

Storytime!

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Identity, Purpose, Belonging / Share / Acts 21:37-22:21

Notes

September 11, 2024 Bible in a year Share your testimony, share your fears.

You want to know a secret? I didn't always enjoy sharing as a kid. I grew up with an older brother and a younger sister. Now, I don't really remember having to share much with my older brother, we had different interests and were 4 and 1/2 years apart, yet despite this, as we grew up a bit and were teenagers together we would often hang out and he would let me tag along to the movie theatre to watch a movie with him, drive me to the mall to go shopping, or we would play games on his Nintendo or Sega Genesis. My sister and I were only 18 months apart, and well we did have to share and I didn't always enjoy this, especially my clothes. We shared a room for quite awhile until my brother moved to the bedroom in the basement and I stayed in our current room. There was a time in life when we reached a certain age that we were relatively the same size and well she would come into my room asking to borrow my clothes. While I hesitantly would let her, or maybe sometimes I didn't, I later would find the article of

clothing on the floor of her bedroom, hardly ever back in my own closet. I was appreciative of the times once she grew taller than me and well it became much more difficult for her to borrow my clothes. I don't mind sharing with her now. While sharing of things is extremely important in this world, particularly from those who have plenty to those who do not, today I want to focus on the sharing of our story. You see, I find when you discover commonalities between stories it makes it much easier to connect, one of many reasons I am enjoying coming around and getting to connect with many of you.

I remember one day arriving to one of my good friend's homes. Now you see, if you're anything like me, when you know you're going to have company over you'll often clean things up, for I've discovered living with kids life goes by so quickly that you don't always get to clean up things as quickly as you want to, or you'd rather go for a walk or hang out as a family than fold the loads of laundry or empty the dishwasher. Or there's that one thing on the stairs that stays there no matter how many times people walk by it. Well, my good friend's home was always in order everytime I went over until this one day when she had baskets of laundry everywhere with laundry still to be folded in the living room, the vacuum cleaner lying down on its side and a sink full of dishes. A friend who I had known for years who I thought always had things in such

order was more like me than I initially thought.

If you saw the picture of my two kids on my phone screen you would probably say, oh that's a lovely picture of them but there's a whole story behind it which the one screenshot doesn't show, probably why I keep it on my phone as a reminder. I remember camping in PEI a few years ago and the kids were just fighting, over what I have no idea, and I probably had been trying to get them to stop to no avail. For some reason I turned around, said smile I'm going to take a picture, and the two stopped bickering, wrapped their arms around each other and gave great big smiles, the resulting picture on my phone. The story behind that picture is different than what it portrays, often as the story behind our lives is different than what we can portray in the small snippets of our lives to others.

The passage for today comes after Paul has arrived in Jerusalem, after much pleading for him not to go. Being in Jerusalem and in Jewish territory he first appeared with the elders of the Jerusalem church. There he experienced something of a mini-trial, as they urged him to demonstrate his faithfulness to the law for the benefit of the more zealous Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. To comply with their wishes, he participated in a Nazirite vow, which took him to the temple. There Paul was falsely accused by some Asian Jews of having violated the sacred precincts, and a riot ensued.

Paul has been beaten outside of the temple and the crowds shout at him, “Fellow Israelites, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place; more than that, he has actually brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.””

The commander has arrested him and this is where the reading for today begins. Paul hasn’t said anything during this whole ordeal until now with a simple question to the commander speaking in Greek, may I say something to you? From this he compactly tells his story. He reviews his past, talks about his encounter with Jesus that has invaded his present, and he describes his commission that shapes his vocation moving forward into the future.

Sometimes, as the commander does with Paul, people will jump to conclusions about who we are. He initially thought Paul was the Egyptian who started a revolt and led terrorists into the wilderness. But Paul, despite how badly beaten he must look and feel after the mob tried to kill him, doesn’t get all up in arms about it but replies, “ I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city; I beg you, let me speak to the people.”” No harsh words, just a plea to speak.

When Paul begins speaking to the crowd he does it in Aramaic, the common language among Palestinian Jews. He used Aramaic not only to communicate in the language of his listeners but also to show that he was a devout Jew

and had respect for the Jewish laws and customs. Paul spoke Greek to the Roman officials and Aramaic to the Jews. A way to connect with each group. This opportunity was his witness before a mob in the Jewish temple square, it is in every sense a testimony before the people of Israel. A way to show them, I'm more like you than you might think. Just like a family we have connected with over the last few years, it is our common ground in our abilities to discuss the difficult things in life that has brought us together, despite differences we have, such that we are able to continue to have discussions about our lives and in particular faith with each other, and to cheer each other on. In order to even have conversations with others it can never be an "us" vs. "them." There needs to be a connection somehow such that people will listen. Once Paul connected with them on their own language and background in Jerusalem, by saying that he was as zealous for God as any of his listeners, Paul was acknowledging their sincere motives behind their desire to kill him, pointing out that he had done the same to Christians a few years earlier.

Paul is passionate with his words, but he isn't angry. He offers a reasonable defense, but he isn't cynically defensive. He is assertive, but he isn't vengeful. How did he maintain this kind of balance? How did he tell and live this story so well? The first thing Paul did was to understand his

past. There is enough shame and regret in everyone's past that we might simply want to ignore or forget it. Paul doesn't do that. He recognizes one of the most creative and restorative dimensions of the gospel is the ability to use the substance of the past in the present. When he says, "I was/ am just as zealous for God as any of you today," he is sympathizing with his fellow Jews. More than that, he is taking all that is meaningful from the past—even the difficult lessons learned—and carrying it into the present so that he can build bridges with those he loves. Paul always tried to establish common ground with his audience before launching into a full-scale defense of Christianity, and I would argue this cannot be done unless you tell some of your story.

After establishing common ground with his audience, Paul doesn't sugarcoat his past, and while there are times when I would like to, I've often found when I divulge more than I might initially like or want to, or to leave out the parts I might be ashamed of, God will ask me to open up more, which leads to connecting with people on a whole different level than just through surface talk. Paul gave his testimony, sharing how he had come to faith in Jesus, how he once persecuted the one he now loved. We need to be prepared to share what Christ has done in our lives.

Paul recognizes how God takes the initiative in our lives. There is no part of heaven or earth, past, present, or future,

in which God is not involved and leading the way. Jesus is ahead of us all to meet us on the road. The Lord brings devout friends and family—like Ananias—into our lives to heal us, direct us, teach us, and bless us as I have found with this church and close friends.

We think we will impress people with our strengths but we connect with people through our vulnerabilities. Most of us want other people to see our strength and are nervous about anyone discovering our weaknesses. We do not advertise our limitations. However, Paul was not afraid of being vulnerable about his frailties.

My first year teaching at NKEC, I had just come from a rough year of teaching previously. I struggled to find my purpose in this world and I let my fear of failure in a new situation get the best of me, leading to a lot of shame and anxiety. Christoph was a huge support system for me here which led to my baptism in 2018. Somehow, which I cannot remember all the details, I connected with a girl at school who found out about my baptism. She asked if she could come and see, at which point I gave her the details, and she came with her mom. While I was very nervous to tell my story I am so thankful that God gave me the strength to say it out loud. For shortly after this day the girl's mom connected with me and told me how much my story impacted her daughter. It was the first time she had ever heard someone say out loud some of the struggles that she

was currently dealing with and from that we formed a bond, to the point, as she continued on into school, I was the one they would come find when she was having a rough day. Within a year she invited me to her baptism at her church, where we celebrated her accepting Jesus Christ as her saviour. It was a day I'll never forget.

When I sat down to write the message for this week, I was struggling. I knew it was on sharing, had read various sources, had lots of notes, but didn't know how to put it all together. So, I did what I sometimes do when I'm struggling to see what God is asking me to say and I asked my office mate, Oreo, if she wanted to go for a walk and off we went, so that I could walk and talk with God. It was on this walk that I realized the significance of this topic with some important dates coming up. Tomorrow is the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (once known as Orange Shirt day) and Tuesday is the beginning of the UN's World Mental Health Month. Opportunities to share stories, to not shy away from our past, but to acknowledge the wrong that has happened and to vow to do better, or to share the struggles we have had or continue to have. It is this sharing of our stories that one can find freedom as Paul writes to the Corinthians and to the Galatians.

When Paul spoke in Greek, he showed he was a cultured, educated man, and not just a common rebel starting riots in the streets. It grabbed the attention of the commander

and gave Paul protection and the opportunity to give his defense. Use the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation to educate yourself on these matters such that you can communicate with others. The day was designed to bring to light the awful residential school experience, to witness and honour the healing journey of the survivors and their families and to commit to the ongoing process of reconciliation. Find out about the atrocities that happened in the residential schools, which the last one didn't close down in Canada until 1996. What was once Orange Shirt Day, and now a national holiday, came from a former student Phyllis Webstad as I mentioned in the children's story. The residential school in Nova Scotia, the Shubenacadia Indian Residential School, operated for 37 years with children from all over Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, PEI, and Quebec. There were serious problems with the institution: poor living conditions, corporal punishment, over-crowding, lack of academic education, forced farm labour, hunger, racist curriculum, and children punished for speaking their Mi'kmaq language. The day opens the door to global conversations, an opportunity to create meaningful discussion about the effects of residential schools and the legacy they have left behind. A discussion we all can tune into and create bridges with each other for reconciliation. A day for survivors and those affected to be reaffirmed that they matter. A day to hear their stories and to listen, an important part of storytelling.

And while we may be getting better at talking about mental health and mental illnesses, with the onset of social media we often “see” more into people’s lives, however, unfortunately it is not often the true glimpse into their world. As social comparison increases with social media usage, we begin to judge ourselves more, comparing our accomplishments to those of others. A sense of belonging is vital to humans and their mental health. “Belonging requires both the potential to give and receive. This mutuality of belonging echoes church metaphors of the body of Christ and commands to serve ‘one another.’” Scripture reminds us that we are chosen, children of God, and to find our identity in Christ. We are made uniquely and special, all with distinct gifts, which we are to use to serve and share with one another not to judge one another. It is through serving and sharing that we can find our belonging and identity in Christ and the church. Share and listen to each other.

By sharing our stories we can demonstrate that while we are all sinners Christ died and rose for each and everyone of us, no one is left out of this, we are all justified by his grace as a gift.

Communication is how, as humans, meaning is often made. Meaning-making is key for forming identities, life-changing learning, and discipleship. So, we need to talk, to not shy away from painful pasts or history, but to be open

to where the Spirit is leading us and how to reconcile with those who are hurting.

Sometimes we'll see the fruits of our labours through these conversations and we'll see lives changed, and other times we don't, as right after this passage the crowd says, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" But that didn't stop Paul from sharing his story, by sharing the gospel and it can be argued that no one, apart from Jesus, shaped the history of Christianity as much as Paul. Who knows the number of people from the crowd that day who eventually came to follow Jesus.

I would argue there's nothing better than stopping by someone's home, and asking how they are really doing, not just over a text or a phone call (as important as those are) but seeing Jesus in them and them seeing Jesus in you. We need to share with each other. Meaningful conversations are extremely important and invite honesty, including joys and fears, all within our story and experiences, helping to see God's presence in our lives and activities. I haven't always wanted to share my story, for fear of what people will think. And I am told to be careful how much I share, but I have found freedom that God loves me despite my past mistakes and any that I will make in the future. No one can separate me from the love that I know in Christ. Stories have power. Listen. Let God use yours.

