

The Timeless Power of Storytelling

“Tell me a story.”

It’s a familiar request from a small child. But we never really outgrow our love of stories. We happily pay to watch movies and cable shows. We enjoy “behind the scenes” stories about athletes on ESPN. Many of us still relish a good, old-fashioned novel, whether at bedtime or on the beach.

Given the universal appeal of storytelling, how do we use stories to support and inspire ministry in our congregations? How do we celebrate the good work that is being done in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

For as long as stories have been told, they have been used to instruct, lead and inspire. Jesus is our role model in storytelling, as in so many other areas of life.

Notice how Jesus’ stories (also known as parables) were short, accessible and used images and words familiar to his audience. In an agrarian society, he talked about seeds that take root in good soil or die in parched earth. He chose a familiar route from Jerusalem to Jericho to illustrate what it means to be a good neighbor. And he urged the fishermen who became his closest followers to consider a new kind of catch: people.

In a world drowning in information, stories break through the clutter to speak to us with remarkable clarity. Stories get people to care, to take action, to engage.

When you want to raise money for your youth group so they can renovate homes in Mississippi, tell a story about how a previous mission trip transformed the life of a teenage member of your congregation. When you want to lift up volunteers who were crucial to the success of a new ministry, tell a story about one person’s experience of grace through giving.

Keep the example of Jesus’ parables in mind when you’re choosing a story to share with your congregation.

A good story is:

■ Short and sweet

Jesus’ parables were memorable in part because they were brief and easy to remember.

■ Packed with concrete details

Think of the woman who searched her house for the lost coin. You can feel her sense of urgency; you can see her frantically sweeping.

■ About a strong main character

Build your story around one engaging person, such as the poor widow who put the rich to shame with her gift of two copper coins.

■ Timely and relevant

Give your story a practical application and, if possible, a local angle. Everyone in Jesus’ audience understood the “problem” with tax collectors—and what their social status was.

■ An invitation to action

By talking about the simple, every day task of separating sheep from goats, Jesus got his listeners to think about how they were treating those in need.

In the 21st century, we are blessed with a wealth of tools to tell the stories of “God’s work. Our hands.” Video. Blogs. Print. But the way we tell stories hasn’t changed. And the need for stories is greater than ever.

Tell the story!