



# Tell Me a Story

SCRIPTURE:  
Matthew 19:16-22

---

May 30, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

---

If you were to ask me how I should know to be careful with my words, I could tell you about the time I unfairly told my friend Alexander he was terrible to the people in his life.

Or maybe you wonder how I learned to heed warning lights, and I could tell you about my friend Eric who ignored the oil light in his car a little too long.

If you were to ask me how I know to be careful with knives, I could tell you about the scar I got in 5th grade when I wasn't paying attention.

If you were to ask about the importance of serving others, I could tell you lots of stories, but today I'll tell you about Kennedy Krumm, who went to the Dominican Republic every single one of her Spring Breaks in high school—who was changed and inspired change during those trips—and who we will welcome on Tuesday as one of our summer interns.

If you wanted to know about the importance of listening to victims, I could tell you the story of my older brother who endured years of molestation at the hands of trusted family.

We all carry these histories: the stories not just of what has happened to and around us, but the stories that have created and sustain who we are. I'm more and more aware of how much we are surrounded by stories—how we swim in narrative.

This weekend, for example, comes with stories. The story of how Memorial Day came to be a national holiday: observed as early as 1865 in the aftermath of the Civil War, going through a few different iterations before being made official in 1971 with its current name and timing. Beyond a history lesson, Memorial Day points to the meaningful stories of those who have died serving in the U.S. military. It's even the stories of how we spend our time tomorrow and who or what we will pay attention to.

Even in this moment, there's a sense in which we are engaging in storytelling. A preacher has a certain responsibility to tell stories—the stories of Scripture—and offer, from the preacher's perspective, and hopefully in concert with the Holy Spirit, what these stories could mean not just to some distant people in another place and another day—although that carries its own value—but what Scripture could mean to us gathered in this place on this day.

In fact, in our tradition, that's not restricted to clergy. As Christians, we each bear a piece of that task in our lives—each us in this room, we are all God's storytellers.

I'm aware, every time I step into this space, or, as it happens more frequently, every time I step in front of the youth to speak, that I talk responsibly about my own story while also holding space for others' stories. It's so dangerously easy to assert my story, my experience, as the only story when I don't allow space for, or consider, another's.

In her excellent TED Talk titled "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about the consequences of a single narrative—robbing people of dignity and making it difficult to recognize our equal humanity. The reality, she says, is that there is never a single story about any place or about any people. Even about any person.

And how do we create a single story? "We show a people," she says, "as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." She goes on, "The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with them is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

So I'm trying to make of habit of thinking not only about my stories but your stories. And not just the stories of people like me or like us, but of people not

---

like me and not like us.

I don't succeed every time, but I attempt not to restrict things to solely my own perspective. It's necessary to leave room for another person's story—seen and told from their perspective.

I want to be careful here; I don't mean to imply that all stories are equal or that all stories are equally valid. It's true to say they are not.

I'm just not sure I can always accurately assess the difference—or that it's my privilege to do so. Perhaps that is why community is so important. It's in community where I am reminded that I'm part of something larger, that my stories aren't the only stories, and that my stories are capable of affecting other people for better and, let's keep it real, for worse.

I need community—and particularly a community of people with diverse points of view—to listen to my stories and help me draw out what is important when I can't, or won't, see it. Community is also where I can contribute my perspective for someone else—as long as I'm willing to listen to stories that aren't my own. In short, in community we can be changed by the stories of others.

In today's Scripture we see an encounter between Jesus and a man whose name we don't know, just that he is a Rich Young Fella. At the end, we read: "When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

What I'm wondering is this: Did this man tell the story of his encounter later? What was his version? What story did he tell a week later? Or a year, or ten years later? Did he hear of Jesus's death and reflect on the encounter differently? Did he put this behind him, never registering it as even worth sharing? I wonder whether he thought of his encounter as significant or not, which would have been reflected in some way by the story he told, or failed to tell.

And then that really gets me thinking: Do I realize when I've had a significant encounter with Jesus? If so, would I be vulnerable or confident enough to tell that story? Is my relationship with my faith or my faith community worth telling others about?

It's probably too much to expect that we would share every Sunday's worship story with others—not every sermon is worth sharing, right? But maybe I should attempt more often to share my Sunday stories,

or faith community stories, with other people on other days of the week.

I like to think the Rich Young Man, even if he continued to disagree with what Jesus asked of him, would perhaps have found meaningful or hopeful conversation in telling others about his interaction with this crazy rabbi who wanted him to get rid all of his stuff. The gall of that rabbi! Because if so, the rich young man cared enough to relate the story and his community (if he had a community to share it with) might have offered loving, even if critical, feedback. Which is to say, perhaps the end of the story we read isn't actually the end of that guy's story.

I'm sure I've walked away from Jesus, just like that rich young man. I'm sure I've done it more times than I know. My only hope is that I talked about it later. Learned from the sharing of it. Grew from the conversation about it.

When we share significant stories—whether of joy or regret—it means sharing and learning about the past in ways that risk vulnerability. Sharing stories can be a doorway into learning about the heroism and sacrifice others have made—sometimes on our behalf. But it can also demonstrate the ways failure, regret, and missed opportunities can creep in the corners of our own histories—something we'd rather forget or wish wasn't as central to our stories as they are.

In either case, I think we are wiser for owning them and telling them—both the stories of hope and the stories of disappointment. Inspiration can and should come from both, I think, which Scripture makes clear.

One of the valuable things we do when youth gather together on Sunday or Wednesday nights is give students space to both learn stories of faith, and share and listen to each other's stories. In fact, one of the questions toward the end of this year was, "What is a story from your life that is integral to who you are right now?"

That might be one of my all-time favorite questions. Not just because it was good for the students but because all of us in our lives are sharing our responses to that question. I think it is critical for us to do that, and critical that we have people in our lives that care enough about us to hear them.

This past year, many of us haven't seen each other. And that means we haven't been able to hear each oth-

---

---

er's stories. When we don't know each other's stories, it means we are unable to love each other as well as we otherwise might.

In the weeks ahead, we are going to talk about some stories in this space. Stories that Jesus told. That's going to be good for us, and I hope you walk with us as we live into those narratives.

But make it a point to pay attention to stories this summer. But not just any story. Share some stories that are integral to who you are, and invite at least one other person to tell you some of theirs. Think about a story from the most difficult year in your life and share it. Think about a story from the best year of your life and share it. Tell a story where you are not the hero. It does us all some good to consider a story where we might have been the villain. Not because we should be proud of it, but because we have the opportunity to be humbled by it.

If you don't quite know who to share those with,

email me and let's have coffee and learn about each other. Or email any pastor; I promise none of them will wear robes when meeting with you.

If us pastors are too scary, invite someone you know in this faith community to get to know you better. This place, this community, is full of people who care about your story.

And if sharing with others scares the daylight out of you, find a story about a people who are not like you and listen to it, read it, learn from it. Consider that God works in ways in which you are unaware, or don't yet value.

It makes me sad that the rich young ruler walked away, and sad that it is sometimes my story, too. But I'm glad I know the story. And I hope he shared it with those who loved him enough to hear it and he was willing to listen to the stories they told in return—and I hope they were changed for the telling. Maybe we can be, too.