

Let us Pray: *Nurturing Lord, open our ears to what you would have us hear, open our eyes to the new things you are doing in our midst, so that we might see you at work in and through us. If these words are not your Word, may they be forgotten and come to naught, but if they be Thy Word, may they adhere to our hearts, forever transforming us from glory into glory, into the creatures you would have us be, thou who art our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

One of my favorite things to do when I am gathered with friends is tell stories. When people first started telling me I was funny I couldn't figure that out – because I don't tell a lot of jokes. In fact, I really only know about three jokes – only one of which I can tell here.

What is brown and sticky? A stick.

Stories are another... well, er story. I have a bunch of them. I am slowly coming to grips with the fact that I am going to be one of those older people who repeats a lot of the same stuff over and over... I know this because I already do it.

We tell stories to be funny. We tell stories to make a point. We tell stories to share our history. Story telling is still important. Although books and computers and newspapers and magazines are far from being a new invention, we still have an oral tradition. We still have an oral history.

In Biblical times it was really all they had. To write anything down in mass was tedious and expensive so story telling was the way it went. As I read to you today's passage from Acts, I invite you to listen to the story as if you are gathered around a table listening to your guest tell you a story about himself and his two friends, Paul and Silas.

ACTS 16:16-34 (NIV)

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of the Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved – you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – he and his whole family.

The Word of the Lord...

It has drama, it has humor, it has tension – it has a conclusion. It is better than *Cats!*

What a great story!

First of all, the woman has clearly been taken over the spirit of a younger brother or sister. She annoys Paul and Silas by saying the same thing over and over again. This is tactic #2 in the *How to Annoy Your Sibling and Not Get Into Serious Trouble Handbook*. Number 1 is getting as close as you possibly can without touching them. Number 3 is repeating everything they say. Number 4 is gently poking.

The woman was not really saying anything bad: "*These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.*" The problem was she just kept saying it and Peter just could not take it anymore and he removed the spirit from her and she stopped.

This story right here is why the majority of us no longer have the option of running our spirit removal service. Can you imagine the abuse of this gift? We would be driving on highways and as we were passing that incredibly slow car in the left lane we would yell: "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you evil cell phone spirit to come out!"

The hardest I ever laughed at seminary - and maybe ever - was when one of my favorite professors showed up with his children in the cafeteria. His name is Dr. Andrew K. M. Adams but he goes by his initials: AKMA. I knew him well because he was also at Eckerd College and was the professor I worked with on my senior project – a thesis and lecture that he graciously gave me a C+ on so that I might graduate.

At Eckerd College he had two sons. Two boys who by the age of 5 and 3 knew more Greek and Hebrew than I ever knew – even at my peak. Occasionally I would engage in the humiliating

exercise of babysitting them. Humiliating because at the ages of 3 and 5 they were embarrassingly smarter than me. We would play a game with large cards that had pictures of various sections of roads. For instance, one card would have an intersection, another would have a curve, another would just be a straight street, another would have a bridge, etc... I guess it was a city planning game and here is a hint: you do not want to live in my city. The boys would always play me right into a dead end. I am not sure which is worse, losing to them or having a three year old condescendingly explain to you why you lost and laying out some better strategies for me to try next time. Which I would have... if he were not talking over my head.

So in Florida he had two sons. By the time we met up again in New Jersey the good Lord had added a daughter to the mix. She was two at the time... and fluid in French. So AKMA drops by the cafeteria where some friends and myself are skipping chapel and drinking coffee and taking turns seeing who can be the funniest... telling stories. He has brought all three of his children as the boys are home schooled (of course), his wife is at a conference and the day care had an evacuation due to an unfortunate plumbing incident.

The man - even flanked by his academically superior boys and attempting to wax poetic about the Greek text found in the Gospel of Matthew- was clearly in over his head. His two year old daughter was running everywhere and his boys in an attempt to control chaos had only added to it by running after her and trying to head her off as she ducked in and out and between tables and chairs. In the middle of it all were us still seated at the table slowly moving from stunned silence to gentle giggles to belly laughs as we watched Dr. AKMA - so unflappable in the classroom, commanding in the pulpit with his deep, booming voice and father of child prodigies... slowly lose it.

He did not want to completely come undone and be undignified and run after his daughter, but he also was uncomfortable with the amount of attention all of this was getting (by this time chapel is over and folks are streaming in for their mid-morning coffee break) and he wants to stop the madness so he ends up being caught in between and doing neither and starts pivoting on one foot and spinning in a circle - wanting to go stop her, but not wanting to run after her.

We at the table - ever helpful - are laughing hysterically.

Then the topper... with all of this chaos going on - chairs banging, professors and students coming in and stopping and gawking, sister, brothers and father screaming, us laughing - his ten year old suddenly scrambles on top of our table puts up his hands and yells: Evil spirit come out!!! In Greek.

And it worked.

We all have our stories. A lot of them are funny. A lot of them are sad too. In some of our stories we save the day. In other stories we make everything worse.

In Paul's story he saves the jail guard from killing himself. In Paul's story his impatience is the reason why they are in jail in the first place. The lyrics in a song by Mary Chapin Carpenter go like this: *Sometimes you're the windshield. Sometimes you're the bug. Sometimes it all comes together. Sometimes you're just a fool in love. Sometimes you're the Louisville Slugger. Sometimes you're the ball. Sometimes it all comes together. Sometimes you're gonna lose it all.*¹

That is our life story. No one wins all the time. No one loses all the time either.

Not only do our lives have a story line to it, but our faith has a story line too. What is your journey into faith? Some of you might have quite a dramatic story. Others of you may have a more even story – still with its highs and lows – but no peak moment. Take some time here and think about your story. <pause> Now as you are thinking about your story translate it into a line – kind of like a graph of your faith story. <Examples with hand – growing up, accepting Christ at high school retreat, call into ministry, ordination exams, ministry with MPC.>

And now I ask you this:

How many of you are flatlining?

Many of us have other storylines in our lives that are so busy going up and down that we forget about our faith story... and for some of us it is just barely hanging on as a line at all.

Is your faith flatlining?

Let me tell you something – if you think this is you, then it probably is. And if you think I have no clue and I have no right to be saying such things... then it is *definitely* you.

This is an emergency!

Good news though, I have the paddles that can jolt you back to life and lift your faith story line right up. Clear!

In your bulletin and your newsletter there are opportunities for you to get your faith story line going again. There are mission opportunities.

There are numerous activities that you can invite an unchurched friend, neighbor or relative to. The Nominating Committee is praying for leaders to be a deacon or an elder – is God calling you? There are opportunities to show thanksgiving to God through the giving of your tithes and offerings – including during the summer even when you are away.

Vacation Bible School arrives in August and with it will come a campaign for cleaner water in our world. Volunteers and helpers are always needed and it comes with a tremendous opportunity to serve over 100 kids from our community.

The majority of story lines in our lives have unknown endings. This can make engaging in them a nerve wracking process. I would never proclaim to you that being a Christian and living out our faith through our actions and our stories is an easy proposition. There are challenges to be faced. That is what makes the story so great.

The difference between our faith story and a lot of our other stories, is that we do know the ending. The summary from the Gospel of John is clear: *Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.*

We know Jesus Christ and we know the Righteous Father who sent him. We got that part of the story. Now it is time to revive the faith story line. It is time to take action. CLEAR!

Let us Pray... *Almighty God, Almighty King – you have charged us to be your disciples. Do not allow us to shy away from your call. Energize our faith stories. Revive us again. Clear the barriers that keep us from inviting others to the truth found in you. You are the one God, who lives and reigns forever, Amen.*

¹ “The Bug” Mary Chapin Carpenter. *Come on Come on.*