

CHAPTER 10

Do Tell: The Great Story of Jesus

Christ Jesus ... emptied himself ... and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him..., that at the name of Jesus ... every tongue [should] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

PHILIPPIANS 2:5, 7-11

My friend Mark Shea had an experience that speaks volumes about the spiritual literacy of twenty-first-century Americans. He was at work when his coworker's radio began playing Joan Osborne's "If God Was One of Us." Mark's coworker looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, "Wouldn't that be a great idea for a story?"

Mark said, "What?"

She replied, "Suppose God became a human being. Wouldn't that make a great story?"

The woman speaking was a college-educated professional living and working in the heart of one of the great urban centers of a nation ostensibly filled with Christians. She was genuinely surprised when Mark explained that her "story idea" was in fact *the Great Story* that has dominated Western history for 2,000 years.

We must be clear: The purpose of evangelization is *not* waking up a generic “faith.” Evangelizers seek to bring people to an encounter with the person of Jesus of Nazareth, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, and risen from the dead. Our own personal witness can help illuminate and make living, compelling, and believable aspects of Jesus’ story, *but it cannot take the place of Jesus’ story*. As Father Cantalamessa preached in front of Pope Benedict and the papal household:

To re-evangelize the post-Christian world it is indispensable, I believe, to know the path followed by the Apostles to evangelize the pre-Christian world! ...

... The preaching, or kerygma, is called the “gospel”; the teaching, or didache, instead is called the “law,” or the commandment of Christ that is summarized in charity. These two things, the first — the kerygma, or gospel — is what gives origin to the Church; the second — the law, or the charity that springs from the first — is what draws for the Church an ideal of moral life, which “forms” the faith of the Church. In this connection, the Apostle distinguishes before the Corinthians his work of “father” in the faith from that of the “pedagogues” who came after him. He says: “For it is I, through the Gospel, who has begotten you in Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 4:15).

Therefore, *faith as such flowers only in the presence of the kerygma*, or the announcement. “How are they to believe” — writes the Apostle speaking of faith in Christ — “in him of whom they have never

heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?” Literally, “without someone who proclaims the kerygma” (*choris keryssontas*). And he concludes: “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ” (Romans 10:17), where by “preaching” the same thing is understood, that is, the “gospel” or kerygma.¹

If Christian faith flowers only in the presence of the kerygma, what does that mean for our pastoral practice? How is our generation to believe without someone who proclaims the kerygma? We can no longer presume that people around us already know the story. On the contrary, we have to presume that (a) many don’t know the basic facts of the Story; (b) a good deal of what they “know” may be wrong; (c) they don’t know how the parts of the story fit together to make a whole; and (d) they don’t know what the story means for them personally. Nor do they know what it means for their family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, or the world.

To be sure, telling the story requires that we respect the religious and spiritual situation in which each person finds himself. We must be sensitive to the tempo and pace at which people move through the stages of pre-discipleship. We must absolutely respect their consciences and convictions. But we still have a duty to provide opportunities for them to make a real spiritual choice to follow Christ. We must respect their right to hear the Story.²

¹ “Father Cantalamessa on Christ Yesterday and Today (Part I),” emphasis added.

² Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 80.

THE STORY AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

In every individual's life, there are two fundamental dynamics at work: (1) the individual's personal spiritual journey through the thresholds and (2) his or her knowledge of the Great Story of Jesus. An individual can be spiritually far ahead or far behind his or her knowledge of the kerygma, depending on circumstances, openness to the Spirit, and opportunities.

For instance, Daniel Moore, the young meth addict, was in a struggle for his life and *knew* that he was sinful and hurting others. Although Daniel had always regarded himself as Catholic, he was not baptized until he was nineteen, and his knowledge of the kerygma was limited to distorted snippets of evangelical Protestant sayings that he had heard from his friends. Daniel's readiness for personal change far outstripped his knowledge of the Story.

Some know the "facts" of the Story but have not grasped the meaning, because they have not yet broken through to trust, much less openness or seeking. One of my friends who is running a "seeker" group for Catholics witnessed this interaction a few months ago:

One of the participants really opened up. She is a disciple who has been Catholic her whole life. She encountered Jesus through several evangelical events she has attended. She currently has one foot in the Catholic world and another in the evangelical world. She has little trust in the Catholic Church, as she doesn't understand why most Catholics don't have a relationship with Jesus and she doesn't see

the Church producing individuals who have a relationship with Jesus.

She shared with strong emotion how she wants to know why Catholics can't ever rest in the love of the Lord, secure, knowing they are saved. She said, "If I am going to walk away from the Church, it would be for this reason: that we can't rest in the love of the Lord. It doesn't seem right to me that you always have to worry about whether you are going to be with God or not forever."

What was fascinating is that she thought that most Catholics are worried about their salvation! And yet the other Catholics in the group showed little to no concern about salvation at all! There wasn't any "understanding" of what salvation really is and how that gift is received. There was no mention of Jesus and his passion, death, and resurrection having anything to do with salvation. It was as though simply "knowing" about Jesus was somehow vaguely important, but no one really knew why.

Ultimately, it is the two together — an open heart and a response to the Great Story of Jesus — that enables an individual to declare with faith, "Jesus is Lord." Indeed, the two feed each other: learning about Jesus through his story can motivate people to finish the personal journey, while moving through the thresholds enables us to understand the story of Jesus as a whole and respond to it.

TAILORING THE GREAT STORY TO OUR AUDIENCE

St. Paul spoke of being “all things to all” (1 Corinthians 9:22). The essential basics of the kerygma do not vary, but we have to ask this question: *What parts* of the Story does this individual or this family or this group need to hear *when* and *in what order*? This can vary, depending upon the beginning place, the holes in their knowledge, and their questions and concerns. We need to ask the following:

1. Does our friend know the essential “acts” of the Story?
2. Has he or she connected the dots? Does he or she understand the Story as a whole?
3. Does our friend understand the personal significance of the Story?
4. What is or has been his or her response to the Story?

It is often disconcerting for Catholics to realize that the basic kerygma that awakens Christian faith and leads to the Church is not primarily *about* the Church herself. I have run into numerous Catholics who fear that if we talk about Jesus, Catholics will be lured from the Church by the intoxicating discovery that a relationship with God can be personal as well as communal.

We have to come to terms with the reality that, in the United States, *if we don't evangelize our own, someone else will*: evangelicals, Mormons, or independent Christians. The *Atlas of Global Christianity* estimates that over 314 million “evangelism offers” are received every day in the United States. That's an average of *more than one “offer” per person every day*, and the vast majority are aimed at people who

are already baptized.³ If we don't preach the kerygma in our parishes, people *will* hear it in a modified form outside the Church and may come to the mistaken conclusion that it isn't to be found within the Church. Our practice of *not* telling the Great Story clearly and compellingly *within* our parishes has contributed as much to the “me and Jesus” mind-set as anything else.

What follows is a very brief outline of the essential Great Story of Jesus organized with postmodern sensitivities in mind. People do *not* have to hear the different “Acts” of the Great Story in this order. Nor do they have to hear the whole Great Story all at once. Most people at the thresholds of trust and curiosity may only be able to take in certain parts of the whole kerygma at one time. But in the end, an individual will need to be familiar with all the “Acts” and understand the kerygma as a whole before he or she can make a deliberate decision to follow Jesus as his disciple. Some people to whom we tell the Story will have been Catholic all their life but are not yet disciples, while some will not be baptized or have any Christian background at all. But all have the right to hear it. All need to hear it. But where we *begin* telling the Story can vary widely, depending upon our audience.

THE GREAT STORY OF JESUS IN NINE ACTS

Act 1: The Kingdom

The version of the kerygma that I first heard as a fundamentalist child in the Deep South began with “God loves

³ Johnson and Ross, *Atlas of Global Christianity: 1910–2010*.

you” and then segued immediately into “Here’s your problem: you’re a sinner.” This can still work in the Bible Belt and in certain other settings.

My friend Barbara Elliott is founder of the Work-Faith Connection in Houston, which helps adults living in poverty or transitioning out of homelessness, prison, or unemployment to successfully reenter the workplace. Barbara points out that you don’t have to convince most of the addicts and ex-cons going through the WorkFaith Connection that they are sinners. They already know it and are looking for redemption. But many in my hometown of Seattle would find the idea of “personal sin” both ridiculous and incomprehensible. When sharing the kerygma with a young Angelino or New Yorker who has been steeped in postmodern assumptions since birth, you are probably going to have to start in a very different place.

Jesus began his earthly ministry in his first-century Jewish context by proclaiming the Kingdom of God (see Matthew 4:17). What first-century Jews found compelling can also be surprisingly intriguing in the twenty-first-century West. Postmodern young adults who don’t believe in personal sin are usually very aware of structural sin and therefore can find the idea of the Kingdom of God very attractive. That’s why I have listed “The Kingdom” as the first “Act” of the Great Story. But again, this may not be the appropriate beginning place for everyone. Where you should start telling the Great Story depends upon the need and spiritual openness of the person with whom you are sharing. That’s why I call the starting place “variable.”

The proclamation of the Kingdom appeals to those who don’t yet trust and those already at the thresholds of

trust or early curiosity, just as it did to Jesus’ first hearers. In that proclamation, we declare that God is love. He created us for a life with him full of love, peace, truth, beauty, goodness, and meaning that begins now, lasts forever, and can’t be taken away. It is this life that Jesus preached and called the Kingdom or reign of God.

Act 2: Jesus, Face of the Kingdom

The life of the Kingdom can serve as a powerful “bridge of trust” to Jesus. The second act of our story is largely addressed to those at the threshold of curiosity. Jesus is not only the great prophet or announcer of the Kingdom — *he* is the presence of the Kingdom. The “kingdom shone out before men in the word, in the works, and in the presence of Christ.”⁴ An excellent biblical passage to share, which rouses curiosity, is this:

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as was his custom, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news
to the poor.

⁴ *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), 5 (online at www.vatican.va/archivc/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, as May 8, 2012).

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16–21)

If we help them encounter the actions and teachings of the Kingdom in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, people who are intrigued by the *Kingdom* can very easily become intrigued by Jesus the *man*. As evangelizers, we must always remember that “the kingdom of God is not a concept, a doctrine, or a program subject to free interpretation, but it is before all else a person with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God.”⁵

Act 3: Jesus, the Kingdom in Word and Deed

Jesus is the face of the Kingdom, not only because he announces the Kingdom, but also because he does the works of the Kingdom. Jesus reveals the love of the Father and the nature of God’s Kingdom through his every word and action. Jesus gives a frank answer to the messengers who come to him from John the Baptist, who is languishing in jail and struggling (as modern inquirers still do) with the question, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Luke 7:20):

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 18.

In that hour he cured many of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many that were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.” (Luke 7:21–23)

Two deeds are particularly characteristic of Jesus’ earthly ministry: healing and forgiving. These deeds signify that in the Kingdom there will no longer be sickness or suffering and that Jesus’ mission is to transform people, free them from sin, and make them whole in body and spirit. He makes this particularly clear when he heals the paralytic:

When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, “Why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins” — he said to the man who was paralyzed — “I say to you, rise, take up your bed and go home.” And immediately he rose before them, and took up that on which he lay, and went home, glorifying God. And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, “We have seen strange things today.” (Luke 5:22–26)

Jesus’ healing miracles and authority to forgive sins raise the question of his divinity — “*Who is this?*” — which

is naturally followed by another question, “*If Jesus is God, what does that mean?*” This is why there is no point in the New Testament at which Jesus is met with indifference or boredom. His presence always provokes either profound questioning or deep hostility. It drives those who are filled with honest curiosity toward and often across the threshold of openness to ponder the mystery of his passion.

Act 4: Jesus Embraces the Cross

At the threshold of openness, the inquirer is usually ready to face the fact that Jesus’ ministry results not in “success” as the world understands it but rather in the mystery of his rejection, betrayal, crucifixion, and death. Yet it is *for us* that Jesus embraces the cross in obedience to the Father, as the means of our salvation and access to God’s life. He himself testifies:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father. (John 10:17–18)

and

The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:28)

But the cross is not the end:

He began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders

and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31)

Act 5: Resurrection, Ascension, New Life, Adoption, and the Kingdom

Confrontation with the biblical record of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is particularly meaningful for those at the thresholds of openness and seeking. The New Testament is absolutely clear: The entire Christian message stands or falls with the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.... If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17–19)

The Resurrection is a historical event. Jesus appeared to many witnesses, and the New Testament and the tradition of the Church bear abundant witness not only to their testimony but also to the quality of their lives as honest witnesses to the risen Christ. Inquirers can study the historical evidence for the Resurrection and discover how powerful it is. Satisfied with that, they can then move on to the personal challenges of what the Resurrection means for each human person.

Because God has assumed our human nature, Jesus’ life of perfect love and obedience, his death and resurrection *on our behalf*, break the bondage of sin and death. As the

Church teaches, “By His Incarnation, He, the Son of God, in a certain way, united himself with each man.”⁶

Now, in his resurrection he opens the way to our own resurrection and to a new life for all: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). Which takes us to the next act of the Great Story.

Act 6: Jesus Asks Me to Follow Him

To those standing at the thresholds of late openness and seeking, Jesus uses the same language he used with Simon and Andrew:

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Matthew 4:18–20)

The command to “follow” is one heard again and again in the Gospels. Jesus directs it not to everyone but to those who are truly seeking him. Sometimes he warns those who are not yet truly open or seeking that they need to count the cost. In short, his call to us is predicated on the reality that discipleship is not something that just “happens” but is a real decision and turning point requiring all the resources

⁶ *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), 22 (online at www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, as of May 8, 2012).

of heart, mind, and strength we can muster — particularly since following Jesus involves that we obey, as Simon and Andrew did, his call to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17).

Act 7: Personal Sin and Forgiveness

The act of recognizing one’s personal sin and need for forgiveness usually comes late in the journey of those who have absorbed the postmodern worldview. It can be difficult to grasp the reality of personal sin because it feels like an attack upon the self. As Scot McKnight observed about emerging adults (iGens):

For a person to feel guilty, that person must have a sense of morality. But morality requires a potent sense of what is right and wrong, and it needs a powerful sense of what is true and false. Contemporary culture does not provide the average iGen with a profound grasp of what is right and wrong apart from the conviction that assaulting the self is clearly wrong.⁷

The Kingdom, with its prophetic revelation of structural sin, often functions as the twenty-first-century doorway into the reality of personal sin. As the *Catechism* points out, systemic sin is birthed, fueled, and sustained by the acts and sinful choices of individual people (CCC 1869), including us. The seeker must ultimately come to trust and seek Jesus enough to acknowledge what St. John the Apostle says: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

⁷ McKnight, “The Gospel for iGens.”

The forgiveness of sin — and therefore our need to acknowledge our sin — is at the heart of the Gospel: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46–47). And so we must face and repent of sin — *our personal sin*, which lies at the root of the great structures of systemic sin — since it was for the forgiveness of our personal sin that Christ suffered, died, and was raised from the dead.

Act 8: Dropping the Net

As the inquirer stands on the verge of discipleship, he is in the position that Peter was in when confronted by the challenge of who Jesus was:

Jesus ... asked his disciples, “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 16:13–17)

As St. Paul says, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). The disciple cooperates with the Holy Spirit, making a conscious choice that requires faith in Jesus Christ as God, with the intention to follow him in what the Church calls the “obedi-

ence of faith.” Discipleship is expressed by repentance of personal sin and baptism into Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and body on earth — the Church — or by the renewal of baptismal grace through confession and return to the regular practice of the faith.

Act 9: The Life of Discipleship

The new disciple is now ready to begin a lifetime of following Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit in the midst of his Church for the sake of the world. Newly baptized Sara Silberger speaks for many who have newly crossed into the world of relationship with God and discipleship:

I wish that lifelong Christians, especially lifelong Catholics, could understand just for a minute what it is like to be lost. Maybe they would be less afraid to evangelize. It may be hard to explain.... Before I started this process, I thought of myself as a happy person, reasonably confident, proud of my life and how I lived it. It’s not like I saw myself as stumbling around in a pit. But from where I stand now, wow.

It was so different, so lonely. People talk about real Catholic discipleship as a lonely road — I do too sometimes — and it is frustrating, and stupid, and there is no good reason for it to be like that. But being without God is a different, deeper kind of being alone. I wouldn’t even have known to call it lonely, because there isn’t any concept that someone else should be there.