

Re-imagining the Sermon

By Steven James

One of my favorite descriptions of a good story comes from novelist Flannery O'Connor: "When you can state the theme of a story, when you can separate it from the story itself, then you can be sure the story is not a very good one. The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is."¹

Now read that paragraph again, replacing the word 'story' with the word 'sermon.'

Jesus knew all of this about stories and sermons. He knew that sometimes truth can't be explained, outlined, analyzed and summarized. He knew that sometimes the only way to tell the truth is to wrap it up in a story. Here are three ways to do just that.

Lesson #1 – Work with Images Rather than Propositions

Just because people leave with all the little blanks filled in on their church bulletins doesn't mean they're any closer to God. I believe sermons should move people—intellectually, emotionally, imaginatively, spiritually—to the place where they can encounter God.

That means appealing not just to intellect, but also to imagination.

Imagination lies at the heart of a faith that hopes for what it cannot see, a religion in which a lamb tramples a snake and immortal God dies as mortal man. Without imagination how can we *know* a love that *surpasses knowledge* (Ephesians 3:19)? Or *fix our eyes* on what is *unseen* (2 Corinthians 4:18)? Or cling to the *certainty* of what we *cannot prove* (Hebrew 11:1)? Without imagination, how can we accept a faith in which death is the beginning of life, weakness is the key to strength, and foolishness is the pathway to wisdom?

You cannot have faith without imagination. And you do not grow in faith by just hearing facts.

If you're preaching about the hidden sins in people's lives, rather than stating a theme such as, "In my sermon people will discover that believers should not hide their sins from God," start with an image. Maybe tell a story about going fishing and realizing that there are many currents under the surface of the lake that you can't see at first. 'Hidden currents' in our lives could be a powerful image that would speak to both the head and the heart.

Often the best told stories, and sermons, need no explanation because they embody the truth. They say what cannot be said any other way.

Lesson #2 – Trust the Story To Do Its Work

In nearly every book on public speaking and preaching I've read I see the same advice: "Tell 'em what you're gonna say. Say it. Then tell 'em what you said."

That might be a good way to teach someone how to bake a casserole, but it sure stinks when it comes to telling a good story. Maybe that's why Jesus never did it. Not once.

Instead, he spoke in metaphor, story, and imagery that appealed to curiosity and imagination. He didn't preach 3-point sermons, he preached 1-point sermons—and most of the time he didn't even tell people what that point was.

Jesus rarely explained his stories, in fact only *once* in scripture are we told specifically why Jesus told a story (Luke 18:1), and only a couple of his story explanations appear. Jesus trusted his stories to do their work in the hearts of the people listening. This leads us to one of the great paradoxes of education: *the more you explain a story the less impact it has*. Think about it. Haven't you heard someone use a great illustration and then spend the next 30 minutes draining all of the impact out of it? We end up diminishing rather than expanding the impact of a story by explaining to people what we think it is supposed to mean.

God trusts curiosity to be an important guidepost for people on their spiritual journeys. For some reason, we tend to trust our explanations of truth, but not the allure of mystery. Jesus trusted his stories to do its work in the lives of his listeners. He almost always wrapped truth up in mystery. We can do the same.

Lesson #3 – Never Tell the Same Story Twice

In my creative communication I often point out that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell the story of Jesus's life. Yet they all tell it differently. "So," I ask the participants, "which of them is right?"

People stare at me for a moment trying to figure out if it's a trick question. Then someone will say, "They're all right!"

"Yes, but they tell it differently," I continue. "How can that be?"

And someone will inevitably offer the correct answer: because they were different authors writing to different audiences.

So it is today. We are, each of us, different and unique storytellers telling God's story to different audiences, and there is no "right way" to tell a story. There are however effective and ineffective ways. And one of the most ineffective ways is to tell a story that doesn't connect with your listeners.

Effective communicators combine careful and thoughtful preparation with a warm sense of spontaneity. In short, they respond to their audiences. They prepare their messages with their listeners in mind. Their stories and jokes aren't canned. People feel like the message is directed right at them.

When speaking, don't worry about how the story is "supposed to go" or how it went when you practiced it yesterday. Pay attention to what's going on right now. In short, don't try to tell the story right, tell the story well.

So, use powerful images to speak to the imagination of your listeners, spend more time shaping stories that embody the truth and less time explaining your points, and then respond to your listeners as you speak to them. These steps will help you connect with and reach your congregation with the greatest story of all.

Steven James has spoken more than 1500 times across North America. He is the author of the highly acclaimed inspirational book *Story: Recapture the Mystery*, and a new breed of high-octane thrillers, beginning with *The Pawn*, both published by Revell.

ⁱ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), p. 96.