

August 27, 2017

Church Planting
What's Your Story?
Acts 22:1-11

Opening words: Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) was an English biologist. His field of expertise was comparative anatomy. During his lifetime, he was called "Darwin's bulldog" and championed the theory of evolution. Sadly, he was also a well-known agnostic. One weekend he attended a house party with other men. On Sunday morning, while most of them were preparing to go to church, he approached a man known for his Christian character and said, "Stay here with me and tell me why you are a Christian." The man, knowing he couldn't match wits with Huxley, hesitated. But the agnostic said gently, "I don't want to argue with you. I just want you to tell me simply what this Christ means to you." The man did, and when he finished, there were tears in Huxley's eyes.

That story reminds us of two things. First, it reminds us of the power of words. Second, it reminds us of the power of a sincere testimony. That leads me to two interesting questions. First, if someone asked you to share what Jesus means to you, what would you say? Second, when was the last time you shared your story? I will be honest with you. Today, I am going to challenge you to share your story. In other words, today, I am going to challenge you to share your testimony.

This is sermon number fifty-four in my sermon series, *Church Planting*. You remember my task. I am preaching through the Book of Acts. This will be my last message in this series this summer. However, I will return to Acts next summer and the following summers until I complete my task. Why make such a major time commitment to the Book of Acts? Because, Acts is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who created the church originally and it will be the Holy Spirit who must revive the church again. Human effort is not enough. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 22:1-11. This week's message is called *What's Your Story?*

Acts 22:1-11 "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense."

² When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.

Then Paul said: ³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶“About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

⁸“‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.

“‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ⁹ My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

¹⁰“‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked.

“‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ ¹¹ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

It has been said, *your testimony is the story of your encounter with God and what role He has played throughout your life.*” I agree, and find value in that quote. If you find value in someone’s testimony, say, **“Amen!”**

Today, we find ourselves in the twenty-second chapter of Acts. If you were with us two weeks ago, then you may remember the story line. Paul has completed his third missionary journey and has returned to Jerusalem to help the struggling church in the Golden City. Paul told the church in Jerusalem about his successful work among the Gentiles. They told Paul how God had been moving among the Jews. It is those new Jewish-Christians who challenged Paul. Reluctant to give up their old ways, they are angry with Paul because they believe Paul had dismissed the Old Testament laws. Last time, we were told the tension between Paul and the Jewish-Christians was so high, a riot broke out. The Jerusalem Police Department was informed about the disturbance. They put down their donuts ☺ and ran to the scene of the riot. Not having all the facts, they arrested Paul to calm the ugly crowd and protect Paul. The great evangelist asked to speak to the crowd before he was taken away. The commander of the soldiers granted his request. That takes us to our reading for today.

In verse two, we are told Paul spoke in Aramaic. In other words, Paul spoke to them in their nature tongue. That means his words were easy to understand. He did not want language to be an obstacle. What he wanted them to hear was his story. Look at the text with me. From verse three to verse twenty-one Paul simply gives his story. Paul did not talk about some continuing education program he had taken. Paul did not talk about the famous people he knew. Paul did not try to impress them with his future goals. Paul simply told them his story. In other words, Paul gave his testimony. Luke, the author of this passage, records every word the great evangelist uttered.

He was born a Jew in Tarsus. Next, he gives them his educational background and informs them of his misguided passion for the law. In those days, he was respected by people in high places. That all changed one day. He was traveling to Damascus. It was about noon when Jesus himself confronted Paul in a bright light. Paul is struck with blindness and Jesus corrects Paul’s ways. He had Paul led into the city and he was introduced to a man by the name of Ananias. It is this saintly man who starts Paul on

the Christian path. Beyond our reading, Paul finishes his story. In time, he tells this group of angry Jewish-Christians that it was Jesus himself who instructed him to take the Good News to the Gentiles. Paul knew that his greatest defense against this hostile crowd was his testimony. Paul knew what we often forget. Our testimony is a great weapon. That leads us to a good question: When was the last time you shared your story?

Several years ago, I was struggling with the season of Lent. David Parry was on staff during that time. He thought we should do something new. He thought it would be interesting to let people tell their stories. I called it *Moments with the Master*. On Sunday mornings, I preached on people in the Bible who had encountered Jesus. I looked at the stories of the rich young ruler, Nicodemus and the rest. On Wednesday evenings, we asked people to share their stories of their Christian pilgrimage. I set up the speakers. I tried to find someone who represented different areas of our church. I looked for different generations and different groups. When Easter came that year, I evaluated that series. I consider that series to be one of the best things we have ever done. Every story was great. We stopped looking at people in the old way and started looking at people as disciples of Jesus Christ.

One Wednesday evening, the speaker was a young woman who came home from college to tell her story. She started by thanking her parents for all they had done. She thanked them for bringing her to church. Then, she talked about all the things she had done within the life of this church. There were countless hours in Sunday school. Annually, she participated in the Christmas play. She endured the long hours of confirmation class. She went on many mission trips as a youth. Then, she said something completely honest. She said, I grew up in this church but really took this church for granted. She said, I didn't really start to appreciate this church until I went to college. One night on campus, it hit her. The only things she knew about God were things she had learned at Western Reserve. If you were here that evening, then you know the truth. Her words woke us all up. This church doesn't just exist to maintain a nice building. This church doesn't just exist so you can have another place to make friends. This church is more than just another non-profit. This church exists to make disciples for Jesus Christ. Her story changed the way we looked at ourselves. Let me ask you the question again: What's your story? This is the problem:

Very few people are sharing their story within the faith. Our stories are well-kept secrets. The Billy Graham Foundation tells us 90% of American Christians will never share their story. That is one of the great problems in the life of the church. We need to start telling people our stories. We need to start telling people what Jesus means to us. The reason we aren't telling our stories is complex. There is not a single reason why Christians are mute. There are a variety of reasons why we are silent on the topic. The Christian Century says there are six reasons why people don't share their story. Some mute Christians say:

1. **"I'm not smart enough."** The disciples are not remembered for their brain power. You do not have to be an expert on the Bible or Christian theology. You just have to know your story. You know it because it is your story. What's your story?
2. **"I don't want to make people mad."** If you tell your story humbly, you will not draw anyone's anger, but you will earn their respect. What's your story?
3. **"I don't want my friends to make fun of me."** Despite all the shortcomings of our time, we live in a time when people respect other people's beliefs. No one will laugh at you. What's your story?
4. **"I'm not a good Christian."** Christians are not perfect people. Yes, we should read the Bible more. Yes, we should sin less. However, those things are true, but they are not a reason for not telling your story. Christians are not perfect, but they are forgiven. What's your story?
5. **"All my friends are Christians."** If all your friends are Christians, then something is seriously wrong. There is no way to win the world for Jesus Christ if we live in a Christian bubble. Why don't you go out and make some non-Christian friends and tell them what Jesus has done for you? What's your story?
6. **"I don't know where to start."** In other words, my story is boring. Your story may not be filled with addictions and violence, but it is your story. Why don't you start at the beginning? Some wade into the faith. Others jump off the high dive. What's your story?

This is my challenge for you today. In the next week, tell someone in your life what Jesus has done for you. Tell someone what Jesus means to you. Don't be a coward. Don't tell them about your church. Don't tell them about the latest fundraiser. Don't tell them about the quality of the people in your church. Don't tell them about the latest gossip. Don't tell them local church history or the history of the United Methodist Church (very few care). Don't even tell them about your handsome preacher 😊. Only tell them one thing. Tell them what Jesus means to you. And, when you do, things will change. There is an untapped power in your story. If you promise to tell someone your story this week, say, **"Amen!"** Let me get you started by telling you my story.

I was born into a Christian home in Warren, Ohio, the youngest of three children. We were not poor, but we were not rich. My parents worked hard. Their model of hard work was one of the great influences on my life. They worked six days a week and only rested on Sunday. Weekly, we went to church. I can count on one hand the Sundays

when we missed church as a family. At home going to church wasn't an option, it was a requirement. This is the truth:

When I was young I didn't think much of my home church. I will admit it, I was critical. Yet, that church, Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Warren did something that changed my life. They supported something called a seminar program. It was a forerunner to a mission trip. In my four years of high school, they sent us on two different seminars. When I was a sophomore in high school, we went to the Grand Canyon to build a trail for the blind. When I was a senior, we went to Scotland and made friends across the pond. To this date, I have never felt closer to any group. I don't know how else to say it. During my senior year of high school, a revival broke out in my youth group. I was led to Christ on a cold December day. Jesus went from being a historical character to my Lord and Savior. From the first day, I have appreciated what Christ has done for me. From the very beginning, I knew God saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. Looking back, I can see clearly how God was calling me into the ministry, but because of self-doubt I ran from my calling. I graduated from both high school and college without any direction. I worked several pointless jobs. I knew there was more to life than making money.

In 1983, I surrendered. I packed up all my insecurities and went back to school. The next four years were filled with hardships. I won't tell you those stories because I don't want to cry. However, I will tell you about the night I sat outside on a hill near my apartment building praying for God's help. I was living in a sea of hopelessness. God must have heard my prayer, because I was filled with the Holy Spirit. It was one of those mountaintop experiences in my life. From that moment on, everything changed. From that moment on, I knew everything would work out. From that moment on, doors began to open and my God-given gifts began to blossom. From that moment on, I was filled with both confidence and peace. From that moment on, I looked at life differently. From that moment on, I knew that God was watching over me. From that moment on, I knew that God was providing for me. I wasn't wrong! From that moment on, things were different. In my life, God has placed one Christian person in my life after another. Each one kept me moving forward. Each one added something new and better. I can honestly tell you, it has been quite a ride and it is not over yet. I have been blessed to see many amazing places in this world and I have been blessed to have a true home. I have been blessed to experience true love. I don't know if my story is exciting, but it is my story. For me, it all began in a steel town in northeast Ohio on a cold December day, but it will end in heaven. That is my story.

What's your story? Why don't you tell someone what Jesus means to you? Why don't you tell someone what Jesus has done for you? Why don't you tell your story and watch what happens? It has been said, *your testimony is the story of your encounter with God and what role He has played throughout your life.* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**