

Stories

Since time immemorial people have told each other stories. Whether informally around campfires or kitchen tables, ritually in churches or temples, or more formally in tents or classrooms, humans have recollected the events that define them as a family, as a tribe, as a community, or as a nation.

Aboriginal people, especially, with their rich oral tradition, have a heritage of story-telling. Usually told by the elders, the stories move from generation to generation and bind the people together with an iron bond of common knowledge about the past and about the world in which they live. They provide the explanations for what they understand and what they do not understand.

Christians, too, have a rich heritage of stories. As we read in Psalm 78, the Israelites were unified in their common stories, the legacy of Abraham, of Moses, of Joshua, and of David. And these stories have become part of us too. We understand that without these stories, we do not know who we are as Christians. What we believe. Thus, parents read them to their children. Sunday School teachers tell them to their young students, and preachers use them as launching pads for their sermons.

The Gospels, too, are a rich collection of stories. Many of them are the stories of the events that the disciples witnessed. Others recall stories that Christ related. And Jesus told many stories. We can image Christ standing at the bottom of a hill and the people sitting in front of him, listening attentively. Sometimes they are puzzled by what they hear. But most times, times they have the 'aha' moment and as understanding hits them, their eyes light up and they nod their heads in agreement. Jesus has spoken their language and placed the story in their everyday experience.

Over time, changing cultural conditions, fashions, and practises cause us to lose the meaning of the old, old stories. Their purposes are more difficult to capture. Often, we are puzzled by the stories we read or hear. One example, is the story that Matthew and Mark tell about a woman whose daughter was possessed by an evil spirit.

We find it a strange story. For one thing, most of us no longer think that there are evil spirits that invade the hearts of human beings. We rather accept a scientific explanation: it is manic depression or schizophrenia or some other chemical imbalance in the brain.

Aboriginal people who still know the old stories, however, will not give this a second thought. The Anishinabe, for example, instinctively understand the power of the Windigo - the evil spirit that makes a person behave strangely and become dangerous. In some cases, in the past, before the birth of Canada, the elders might have chosen to drive a Windigo possessed individual out of the camp. At other times, they might have decided to execute a demon possessed person because he or she could do great harm to the community.

For me, however, the most puzzling question is Jesus' answer to the woman's legitimate request. Where is Christ's loving sympathy in this story?

Taken at face value, the children in Jesus' dialogue with the Canaanite woman represent the Hebrew people - the chosen ones of God - and the dogs are all the non-Jewish people - those who do not worship Jahweh. If this is the case, how could Jesus possibly have said this? How could he have spoken this harshly to a mother in distress? To our ears, his reply is incredibly nasty. How could Christ place one people on a much higher level than the other. How could he possibly have likened all Gentiles to dogs?

The problem is that we live in 2007 in North America and not in Israel at the time of Christ. The situation then was radically different. The disciples, who at this particular time are alone with Christ would have understood him perfectly and nodded their heads in agreement. That's right, Jesus. We are God's chosen people. We are special. That woman, who is bugging you, is a Gentile. She stands outside the sacred covenant that God has established with Abraham. The Canaanite mother and her daughter have to go to the back of the line. We, the privileged people of Israel, the people of God, get priority and only if Christ has energy left will he grant healing to those outside the covenant.

But the distraught mother, who is a quick thinker, swallowed her humiliation. Did she instinctively understand the Saviour's intent? Did she have a thick skin? Was she so determined to get healing for her daughter that she will grovel? We don't know but quick as a flash, she responded: "Yes, Lord but, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

I suspect that the mood of the disciples changed at that very moment. Some will have thought: "Smart Alec answer. How dare she answer Christ that way. Send her away, Jesus." Others will have thought: "Great answer, Jesus. That's right. Gentiles can have the crumbs but not the sandwich. Healing is only for us."

But then the surprise - for the disciples - not for Jesus. Christ makes this startling declaration: "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."

None among the disciples had expected that answer. What? God's grace is also for the heathen? Are we no longer special?

Every Bible story has a purpose. Matthew remembered this one because once again Jesus radically changed traditional beliefs. The disciples had to realize that they were not the only ones who were special. They had to know that God did not love them more than the Gentiles. That his grace extends to all humanity - Greek, Canaanite, Samaritan. Not just to the Hebrews. As Boas so clearly understood in Ruth's story, God always intended that his chosen people had to welcome the stranger in their midst - to show them hospitality, to fill their needs.

Christ once again makes this message crystal clear. Fortunately, for us, God's covenant, his grace, also covers us - Euro-Canadians. And it embraces people from the Philippines, from Mexico, from Pakistan. God's love also enfolds Mohawks, Innu, and Inuit, Inca, Mayan, and Aborigines.

The lesson that Christ taught so many years ago and that has been handed down from generation to generation pierces right to the heart of Christianity. Just as God reveals his love for us so we must reflect that love to those around us. We all accept the theory but we often fail in the practice. It is very difficult for us to surrender the first place in the queue, to give up special status to a person of different colour, of a different religion, of a different culture.

I am not sure why Christ used such harsh words to drive home this lesson. Perhaps he wanted to shock the disciples out of their smug attitude of superiority. Perhaps he was testing the mother's faith. In any case, the lesson is clear. However difficult it is to practice to love our neighbour more than ourselves, we can, strengthened by urgent prayer and the sure knowledge that God loves us, try over and over again to do unto others as we would like them to do to us.

Canada's Christian churches, for example, having taken faltering, painful steps to heal broken spirits among our nation's aboriginal people. As Presbyterians we must support our church's efforts to heal the wounds still festering among many of our First Nations. As individuals, we must turn into reality Christ's teaching that in the Kingdom of God there are no underprivileged persons. All people will be privileged. We must bring into our fold those people who live on the margins of our society. We must recognize them as fellow human beings who have the right to self-determination, to affluence, to clean drinking water, to meaningful work, to warm homes.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, Euro-Canadian nor Cree, for you are all in Christ Jesus."