

## TELL ME THE STORY

Acts 2:1-24, 32-36

June 10, 2011

Dakotas Annual Conference Ordination

Bishop Deb Kiesey

When our sons were small Brad would read to them every night. He started out with the typical children's stories and then moved on to some of the great classics. They have heard all the Oz stories, the Narnia series (by C. S. Lewis), many of the Dickens tales (especially "A Christmas Carol"), and many others I can't even remember. It became a tradition for the three of them – every night. And a wonderful tradition it was.

Those stories became such an important part of their lives that that I soon realized I was missing out on something very special. They knew characters and situations I knew nothing about. And so, when they were reading the Narnia series, I had to read the books ahead of them so I could participate in that part of their lives. I loved it when we were up at the cabin because the cabin was small enough that as Brad read the stories to the boys, I could sit in the dining room and listen, too.

And when Brad would get to the end of that night's portion, I would hear the plea, "Just a little more – please?"

"Read us a story!"

There is something about a story that can touch us like nothing else can.

Stories can be funny;  
they can bring us to tears;  
they can challenge us;  
they can stretch our imaginations;  
they can take us to places we would never be able to go.

Stories have power to move us in ways very few things can.

Tell us a story!

This coming Sunday is Pentecost Sunday. It's quite unusual for Pentecost to come this Sunday after annual conference, but it's a perfect time for us to remember the power of the story that brought us to this day ... the power of the story that brought this church into being.

The story begins at Pentecost.

Pentecost - simply defined as "Fiftieth Day" - the ancient Feast of Weeks - celebrated seven weeks and one day after Passover.

Pentecost - a day for Jews from across the world to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem - Jews from every nation of the known world.

Pentecost - a day when the streets of Jerusalem were filled with celebration and joy.

The Day of Pentecost had come.

The disciples were in Jerusalem, too. One wonders just what they were doing. Were they hiding? Were they unsure how to celebrate this Jewish holy day now that they had followed Christ? We don't know.

But what we do know is that as they were gathered together, suddenly the room was filled with the sound of a mighty wind. There appeared flames – tongues of fire – that rested on every one of them. Suddenly they knew they had been touched by the Holy Spirit and they began to speak.

The sound must have been something rather impressive – something heard well beyond that room – because even the multitudes that had gathered outside in the streets were startled by the noise and they drew closer. They could hear the disciples speaking, they could understand them, and they were amazed. They questioned among themselves: "Weren't these disciples Galileans? Then how could they understand what they were saying? Everyone had come from regions that spoke different languages. How could Romans and Asians, Egyptians and Mesopotamians understand this group of Galileans?"

One explanation was that they were drunk.

Then entered Peter.

We all know Peter. But do you remember where we last left him? Cowering in a courtyard. You remember? After vowing undying loyalty to Christ, he had run away when the soldiers had arrested Jesus - following only at a distance.

And do you remember the maid that night? She charged him, "Aren't you also one of them?" And Peter could not find his tongue to speak even one word of commitment - one word of witness. He said, "I tell you I do not know the man!"

Peter - the man Jesus had called The Rock upon which the church was to be built - this Peter had been met by the world in the form of a maid. And that night the world had won.

Now Peter is facing another threatening and mocking crowd. But this time something was different. This time Peter had been touched by the flame of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God

had loosened his tongue - the same Spirit which had been promised by the prophet Joel. And Peter spoke and he spoke to them like he had never spoken before.

**“People of Judea, listen to me! ... “**

And then he told them the story of Jesus Christ. His teachings – his power – his death – and his resurrection.

Peter had once again come face to face with the world, but this time the Holy Spirit won, and three thousand repented, were baptized and received the Holy Spirit.

Now THERE’S a story for you!

On Pentecost, the frightened disciples were touched by the Spirit of God. On Pentecost, the "church" got out from behind locked doors and took to the streets.

On Pentecost, the church was born! And the world has never been the same.

For you see, the gift of the Pentecostal Spirit is a people who have been given the gift to speak. The gift of those committed Christians who, upon meeting the world, find their tongues and their courage to witness to the power of the risen Christ in the world.

It is a gift which is needed – and available – in every era of history – within every nation – within every home – within every church. The gift to stand courageously before the world ... a mocking and unbelieving world ... and to tell the story.

Friends, sometimes I think we make the practice of ministry way too complicated. Certainly there are a lot of pieces to how we do ministry, but the truth of the matter is ... underneath it all, what we are doing is telling the story. And all the new programs and all the new initiatives and all the new workshops we offer are simply offering NEW ways to tell this old, old story.

I’ve been enjoying reading the book *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (by John Wigger). It was Francis Asbury who really defined the Methodist Movement across the frontier of America.

Francis Asbury’s success (growing the Methodist Movement from just a few 100 in 1771 to over 200,000 in 1816, the year of his death), was due to three characteristics.

1. His legendary piety and perseverance. He strove for a life of extraordinary devotion to God and service to others. That gave people confidence in his leadership – even when they disagreed with him.
2. His ability to connect with ordinary people – and to lead them into a real relationship with Christ. He built relationships that were deep and lasting and real.

3. His understanding and use of the American culture and his ability to adapt John Wesley's plans to the American Church. He was able to balance the tension between his faith and that culture – sometimes challenging it ... sometimes using it.

He is an extraordinary model for us as we seek to find new ways to tell the story.

For we, too, need to see ourselves as Missionaries once again to a world and a culture that is in desperate need of the story of Jesus Christ. Our world has changed around us. We are facing:

- We are facing a declining and aging church membership;
- We are facing new ways of communicating and relating to each other;
- We are facing new demands on time that puts involvement in institutional religion low on our priority list;
- We are facing a serious lack of relevancy in the eyes of our culture.

This is our new frontier – and friends it's right outside our doors, and we need to find new ways of telling the old, old story to those who have not heard it – or to those who mock it's power.

We need to start by drinking from the deep wells of our Christian – and Wesleyan traditions – and then taking those in new directions from there.

So today, I challenge you – laity and clergy (myself included) to take on these three characteristics Asbury demonstrated so well.

The first I will just call HOLINESS ... holiness in worship and holiness in life.

Several months ago Bob Ruedebusch tells of asking the question at a local church workshop: What do you need from the conference? The answer is one that has haunted me. It was just one word: Inspiration.

I believe people are hungry for inspiration. They want more than just head learning – they want to be inspired.

Did you know that the definition of Inspire means “to put breath into”, and it's the opposite of expire – “no breath”. We're talking about “Holiness” ... about inviting the presence of God into our lives and especially into our worship. Worship needs to be about so much more than just getting together, singing a few songs and feeling good. It needs to warm our hearts and to remind us of the presence of something beyond us ... something larger than us ... something greater, more powerful, more loving ... MORE! The Holiness of the presence of God.

A speaker at our last Council of Bishops meeting said this:

“We – the laity – expect you, like Asbury, to carry the sanctity of your office, and the personal charisma of holiness.”

(Dana Robert, May 2, 2011)

The Holiness of this calling is no small thing. Our leadership must be rooted in a power beyond ourselves. Never lose sight of that.

The second characteristic is “RELATIONSHIP”.

It is not possible to be in effective ministry – either as clergy or as laity – without being in relationship – both with the people around you and with those beyond your church walls. Without those relationships, our faith becomes self-centered and stagnant. I learn from you – and you learn from me as we continue to grow in our understanding of what God is calling us to and to be.

In fact, John Wesley’s understanding of Holy Conferencing was to sit down together and say, “Let me see your soul, and you see mine.” And then – in love – holding one another accountable in that faith and in how we live out that faith.

That’s one of the main reasons for our Ministry Teams – both clergy and laity. That why we offer Bible studies – or small group ministries – or VIM trips ... to share our hearts as we grow in relationship to one another – and as we grow in faith.

And it’s these relationships that allow us to move to the next step ...

The third: “UNDERSTANDING OUR CONTEXT AND ADAPTING IT TO OUR CULTURE”.

That’s what Jesus did throughout his ministry. He understood the culture and the lives of the people around him and took portions of that culture – using them to teach or to challenge. In fact our ritual of Holy Communion has as its base the simple ritual of a coon meal of breat and wine.

Bruce Forbes, a clergy member of this Annual Conference and professor of religion at Morningside College, spoke to the Mitchell UMC last December on his book Christmas: a Candid History. He made the point that our practice of Christmas is really in many ways, an adaptation of the winter solstice celebration in disguise.

Even Charles Wesley took some of the popular tunes of his day and put a theological message to them.

Perhaps one of the most unusual examples of adapting theology to culture happened a few months ago when I was privileged to attend Holy Communion presided over by a Tongan pastor. He described growing up on that tropical island where his father was also a United Methodist pastor. He told us that for them, it was difficult to find and expensive to buy the bread and juice for communion. So instead, they took something from their own culture that was the bread of life to them – the coconut.

He picked up a coconut – held it up and said something like, “When Jesus walked this earth, he took something that was basic to life ... something as common as bread – or this coconut. He blessed it – and broke it.” And with that he took a sharp knife and broke the coconut in two. Saying, “This is my body, broken for you.”

He took the coconut, poured the milk into a small bowl and said, “And Jesus said, ‘This is my blood, poured out for you.’”

And we shared communion – dipping a piece of that coconut into the milk.

It was beautiful. It was powerful. And it didn’t lessen or demean the symbolism of Holy Communion, but it brought even more meaning into that context.

Friends, our roles are to lead change and continuity. Even in the midst of that change, the continuity is the story of the saving message of Jesus Christ.

Because the story we have to tell – both as Christians and as United Methodists - is worth telling – over and over and over again.

Will Willimon tells of preaching on John Wesley’s doctrine of Sanctification and Prevenient Grace – a message that basically said, God’s grace is always there, available for everyone who chooses to accept it. After the sermon a young man came up to him all excited and said,  
“Where are you guys keeping this? This is great stuff!”

This is who we are – this is what claimed us – and it IS great stuff.

Friends, I believe the Dakotas Annual Conference has all the resources we need to do what we need to do. We just need to remember to tell the story!

As we read in our AC scripture theme,

**“Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord.”** (vs. 8)

**“I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust.”** (vs. 12b)

Our world is crying out, "Tell me a story!"

Tell me a story of hope,

a story of love,

a story of new beginnings,

a story that will give me strength through the dark times of life.

The world is crying out for that story.

So let’s tell it – because if WE don’t tell it, who will?

