

“I Love to Tell the Story” based on Exodus 20:1-21 and Luke 15:11-31
Delivered by Elder Bill Jobe on Sunday, April 16, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

The writer Anne Lamott says, "Grace will be sufficient for what lies ahead." I hope that is true. "I love to tell the story of Jesus and His love." I have often wondered if there should have been a song, "I love to tell *my* story of Jesus and His Love." Everyone has their own story. Each person's spiritual journey is unique.

Mama once told me that her hairdresser had described her conversion experience. The woman said it was earth-shattering. Mama said she had never felt anything like that. When asked when she first started believing in God. Mama said, "I never thought I had a choice." This reminded me of when Pinkey Bender spoke here. She described faith as a river where some wade in and are swept gently away; others jump straight into the raging current.

The Bible has a lot more stories in it than it does lists or essays. I don't think it would have survived if all we had were the Ten Commandments, Proverbs, the Beatitudes, and all that begetting stuff.

Boiling down any part of the Bible to a simple list, like putting the Ten Commandments on the walls of public buildings, is missing out on the whole story of where the list comes from. You take God, Moses, and the Israelites out of the picture and all you have is a list. It's a good list and civilized nations include some of it in their laws, but the story makes it so much better. The book of Exodus would be a lot to hang on the wall, but it is something you can carry in your heart and mind everywhere you go.

The story in the Bible that slap wears me out is the Prodigal Son. I don't know about you, but in my life, I have been everybody in that story but the fatted calf. Everyone hears a story from where they are in life. That is one of the beauties of a story, it can be told over and over again and each time there can be something new for the person hearing the story. We can be the father or the son who stayed home, we can be the prodigal son, or we might be a servant who thinks all three are nuts.

I once heard someone tell her story of surviving The World Trade Center attacks. As she told the story, we were with her every step of the way. She told of relationships, miracles, cooperation, and what might be described as the luck of the draw. She gave us smells, textures, and images that I will not forget. One of the reasons for telling stories is so we won't forget the terror or the heroes.

I won't tell her story, but I will tell you one thing she said. There are some things she will only share with people who have had the same type of experiences. In this group, she included the survivors of disasters and combat veterans.

Another power of stories is they can bond people together and help them to heal and grow. Some of the most powerful stories are reserved for special circumstances. They should only be told when the teller feels safe.

Storytelling is part of how group therapy and support groups work. Knowing someone else has survived what you are going through can give great hope.

Telling a story can be so much more than conveying the particulars of an event.

John Campbell loaned me the book "Spinning Gold out of Straw" subtitled "How Stories Heal" by Diane Rooks. Diane is one of those people we don't have a word for in the English language. She is a parent who has had a child die. He was grown, old enough to brew beer and to drink it, too, but that didn't kill him. He died from an allergic reaction to a bee sting. Diane, like most parents, assumed her child would outlive her. In sharing her pain she experienced healing. By sharing, she meant telling and listening. Listening is just as important as telling. I'm working on that listening thing.

Celeste Headlee says, "Being a good talker doesn't make you a good listener, and being smart might make you a terrible listener." If you have suffered a loss or are in pain, find someone who will let you pour out your story. If you know someone who is suffering, be there to hear their story. There are several stories I like to tell, and my family will occasionally tolerate or even promote me telling. I want to tell you three that I love to tell.

Gloria grew up in the Lutheran Church and I grew up in the Methodist church. We met at Coffee and Donuts right here at Shelby Presbyterian. We knew each other for over three years before we started dating. We sat together at Wednesday night suppers and on Sunday mornings. We talked on the phone and sometimes landed up at the same parties. There was even a time Gloria was dating a guy I had introduced her to, while I was engaged to someone else, and we all went rafting together.

There came a time Gloria and I were both unattached. Well, we noticed we got along pretty well, one thing led to another, and I got to thinking about marriage. I was a little skittish about the idea though. I was divorced and had broken off an engagement.

So, I started praying, and the first thing God and I figured out was that if I was going to get married I was going to need to get rid of the house I was living in. The house is on Lafayette Street next to where Shelby Shopper is now. The convenience store next door had been robbed three times while I was living there. One of the robbers was caught on my back porch. Not exactly the place for a family.

One day, while buying a flower for Gloria I noticed a frame shop next to the florist. I walked in and asked the owner "How long - you been here?" She answered, "About seven years but we are looking to move." I asked, "Where are you going to move?" She answered, "We're looking for an old house in the uptown area where we can live upstairs and have our business downstairs." I asked, "You want to buy my house?" She asked, "Which one is it?" I answered, "Lucy Hamrick's old house." She answered, "We'll take it."

Sometimes, God says, "Yes, yes, yes".

The owners of the frame shop, Butch and Jean had looked at the house before I had bought it and had decided it was more work than they wanted to take on. I had already done most of the major repairs so they could decorate and move in.

I believe God is always trying to communicate with us and we just don't know how to listen. Telling and hearing each other's stories is one way we sometimes hear the voice of God.

When I was in college, I took a creative writing class. When I would read my assignment to the class, the other students would hear so much more than I had felt when the words were written. What I conveyed was what I saw. What they heard was what they felt. Images of trees and sunlight were heard as people and relationships. If you tell a story, don't be surprised if God tells the hearer something more than you said.

Often as we go through life, we wonder why things are so much harder than they should be. If we pay attention, sometimes God is trying to get us in the right place at the right time.

One Saturday my boss at BCI asked some of the techs to help him move. He was moving from south of Pineville to east of Matthews. With several pickups, a rental truck, and my minivan we got about all his stuff in one trip. With all the packing and drive time, it took from about seven in the morning until late in the afternoon before I was back home. One of the things that had been hauled in my van was the doors of the refrigerator. We had to take the doors off to get the fridge out of the first house. We decided to wait to put the doors back on until we had the fridge in the new house. A hinge for the fridge was left in the back of my van. My boss would not be able to put his refrigerator back together until he had this part. I called him and he agreed to meet me out on Highway 74 in about an hour and a half so I wouldn't have to drive all the way to his house.

A refrigerator without hinges almost seemed minor by the time I finally connected with my boss. First, I got behind a crane being transported down Independence Boulevard. The crane took up both lanes and had a max speed of 30 miles per hour. Right at the intersection where I was supposed to meet my boss, the heater hose on my van broke, so I missed my turn. I had a cell phone, but my boss had left his at home. I couldn't get in touch with him. I was already at least a half-hour late meeting him. I stopped, shortened the heater hose, reconnected it, and burned my fingers. I found water to refill the radiator and drove a couple of miles further past where my boss had been waiting for more than an hour. I turned around and found the right intersection. By then he had given up and gone home. He found out I had been trying to get in touch with him and was now on his way back again. My boss found great humor in my misery and didn't seem to mind that his wife was home alone unpacking.

I think I went into autopilot on the way home because I don't remember the drive until I got to Brookshire Boulevard in Charlotte. Just ahead of me on the shoulder, I saw two white dots that seemed to be swinging in mid-air. As I got closer, I saw a man carrying a woman on his back. The two white dots were her perfectly clean white sneakers. I remembered seeing a car on the side of the road, back a mile or so. I stopped and asked if they needed help. They were reluctant at first. I probably didn't look too good after a day of moving and having to repair a heater hose with a pocketknife. They agreed to let me give them a ride. The man deposited his wife in the front seat, hopped in the back, and sort of squatted between the front seats because I hadn't put the back seats back in. I asked them what they were doing. The man explained he had a little job he was going to finish, and his car was in the shop so he had borrowed his father-in-law's car and it had broken down. The job he was doing would not take too long. So his wife had come along and was just going to wait in the car; she had muscular dystrophy. He went on

to tell me he was afraid to leave her in the car when it broke down because recently someone had broken down on that stretch of road and had been attacked and robbed.

I asked what kind of work he did. He said he was a carpenter, but he was not employed full time and he was looking for a job. A couple of weeks before this crazy Saturday, Gloria and I had gone to a wedding and had met a contractor from Charlotte who was looking for help. All I had to do was reach into my wallet and hand this carpenter the contractor's card and I knew why I was where I was. You might say our combined bad luck brought us together or maybe God was teaching me to listen.

As I tell one more story, let the Holy Spirit open your mind and heart and see what might be locked in this crazy story.

Back in the 70s, I was the Building Manager for the Mountain Area Health Education Center in Asheville. My responsibilities included purchasing, housekeeping, security, and maintenance. One day someone abandoned an old step-bed pickup truck right in front of our dumpster. My boss told me to contact our lawyer. I called and asked how we should proceed in getting the truck removed. The lawyer advised me there had been a recent rash of lawsuits involving towing vehicles, where the owner claimed some kind of damage had occurred during the towing. He suggested I contact the police. The police couldn't move the truck because it was on private property. They did give me the owner's name based on the tag. Luckily, the owner was listed in the phone book, and I eventually got in touch with him. This was prior to the advent of everyone having cell phones or even answering machines, so it took a while.

By now, the dumpster had not been emptied in two weeks, and it was normally emptied twice a week. All the janitor's closets in the building were full of trash and I was making daily trips to the dump in my truck. When I got the owner of the truck on the phone, he assured me he would be there that afternoon to take care of the problem.

I was somewhat pleased with myself and was more than relieved when the man was there working on the truck when I got ready to leave. I went by and he assured me he would have the truck out of the way that evening.

Just in case, I offered to help him roll it away from the dumpster, but he declined. He wasn't sure he would be able to get the truck running. If that was the case, he had a friend who had a tow bar and if we left the truck where it was it would be easy to hook up.

As a final fail-safe, I made sure he knew we had a security guard who would be more than willing to help him roll the truck into a parking place if his friend fell through with the tow bar.

Seven o'clock the next morning I pulled around to the upper parking lot and my heart fell. There it was, the old truck was still there, and the next day was a dumpster pickup day. I went straight to the phone—no answer at truck guy's house. I kept trying all day. I had no idea where the guy worked.

Well, five o'clock came and the truck was still there. This was the end of my rope. Many times in the almost three weeks of this ordeal, I had thought of just rolling the truck into a parking place to get it out of the way, but it was always locked. It was still locked. I looked in the window

and I started thinking; praying might have been a better idea. The brake was up and the truck was in gear. I thought this is a straight drive, if I push it, the most it will do is turn the engine just like I had done many times with other old clunkers to kick them off when the battery had gone dead. That wouldn't hurt anything. The hand brake is set so it can't roll too fast and the wheels are turned just right to go straight into the first parking place. So I got behind the old truck, leaned into it, and pushed as hard as I could. The truck didn't move an inch. Then I started thinking again, if I gave it just a little push with my truck it would inch along and surely stop when it gets to the curb in front of the parking space.

Something strange and almost magical happened when those two bumpers met. I was right, the wheels were lined up just right for the truck to roll into the parking place, but I was very wrong in my prediction about the hand brake and the transmission. They didn't hold for anything. I thought well, that's OK, it will stop when it gets to the curb. No, that didn't stop it but it would be all right, it was uphill on the other side of the sidewalk and the back wheels would catch on the curb.

Across the sidewalk and up a slight incline goes an unmanned, formerly dead, now resurrected pickup truck. On the other side of the slight incline is a drastic drop into another parking lot, which is almost always full. I jump out of my truck and reach the top of the slight incline just in time to see the possessed truck speed through the only empty spaces in the lower lot. The truck is going so fast; when it hits the curb on the far side of the parking lot it looks like a bucking bronco and ejects the spare tire from the bed. Now it is a race between the spare tire and the truck to see who can reach the finish line.

Hopefully, I had the presence of mind to thank God for the miraculous empty parking spaces. The next obstacle for the truck would surely end this nightmare. Ahead was a drainage pit with a slight drop in on this side and steep uphill banks on the far side, as well as being filled with low-growing brush. The devil must have installed four-wheel-drive in the truck when he took possession. The spare tire did falter and submit to the brush, but the truck would have put a Hummer to shame. The truck went almost airborne as it came out the other side.

Praying was out of the question at this point because I had forgotten how to breathe. Just below were four lanes of 5:00 traffic, and a rock retaining wall that would give the truck just the right altitude to land on top of the unsuspecting commuters. Just as I was sure I would be spending several years in jail for involuntary manslaughter, there was a flash of light and an earthshaking thud. I was afraid to look. The traffic was still moving; no one was screaming. Where was the truck? All I could see was its tailgate and a very large power pole still rocking.

Somewhere in the drainage pit, the devil relinquished the wheel to God. The truck had hit the only power pole on the block and had hit it dead center and so low that it had plowed the front bumper into the ground. It took two wreckers to unearth the front of the truck yet the pole wasn't damaged enough to need replacing. *You think this story is over, but it's not.*

About this time, the owner of the truck is coming up Biltmore Avenue with his buddy who has the tow bar. When the buddy asked, "Isn't that your truck?" The owner expects to see his truck being towed away, not wedged between the ground and the base of a power pole.

After I had relayed exactly what had happened to the police and the truck owner, the kind officer looked at me like I had surely lost my mind. After a moment, he said, "That may be the truth, but this is what my report is going to show. Mr. Jobe was backing out of this parking place when his truck bumped the abandoned truck that was in this parking place, causing the said truck to go over the bank, across the parking lot, through the drainage pit, and into the power pole."

The owner of the truck and I exchanged insurance information, and he called me later to thank me. My insurance had paid him well for his vintage truck he was about to sell for scrap metal.

Forgiveness and grace are the story behind the story. Both the policeman and the truck owner gave me grace and forgiveness. I didn't even ask for forgiveness; all I did was confess exactly what I had done and they set me free. Now, if the truck had gone over the wall and killed someone, forgiveness would have been up to a higher power, both here on Earth and in Heaven. I sincerely believe confession would still have opened the path to grace.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, as we head out into the world help us to tell your story in words and actions. Help us to listen to the stories of the hurting, the struggling, and the grieving. Help us to pause and let what we are hearing soak in, so the teller knows we are hearing them. Let our stories of faith, hope, healing, intervention, and love shine light into the dark corners of the world. Amen