



Have I Told You This Story Before?

TEXT
Acts 26:9–18

July 16, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

You may not have noticed this before, but sometimes when I am preaching, I will tell a story that I have told you before. It happens. You have probably never noticed.

My friend Jenny McDevitt tells me that some of them I have repeated so many times, I could at this point not actually tell the story, but just name the story, and you could tell it to each other. I could just say “Car Wreck” or “Music Truck” or “Sarah’s Birth” or “Parking Lot” or “Norwegian” or “Gene and the Red Car” — and you would already know the story. It would save some time.

That Jenny, she’s so funny.

Well, if I am guilty of repeating stories, I am not the first. The apostle Paul was a storyteller also. And he tells his stories over and over.

His favorite story to tell was the story of his conversion. In the book of Acts, we hear this story three times.

It goes like this: Before he was Paul, he was Saul. He was a devoted man, a rule-follower, a Pharisee. Out of his devotion to God, Saul sought to rid the world of God’s enemies — in particular, those who confessed

that Jesus was raised from the dead and was indeed the Messiah.

Saul persecuted the church: men, women and children. He was on his way to Damascus to root out any Christ followers there, when something happened on the road. There was a light. There was a voice.

The risen Christ appears to Saul, asking, “Why do you persecute me?”

Saul asks, “Who are you?”
“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Saul, in seeking to do away with God’s enemies, discovers that he himself has been an enemy of God. And more importantly, Saul learns that God does not deal with God’s enemies by destroying them, but by loving them into new ways.

When Saul is met by the risen Christ, it is Saul himself who is given new life, raised from the dead. He is given a second chance; he is given community; he is given a new ministry; he is given a new name. No longer Saul, now he’s Paul. It’s a story of grace. And Paul couldn’t stop telling it.

My children have listened to me tell stories even longer than you have. (It’s one of the

reasons they both live out of state now.) They have commented on the fact that I not only tell the same stories over and over, but that I tell them the exact same way.

Well, I don’t know if that is true, but if it is, then I am not like the apostle in this fashion. Each time he tells this story, he tells it a bit differently. Some are bothered by the inconsistency in the story. The details change enough that were Paul to be interviewed by police detectives, his carelessness about details might raise questions about the veracity of this story.

This time Paul says everyone was knocked to the ground, but he had never said that before. It was only Saul who was knocked to the ground. This time Paul says God spoke in the Hebrew dialect. God speaks Hebrew. He had never said that before. This time Paul says God told him to be an apostle to the Gentiles; but the first time, he just tells him to visit with Ananias.

Oh, some are bothered by these inconsistencies in the story.

If I understand the text, the evolution of the story occurs because Paul’s understanding of the meaning of the story

grows. He is not just telling what happened; he is telling what this moment taught him. And most importantly, he is not just telling this story to others. He is telling this story to himself, over and over and over again.

When Paul finds himself in trouble, he tells this story.

We think of the apostle as bold and courageous, and that is true. But his life was difficult.

Being an apostle does not assure you a life of comfort; quite the contrary. He was imprisoned. He was beaten. He was run out of town and mocked. Paul was flogged and shipwrecked.

He had a “thorn in the flesh,” he calls it. I don’t know if that was a physical problem or a spiritual problem. I don’t know. And in our text this morning, he stands before Agrippa, the king, with his life in his hands. He had to be afraid. Any human would be afraid.

So Paul tells this story. He tells the story that says, *The grace of God called me by name. The grace of God claimed my life. And grace gave me a ministry. I am living a life shaped by grace. Do to me what you will. I will still belong to God who will raise me up.*

We are baptizing some little ones today. We don’t know much about them, except that they are loved by their parents, and they are loved by God. In their baptism, we declare that the grace of God calls them by

name. The grace of God claims them. The grace of God grants them a ministry.

In baptism, we say their whole name. But then, like the Apostle Paul, we give them a new name. Did you notice? We baptized them “child of the covenant,” child of God. God has chosen you; that’s your name. That’s your truest identity. It’s a story of grace.

I want to encourage these parents, as your children age, to tell them the story of this day. Tell them what we sang. Tell them who was here. Tell them why you brought them into the presence of God. Tell them that they are claimed by grace. For I don’t know when, but there will be a day when they will need that story. They will need to remember that they belong to God, and there is no power that can change that truth.

When you have witnessed grace, it changes things.

Can I tell you a story I have told you before? My brother Gene was born with a limited mind. He is 55 years old. He will never forget my birthday, but he will never be able to read a book. He will never hold a job, unless it’s one created for him with lots of supervision.

And he will never give up on his lifelong dream to drive a car. He wants it to be a red car. He silently watched his younger siblings get their licenses and drive. And then he watched his niece and nephew get their licenses and drive. I think he knows he will never drive, but he still talks about it.

It was 20 years ago, I guess. A group of us were playing golf, and my brother Gene came along. He couldn’t use his irons, but when we got to the green, he would drop a ball and putt with us.

He was riding in the cart with my friend Eddie. Eddie and Gene were buddies. Somewhere on the back nine, I turned around ... and I won’t get the details right ... but I looked, and Eddie and Gene had swapped places, and Gene was driving the golf cart.

I don’t know why I had never thought of that, except the expression on Eddie’s face is the reason I haven’t thought about it since. The expression on the face of my brother, driving, I will never forget. If I ever wondered what grace looks like, I saw it that afternoon.

Grace is what it looks like when your deepest dreams are trusted. Grace is what it looks like when that which is wrong in us and in the world is all made right. Grace is what it looks like when the worst in us is set aside and the beautiful in us shines like the sun.

I want to tell you a story. I won’t get all the details right. But deep in the chambers of grace that constitute God’s heart, you were imagined. And God breathed into you the breath of life. You have been carried by grace every day of your life. There have been storms — and there will be more.

Maybe there was a day, and you may not remember it, but there may have been a day

when you were by a font like this, and people who loved you whispered your name into the heart of God, and you were baptized. If so, that moment celebrated what was always and already true.

Grace has called you by name. Grace has claimed you. And in time, in God's promised day, all that has gone wrong will be made right, and the dreams of God's children, dreams that God has given to us, will come to fruition.

So do not be afraid. Let the world do what it will, but you belong to God, and God will raise you up.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.