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Sermon Title: A Short Story
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Mark 4:1-9

Mark 4:1-9

Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

"Get to the point." I live in a profession devoted to words. Lots of words. Our main resource is a book, the Bible. And it's called "the Word of God." It's made up of a lot of words. Indeed, the word Bible really means library.

Since the Bible is a collection of books. When you carry your Bible, you're carrying around a mini-library, an encyclopedia of our religion. A whole lot of words. Most people get to know their Bible from sermons, and that's more words. My average sermon is 17 minutes long, 25 handwritten pages, 2,500 words. In the Gospel of John, we read, "In the beginning was the WORD, and the WORD was with God . . . And the WORD became flesh and dwelt among us." That "WORD" is Jesus.

A generation ago, when a young person was strongly affirming something or agreeing, they'd say, "Word!" Of course, some people use too many words. They talk too much, we say they are "verbose," too much verbiage, too many

words. So, if we were lucky, we have people in our lives to tell us, "Get to the point."

When I was starting out as a pastor, I'd run my sermons by my father (that was not a good idea). He'd take out a black Magic Marker and start crossing out whole sentences, paragraphs. Words tossed out like garbage.

The greatest teacher I had was my English teacher in prep school, Bert Clough. Like all legendary English teachers, he assigned papers, endless papers. And every student had one question: how long? We wanted to know the minimum and how much "filler" we had to come up with. His answer was always the same: "Long enough to reach the floor." What the heck does that mean? No one knew. But the way he beat me over the head with a rolled-up *New York Times*, using French expletives to describe my efforts . . . well, that left the impression that he wanted good words, put together well, that got to the point. And no filler.

Jesus was a master craftsman with words. He chose wisely, used them judiciously, until they "reached the floor." He taught stories that have never been forgotten. Two thousand years later they still pack a wallop.

Listen to this one. It's called "The Persistent Widow." "In a certain town there was a judge who didn't fear God or care about people. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him, pleading, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' The judge always refused her, but finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't give a hoot about God or people, this widow is bothering me, so I will see that she gets justice so she won't wear me out with her constant pleading!'" Now, *that's* a great short story.

Tell me that doesn't make you think! And ask questions . . . And want to know more . . . Let that story enter into your head a bit. Who was that woman? Where did she get her feistiness from, her persistence? Jesus told that story at a time when women were nothing and widows less than nothing. That's why the Christian ideal of charity is helping "the widow and the orphan." In Biblical times, in Jesus's time, the widow was at the bottom, a nothing, a nobody; no standing in society. But not this one. She got up every day, walked to the courthouse, and demanded to "seek justice." And who was her "adversary"? Who drove her to persistently seek justice? What had he or she done to her? What outrage, what evil, what crime so hurtful that nothing stopped her? Not even a pompous, arrogant, uncaring judge. He wouldn't listen to her. Wouldn't take her case. Wouldn't give her the time of day. Wouldn't give her justice. Until . . . well, he got fed up. The Bible says, "She kept bothering him." So, to get rid of her, the judge decided to give her justice. What would "justice" look like in those days, to that woman, alone in the world?

And where are we in this story? Have we ever been the widow, unwanted, unheard, the world against us? Have we ever sought justice only to be thwarted at every turn? Have we ever been so upset, so agitated, so righteously indignant that people noticed, got out of the way, bent their will to ours? And what is it that would move us so? All that from 84 words. One heck of a short story.

A lot of you ask me, "What are you doing this summer?" Expecting that Alida and I are off to an idyllic little cottage on Martha's Vineyard. No, Alida's already had her idyllic holiday in the mountains of West Virginia with 300 of her closest friends. She's vacationed out. Well rested. Tanned. Me? I'm headed to Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia; and to Auschwitz, the Holocaust death camp; and then, of course, to Prague.

I'm going there to do the final writing of my new book, all short stories. All short stories based on faith, to some degree or another, some based explicitly on the Bible, each one designed to take you deeper—deeper into a Bible story, deeper into your own spiritual journey, deeper into your own questions, doubts, faith.

TV has done this with shows like "MTV Unplugged," songs we all know but have never heard like that before. Or "30 By 30," the back-stories of famous athletes. We know their headlines and accomplishments and stardom, and "30 By 30" gives us the back-story and the end story. And who was that radio guy who did "And now, the rest of the story"? Paul Harvey. He'd take some piece of history we all knew but take us deeper—deeper into the person, deeper into the story.

Well, that's what I'm doing. The Prodigal Son; Jesus's first miracle, when he turned the water into wine to save a wedding reception; the Last Supper. Stories where I confront God, God confronts me; a bit about heaven: heaven on earth, and the other heaven, up there, or out there, somewhere. So real you can taste it. And one called "God Votes Trump," which I'm mentioning now because it's not about Trump. Alida hates the title, and I love the title, but she's the editor, so this may be the only time I get to mention it. And I take you to Maine and to Christopher Hitchens's church. And to Poland, Auschwitz, Jesus and me, and you get to listen. And ponder. And disagree. And go deeper, maybe deeper than you want. We'll see.

So I'm off to Prague, the same place I've been going for a dozen years whenever I need to start a book or finish one. Same hotel, same room. Same coffeehouse, where my table is waiting. The stories have been written and corrected, corrected, and corrected again. I am blessed with a team of readers, Rachel, Roni, Sarah Milicia, Elizabeth Van Winkle. They've all gone through

these stories with their Magic Markers, correcting, crossing out, comments in the margins, gigantic question marks. Now it's time to finish them. I'm going away to fix them "until they reach the floor," with my father's voice in my head, "Get to the point." When I return, hopefully with the short stories shorter, fixed, crisper, then I turn them over to Alida.

Two more thoughts before we go to the picnic. Why words? Why short stories? Well, let's go to another short story, today's Scripture lesson, "the Parable of the Sower." A farmer goes out to plant, the old-fashioned way. You reach into a bag of seeds slung over your shoulder, you toss the seeds in a big sweeping arc while you walk along freshly dug rows. (I'm actually old enough to have done this as a little child up in rural Maine. Throwing seeds every which way seemed like great fun.)

Jesus goes on to tell us that was a pretty iffy, random, hit-or-miss process. Some seeds land on the path, so the birds eat them. Some seeds fall on rocky ground, or among thorns, where they wither away because the soil is not deep, or the other plants choke them out. A lot of wasted effort. A lot of wasted seed. Unless, unless, every farmer's dream, every farmer's annual gamble: "that some seeds fall on good soil, and it comes up, producing a crop, multiplying 30, 60, even 100 times." (Mark 4:1-8) A bumper crop. Worth the effort. Worth the seeds.

In fact, this is the only short story Jesus tells that he explains. And his explanation is: "words." The whole story is about words. The seeds are words. And a lot of words get wasted. They don't take root. They get drowned out. Nobody hears them. Lost words. "The seeds," Jesus explains, "are God's words." Jesus's teachings. His stories. His words. And some people never listen. And some never get it. And for some it's in one ear and out the other.

But Jesus's gamble is the same as America's great farmers'. You toss out enough seeds, enough words, in enough directions, some will land in the right spot. Then watch what happens! Watch what happens when some people catch on, they hear those words and take them to heart. What the Bible says about love, about compassion, about our neighbor, about justice, about peace, about the stranger, the enemy, even about ourselves. Some people get it. Enough to make it all worthwhile!

Why short stories? Because I've devoted my life to words. I was raised that way. Growing up, words were golden, not silence; *words were golden*. Every dinner was a vocabulary test. If the *Reader's Digest* arrived on a Wednesday with its vocabulary section, I was expected to know it by Friday. My father started teaching me Latin in the first grade because, he said, "Latin is the root of most words and the key to your SAT." I didn't know what the SAT was; all I

knew was that my life, and my dinner, depended on knowing words, with or without their Latin roots. Words were golden. Words were literally currency in our house.

And the best word of all is "Jesus." As I quoted before from John's Gospel, "The Word became flesh." God's word made alive in the presence of Jesus. My career has been devoted to tossing those words all over kingdom come—up and down, left and right, near and far, and just as Jesus said, some fell on rocky ground, some among thorns, some on hard ground. That's life. Sometimes it's my fault. Sometimes I wasn't good enough. Sometimes I wasn't clear enough or loud enough. But, like the farmer, you keep at it. Because that's what a farmer does. If you want growth, if you actually like to see things grow, develop, happen, produce, you can't quit, you can't sell the farm. You keep tossing the seeds.

Our challenge, for Alida and me, for our whole church, is to find ways for words to take root. Like the farmer tossing his seeds every which way, we toss words about every which way: sermons, letters, email Bible studies, poems, books. Words: we save them, we write them, we read them, every which way.

And the fact is, we are an educated church in an educated community. We are a literary people. Words matter. Now I'm taking my words into a new direction: fiction, short stories. And fiction helps words to matter. Fiction takes us into places and people and experiences and ideas we might not have access to otherwise. Believe me when I say this, I have no idea if these short stories are any good. I've never written fiction, I've never written plot, characters, conversation. I may miss the mark entirely. You and I may both regret this waste of time. But I go into this with great ambition, great "conceit," in the actual dictionary sense of the word: expecting the best. Why else even try?

I have a favorite author, Orhan Pamuk, a Turkish novelist who won the Nobel Prize. He wrote a book once about a book, which sets the bar high for anyone trying to string words together with a purpose. Let me read you from his first paragraph of *The New Life*:

"I read a book one day and my whole life was changed. Even on the first page I was so affected by the book's intensity I felt my body sever itself and pull away from the chair where I sat . . . But even though I felt my body dissociating, my entire being remained so concertedly at the table that the book worked its influence not only on my soul but on every aspect of my identity. It was such a powerful influence that the light surging from the pages illumined my face; its incandescence dazzled my intellect but also endowed it with brilliant lucidity. This was the kind of light within which I could recast myself; I could lose my way in this light . . . I sat at the table, turning the pages, my

mind barely aware that I was reading, and my whole life was changing as I read the new words on each new page." (Pamuk, Orhan. *The New Life*. Trans. Guneli Gun. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997. Print.)

There is the goal. Wish me well!

Let's conclude by joining together in singing, "Wonderful Words of Life," No. 323:

*Sing them over again to me,
wonderful words of life;
let me more of their beauty see,
wonderful words of life.
Words of life and beauty,
teach me faith and duty:*

*Beautiful words, wonderful words,
wonderful words of life.
Beautiful words, wonderful words,
wonderful words of life.*

*Christ, the blessed one, gives to all
wonderful words of life;
sinner, list to the loving call,
wonderful words of life.
All so freely given,
wooing us to heaven:*

*Beautiful words, wonderful words,
wonderful words of life.
Beautiful words, wonderful words,
wonderful words of life.*

*Sweetly echo the gospel call,
wonderful words of life;
offer pardon and peace to all,
wonderful words of life.
Jesus, only Savior,
sanctify forever.*

*Beautiful words, wonderful words,
wonderful words of life.
Beautiful words, wonderful words,
wonderful words of life.*