

Listening to the Stories

Luke 13:10-17 / Veterans' Day weekend

If you've ever driven up Old Academy Road on a Thursday evening,
at 7:30 p.m. —

or rather, if you've ever tried to drive up Old Academy Road on a Thursday evening — I
owe you an apology.

It's a bit of a traffic jam, and it's our fault.

7:30 is when our high school youth group lets out, over at the Barn,
which means that anywhere from 70 to 100 teenagers
are being either picked up by their parents in the parking lot,
or — here's where you really want to be careful —
driving their own cars out of the lot.

It's a lot of teenagers. Which is actually pretty cool, even if it turns Old Academy into
the Van Wyck Expressway for a few minutes each week.

I often get asked what exactly we do in there —
why on earth do teenagers willingly come to a church youth group?

Pizza, of course, is crucial. Pizza and lots of it.

A place to see your friends — sure, that's always a plus.

90 minutes away from homework — hey, that's good too.

But the big reason that kids show up and keep showing up
has to do with stories.

That's right, stories.

On a Thursday night, from 6 to 7:30, we allow teens a place to tell their stories.

To be heard, to be believed, to be listened to.

Last Thursday night was one of our frequent 'open topic' nights.

And what that means is — well, exactly what it sounds like it means.

The kids pick the topic.

They decide what we're going to talk about,

and this week it ranged from current politics to college pressure to whether homework
should be graded or not.

And when they talk, they tell their stories.

"This is what it feels like to me," they say,

and "this is what happened to me."

And we listen. All the other teens,
and the dozen of us adults who shepherd this group,
we listen, and we nod, and we encourage, and we listen some more.
And it works. I got a note a little while ago from one of the teens who said,
“SPF is where I feel accepted, and true to myself,” — and heard.
We let them tell their story.

But we also, and this is important,
we also give them the chance to hear other people’s stories,
so that they, too, can learn how to listen into someone’s life,
so that they can find out for themselves that everybody has a story.
In that room, we’ve listened to people not much older than them tell their stories of
recovery;
I’ve had friends from the police department talk about what it’s like to serve their
community;
last year a former member of a hate group tell the story of his journey from hate to love.
And this week, on Thursday, I’ve got a 93 year old man coming to share his story.

Alan Moskin.

Alan is a World War II veteran whom I met last year,
and whose story I knew our teens needed to hear.

Alan was a member of the 66th Infantry, 71st Division,
part of Patton’s 3rd Army.

And in May 1945, his company liberated the Gunskirchen Concentration Camp in
Austria.

What we’ve only seen in pictures,
Staff Sergeant Moskin saw with his own eyes —
as a Jew himself,
he witnessed the horror of what had been done to his sisters and brothers in faith.

Can you imagine what that was like?

To be a nineteen-year-old American soldier,
sent in to liberate what you believe will be a camp full of prisoners,
and instead encountering an evil beyond anything imaginable.

In April of this year, I listened to him tell his story
at Fairfield’s Holocaust Remembrance service.

He told it as if he had just witnessed it yesterday —
and that’s because for him, his story is who he is —

it is as real and true every day because his story is his truth;
it is a part of him forever.

For many years, he said, he had quietly lived with this story,
saw no need to share it.

And then he realized — he said —

that there were too many young people today who didn't know the stories of men and
women like him.

That's when he began to tell it.

And as I listened, I thought — our teenagers need to hear this story.

In the space that's sacred to them,
where they share their own stories,
this one needs to be heard.

That's why this week they will hear that story.

Before you this morning are the faces of many, many veterans
like Staff Sergeant Moskin.

Some, like him, veterans of World War II -

like Bob Evans' brothers, whose pictures are here - Jack in the Navy, Frank the Army.

Many — many of you — veterans of Korea or Vietnam
or the Iraq wars —

there's a very young Art McCain up here,

there's Joyce Bultmann, and Jack Barry, and Chuck Collison,

there's Jim Kallstrom with, of all people, baseball great Ted Williams, visiting the
troops in Vietnam.

And so many more, whose service today we honor.

Each person up here —

each one of you whose picture is here —
carries a story.

And if there's one thing we've learned in the past decade or so,
it's that those stories of service don't end with war's end.

What has been experienced lives on within each person —
whatever griefs have been known,
traumas both to body and to soul,
those live on.

Whatever courage has been found, whatever sacrifice endured,
all of that lives on.

All of that — hurt and healing, struggle and endurance,
all of that becomes part of each veteran's story.
And those stories — your stories — need to be heard,
so that they become part of our stories.

A few minutes ago, Pam read us our scripture for today.
It's a story from Luke's Gospel, a story I've always loved,
about Jesus and a woman that the scripture just calls "the bent over woman."
Here's what happens.

One day in the synagogue, the story says,
one Sabbath day in the synagogue, Jesus was teaching.
And we know what he was teaching, because we know what he always taught: Love.
And a crowd had gathered, of course, a huge crowd had gathered.
And the story says that Jesus looked out over all those people,
looked across the room, and saw a woman hunched over in pain.
And he stopped what he was doing,
stopped his preaching and teaching,
and asked her to come close to him.
And what he did then was this —
he found out her story.
He found out that she'd been carrying that pain in her body for 18 years.
He found out she'd been bent over, unable to look up and look around, for 18 years.
And he knew what that meant —
he knew the taunts and abuse she must have suffered,
he knew what people thought of someone like that —
that they were lesser humans, somehow, sinners, probably, to be crippled like that.
So he puts his hands on her back, it says — he embraces her, he hugs her,
and he heals her.
He gets in trouble for it, too — the religious leaders didn't think you ought to heal on
the Sabbath.
Jesus doesn't care.

There are a lot of reasons I love the story.
For one thing, I love that Jesus never let anything get in the way of his compassion —
he heals this woman even though he knows
it's going to get him in trouble, pretty serious trouble.
But most of all, I love that, for Jesus,

nothing mattered more in that moment than to know that woman's story.
She doesn't come to *him* —
he's the one who sees her, sees her struggling, and wants to know —
what's the story here?
How long have you been carrying this pain?
What have you endured?
And how can I help heal you?
Her story matters to him —
she, a hurting, lonely, woman in the corner of the synagogue -
her story matters to him.

What the scripture story tells us
is the same thing that these faces before us this morning tell us —
that all around us are people who are carrying stories within them.
Hard stories, many of them,
like the ones so many veterans carry,
some of them stories that have never yet been told to anyone.

In truth, there as many stories around us as there are people —
stories of hurt and of healing —
stories of fear and of courage —
stories of despair and of great hope.

And if we are called to be like Jesus — and we are —
then what we are called to do is to care, care deeply,
about the story that each person carries within them.
When Jesus looked across the crowded synagogue and saw a woman in pain,
he wanted to know her story,
he wanted to enter into it with healing.
That's what we, too, are called to.

To be attentive to the stories of those around us.
To enter into that story —
which means to listen with empathy,
to understand,
and to participate in whatever healing is needed.

When the Apostle Paul was trying to describe to his fellow Christians what a church should be — almost two thousand years ago —

he said it should be that place where people weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice.

Which means — to listen to people's stories, and to be present with them.

At our best,

in Christian community, we are that place where stories are shared, and they are heard.

And in truth, at our best, that is who we are called to be as a nation.

The country that these veterans before us believed in, fought for, and in some cases died for, our country,

when we are at our best,

is a place where we honor the stories of others.

Where we offer to one another, and to all, the respect that is due to each person, acknowledging that we are all children of the same God.

When we listen, truly listen,

when we open our hearts to one another in compassion,

then we are at our finest as a people, as a country.

So, let me ask this.

What is *your* story? — what pieces of it have yet to be listened to?

Whose story are you called to listen to,

as Jesus, that Sabbath afternoon, found himself called to listen.

Who are you called to liberate?

And how are you — how are we all —

continuing the work of the people whose faces we see before us.

In the name of the One who listened into wholeness,

loved into healing,

and embraced the story of each person he met,

Christ our Savior and Friend. Amen.