

Just Walk Across the Room, #3 – The Power of Story – 3.25.07

Early in my ministry, one hot summer Sunday morning down in the old building, when attendance was down and the energy was low...I was preaching, and not doing very well. I could tell that the people weren't really interested in my message. I wasn't all that thrilled about it myself. People were yawning and whispering to each other. And I looked down and in the front row, there was my wife and she was asleep!

So I stepped down off the platform and walked up and stood right in front of her...

Now, just by telling you that story, I have captured your attention. Stories are good at that. I don't know how this one ends, because I'm making it up! (Heard Bob Russell do this once).

Today we're going to move along in this series on evangelism or sharing the good news, by talking about the power of story – your story and especially God's redemptive story – to draw people to Christ. Christ said that if he is lifted up, he will draw all people to himself (**John 12:32**), and we lift him up when we tell the stories in the Gospels that form The Story of the Gospel message.

Before we get into Story, let me remind you of our vision for this church: **No one left behind.** At the end of our lives or when Christ returns, we want to be able to give an account of our faithfulness here by saying, "Father, as far as it depended on us, we left no one behind, lost, separated from you. We TOLD people your good news, and we SHOWED them too, with our love." **2 Peter 3:9** says that God is "...not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

Recap of the series so far:

1. Just walk across the room...and meet people, to find out where God might be working.
2. Living in 3D - Develop relationships, Discover stories (have enough respect for people to find out where they are, who they are, what matters to them, and where they struggle), and Discern next steps (remembering that in sharing the Gospel with people, we join God's Holy Spirit in his work, and he can instruct us about when to speak and when to wait).

If you missed either of the last two Sundays, I ask you to go get those messages from our web site and listen to them so you can share in this vital priority of our church.

Let's say I walk across a room somewhere and introduce myself to someone; or I walk down the street a few houses and I meet someone who is just moving in to my neighborhood; or let's say I'm going to school and I stay after class and get to know some guy who is also a student. Now in the back of my mind, there is a curiosity that I can't shut off that wonders if this guy knows the Lord, if he has found that relationship that means everything to me for this life and for eternity. But I didn't enter THIS conversation just to ask him that question. What I primarily want to know is HIS story. What does he do? Where is he from? Is he married? What does he like to do for fun? This isn't just an act, to set him up for my Gospel presentation (and I say that with all due respect for the seriousness of presenting the Gospel). Instead, I have pushed myself out of my comfort zone to have this conversation because this is an important way to begin to show God's love – by paying attention to someone and by caring enough to ask him about himself. Some of you are quite good at this, and can do it naturally. It's harder for me, but I have discovered that many, many people are grateful for the chance to tell you a little bit about themselves as long as they sense that you care.

Now that is what we talked about last week, in terms of developing friendships and discovering stories. And as I continue to walk with the Lord and cultivate my relationship with Him, I know that I can trust him to help me discern the next steps.

Now if God is in this, there will come a time in such a relationship when I get a chance to tell my story. I'm speaking here not about where I live or whether I like baseball (that usually comes pretty early) but rather the story of my own faith in Jesus Christ.

What if that were to happen to you today? Are you ready? Could you tell someone, in just a couple of minutes, why you follow Jesus Christ?

There are a lot of ways to tell your story the wrong way. You could say, "Boy am I glad you asked," and then talk non-stop for 35 minutes, missing all the signs that the person you're talking too feels trapped and is hunting around the room for someone else to talk to. You could use a lot of churchy words that leave the person scratching his head, words like propitiation and Beulah Land, and partake and Hittite and Zaphenath-Paneah. You could come across as arrogant and full of pride, thanking God as you speak that you're not like this poor, ridiculous soul you're speaking to.

There are ways to tell your story wrong, but don't let that discourage you. There is a simple way to tell it well. Let's watch Bill Hybels talk about it in this video:

Telling YOUR Story - 7:53 – 10:03

- What were you like before your experience with Christ?
- What WAS the experience?
- What's so different now? (Be HONEST!)

What were you like before your experience with Christ? What WAS the experience? What's so different now? In **Acts 26:1-23**, when Paul was put on trial for preaching the Gospel, he gave an account of his faith that is very much like this. In summary, he says: *"Everyone can testify how religious I was; I lived according to the strictest sect of our faith, as a Pharisee. And I too was convinced that we should do all we could to persecute the Way, and I did. I put them in prison, cast my vote for their death, went from synagogue to synagogue to punish them, make them blaspheme, and traveled to foreign cities to persecute them. (That was my life before). But THEN... Christ appeared to me and my companions. I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' " 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you...I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'" (That's his experience with Christ. Then after?) After the vision, my life has been focused on preaching to people everywhere that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.*

My favorite testimony from Scripture is from John 9 when Jesus healed the man who had been born blind. They actually tried to put this guy on trial for being healed on the Sabbath, and they said to him: **"Give glory to God. We know this man is a sinner." He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (John 9:25)**

What were you like before your experience with Christ? What WAS the experience? What's so different now? In your notes, I put "be honest" next to that last item, and that's important for all three items. For example, my story could be: "I was a wretched, hopeless sinner, living only for the manifold pleasures of the flesh, giving in to temptation again and again, and finding it ever

the more empty.” “How old were you?” “Well, when I accepted Christ, I was 7, but DON’T THINK I didn’t know sin!” “And now? Now I greet each new day with a song of praise on my lips, as I thank the good Lord for seeing me through the night, and I joyously charge into each new day knowing that God will supply each need and lower my cholesterol at the same time!”

Sometimes I wish that WAS my story, and you might be anxious to tell me that it should be! But I need to be more honest and more authentic than that.

I would like to challenge each of you to take an hour sometime over the next two weeks (leading up to Easter Sunday) to write down YOUR faith story as you might tell it in a minute or two. This isn’t a presentation of the Gospel message. It’s your answer for when you’re sitting at lunch with a co-worker and she finally says: “You know, I consider you a friend, and you’ve been very kind to me. But this Christian thing baffles me. I went to church with my friends when I was a kid but I didn’t get a thing out of it and I felt like everyone was frowning at me. So what’s the deal with you?” I challenge you to write this down, and then if you would like a gentle critique from myself or David, either mail it to us or bring it by the office or, better yet, email it to yourstory@morrisonhill.com. I promise not to publish it on the web site without your permission!

In order to practice what I preach, here’s my story.

I was born on a mountaintop in Tibet... ☺

My faith story isn’t dramatic. I don’t have a past full of dramatic sins. I came to faith when I was about seven. My parents were good parents (still are) and they were good parents before they came to Christ, but when they were about 30 and I was about 7 they felt the need to go to church and seek out a faith that they never personally connected with as kids, and they found it, and because they were so deeply influenced by it, I was too. And when I became a Christian it wasn’t something I just did for them, and it wasn’t the case where I didn’t understand what I was getting into. I took it seriously and I understood what I was getting into. And I never wandered from my faith either. My “rebellious days” were just the garden-variety things, and my Dad (being a very logically-minded engineer) made sure I knew that there were good reasons to believe, that faith stood up to scrutiny and wasn’t just a make-believe fairy tale.

Still, there was a time when my faith became my own, and it was at the same time that I felt God’s call on my life for ministry. I was a freshman in college at the University of Akron. I was a Christian, but my life’s goals were very much my own. I was interested in making a lot of money and becoming a successful politician and the only way my Christian faith informed my goals was that I wanted to be honest...for a politician. ☺ But one night as I sat reading my Bible, I was just overwhelmed with the sense that THIS TRUTH was all that really matters in life, and that God wanted me to give my life to serving him fully – and for me, that meant the ministry (which is only one way to serve God fully, understand). I had never remotely wanted to be a minister before, but in a moment in time, I suddenly wanted nothing else.

My life since that time has by no means been perfect or constantly happy or anywhere near fully obedient. What it has been is: Purposeful. Knowing the truth that is in God’s Word and having faith in His goodness has kept me on course, helped us during rough patches in our marriage, given me hope and perspective during my times of depression or grief. I still struggle to turn every part of my life over to Christ, but I know that He is the one who has life.

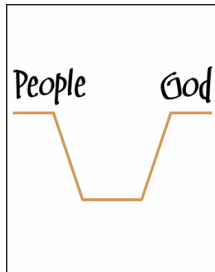
Now again, why not pick a time and put your story into a few words, and even send it in to us and let us help you with it?

But of course the main thing, of course, isn’t my story or yours, but God’s – the Gospel story, the story of salvation. What if, as your friendship develops, someone asks you what Christianity is all about? What if they say: “You seem like a good person. I’m not. God isn’t ready for me.” That’s an opening to share the Gospel. Can you do that, and do it in a brief and

understandable way?

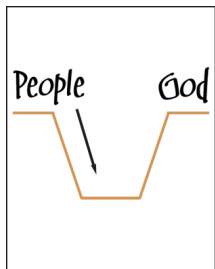
We're going to watch another video clip and you can follow along in your notes under "Telling God's redemptive story." What we're going to see here isn't in-depth teaching from the Scripture, which is important, but which you may not feel capable of doing. What we're going to see are a couple of ways to illustrate the heart of what Christianity is all about:

Telling GOD'S redemptive story...(6:41)

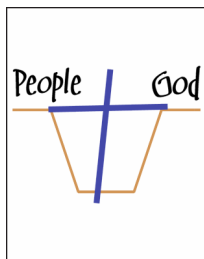


The Bridge

Our sins create a chasm between us and God.

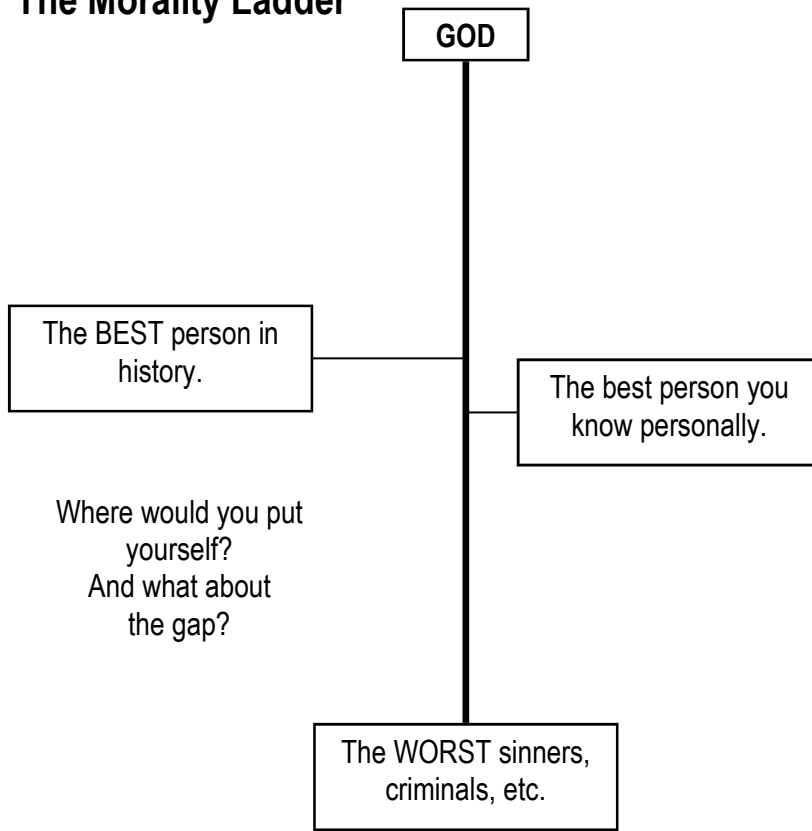


Even the best human effort cannot bridge the gap. Not our good works, our art, our philosophy, our acts of charity.



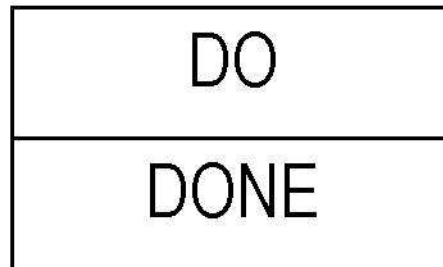
Because of His love, God provided the bridge...His Son, Jesus Christ.
(Illustrations from the *Just Walk Across the Room* curriculum).

The Morality Ladder



DO vs. DONE

People think of religion as what we can DO to please God and go to heaven. But the Bible tells us what God has DONE to pay our way, if we will accept it.



Three very simple ways to present just the very basic truth of the Gospel. Now there isn't a lot of detail there. If someone wants to study the Scriptures in depth, you probably can learn to lead them through that, or you can introduce them to someone here who can. If they want to know how it makes sense to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, or if they wonder if maybe science has made religion obsolete, you might need to give them a book to read (*Mere Christianity* or *The Problem of Pain* by C. S. Lewis, or *The Case For Christ* by Lee Strobel). Bill Hybels says in one of these interviews that a big part of his evangelism with educated skeptics is giving them tapes and CDs to listen to. The ministry staff here can serve as a resource for you when questions come up, and we have many resources in our church library and on our own shelves to help you when deeper questions come up. But these presentations illustrate the heart of our sin problem and the

essence of God's solution.

One thing I want to point out about the Bridge Illustration in particular (but it applies to the ladder too) and this comes from a new friend of mine, a Christian blogger from Michigan named Sam Clark. The gap in the bridge illustration illustrates a FACT about our relationship with God with regard to salvation, and the fact is that we are separated. In **Ephesians 2**, Paul talks about us being dead in sin, separated from Christ and far away from God. That's the fact in regard to what our sin does to our relationship with God.

But let's say you show this to someone who hasn't accepted Christ, but who is searching and who believes in God. They might say: "That isn't accurate. I can see God working in my life, and I really think he is the one who has given me my talents and opportunities. I'm not ready to buy in to this whole Jesus thing, but this GAP...I'm not seeing that."

You could respond: "It doesn't matter how you feel!" Or: "We know this is true because Bill Hybels said so! But instead you should realize that Paul actually said something similar in **Acts 17:27-28** when speaking to the people in Athens: **27 God did this** (that is, he created people and ordered the world) **so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.** **28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'** The bridge illustration shows the necessity of Christ's sacrifice in paying for our sins but there is a sense in which God isn't far off at all, and if he is working in your friend's life, go with that. We've said already that we're looking for where God is working so we can join in.

One last thing - REPENTANCE: The truth we must tell. In our world where anything goes morally speaking and no one wants to be told that their behavior is wrong, we have to be faithful in speaking God's call to repent – that is, to turn away from sin, turn to him, and pursue a new life in the Spirit free from bondage to sinful behavior. Now I know we want to avoid the stereotype of the old-time preacher who shouted hellfire and damnation and preached nothing BUT repent! But we don't correct that problem by failing to preach repentance, by giving people the impression that you can just say "I believe in Jesus" and keep everything just the way it has always been in your life. Believing in him means making him Savior AND Lord, which means turning away from living for sin. That's why both John the Baptist and Jesus began their ministry by preaching "**Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near**" (**Matthew 3:2, 4:17**), and why Peter finished the first sermon of the Christian era by saying "**Repent and be baptized...**" (**Acts 2:38**).

And lest you think repentance is only for non-Christians, Paul says in **Romans 6:11-14** - **11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.** **12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.** **13 Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.** **14 For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.**

This is why I want to end with a call for repentance. From...

- Complacency about evangelism
- Greed and materialism in light of human starvation
- Dishonesty
- Harshness, lovelessness for those around us
- Sexual immorality
- Treating God like our servant and his worship like our personal enrichment seminar. Etc.