill. I gently picked it up and carried it out to and put it in the grass. It lay there quietly. And by the time we came home from church it was dead. “Oh,” I mused, “I wish that foolish little bird had known to fly down. Down was the only way out. I wish it could have learned. I wish I could have shown it.” But before I went to bed that night I saw myself in the little bird’s plight, so often frantically flapping to fly higher, to rid myself of fears or drives that could destroy me. And how stubbornly I too have refused those who would tell me that the way down is often the only way out.

Then I remembered Jesus’ story about the social climbers who clambered all over each other trying to get first to the best seats at a dinner party, and how Jesus said that it was better to take a lower seat first and be invited up. And all the stories he told about the way up being the way down, how the kingdom turns everything on its head. And I remembered how he lived that story, actually, died that story, as the one who did not consider being equal with God something to grab on to, humbling himself to the death of a cross, with the end of the story being that God exalted him with a name above every

name, so that every knee might bow to him.

It sounds so hard. So uncomfortable. So right. The little hummingbird didn't know that story. But I do. And why is it that I forget so easily and need to hear it over and over again? So, please: listen to *my* story. Tell me *your* story. And remind me of *His* story— over and over and over again. Then we can leave the endings of our stories in God's hands, perhaps in the spirit of the Native American storyteller Thomas King, who ends his narratives like this:

Take (this) story for instance.

It's yours.

Do with it what you will...

Forget it.

But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived
your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now.

Notes

1. *The Moviegoer* (New York: Avon Books, 1980), 18-19.
2. *Love in the Ruins* (Picador USA, 1999).
3. *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (Chapel Hill: Chapel Hill Books, 1994).
4. From her article, "The Power of Story: The Incarnation of Truth in Culture," in Paul Fiddes, ed., *Faith in the Centre: Christianity and Culture* (Smyth and Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2001).
5. *The Healing Power of Stories: Creating Yourself through the Stories in Your Life* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1996).
6. "Living within a Text," in Keith E. Yandell, ed., *Faith and Narrative* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 212.
7. *Telling Secrets* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 36-38.
8. *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1991), 60.
9. *Speaking of God: Evangelism as Initial Spiritual Guidance* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).
10. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2000).
11. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1995).