

Are you a storyteller? Or better yet, do you enjoy a good story? I recall one brief moment of stardom in my own life when I struck upon a novel idea for the story hour my third grade teacher afforded us every Friday afternoon. Miss Agnes extended to my classmates and me the opportunity to share a favorite story during a brief rest period following lunch. After weeks of hearing over and over again the stories of the three pigs, Little Red Riding Hood, and Hansel and Gretel, I came upon a winner. Recalling the delight with which I listened to my mother tell old family stories, I decided to share those stories with the class. I recall being very well received, particularly when I shared the story of my mother as a little girl hiding under a table in the train station when she encountered her first car and screaming frantically for someone to save her from “that old devil.” I also recall a great response when I told about my mother and her siblings rushing to get a glimpse of a car actually passing down their very street and pushing my uncle, who by the time I told the story was county school superintendent, out the window. I, frankly, was a hit and every week, my audience looked forward to my place in the story hour. I was a hit, that is, until my teacher laughingly told my mother, who worked in the school lunchroom, about my great success; and my mother cut short my sharing the family secrets.

Stories are important to us, particularly those stories that help us to know who we are. You may remember the weeks in 1977 when the whole nation was glued to its TV screens for the airing of Alex Haley’s *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. Reflecting an oral tradition handed down for generations, Haley’s family story of capture, enslavement, war, and Jim Crow America was, we learned, not just his story but the tragic and bitterly painful story of the country we call home. It was a story we needed to know. Following upon the airing of “Roots,” research into family ancestries flourished; and with channels for accessing our personal histories growing by the day, researching our family stories has become a favorite pastime, particularly, it seems upon retirement. Getting in touch with who we are by coming to know the good, the bad, and the ugly about those from whom we are descended is a fascinating and popular pursuit.

This summer we have been focused, in the words of Marcus Borg, on “meeting Jesus again for the first time” by revisiting those responsible for passing on to us his story. We have moved from the incessant, fast-paced, street language, and run-on sentences of Mark to the concern of Matthew, that most “Jewish” of Gospels, to speak to a righteousness of heart and action to Luke’s inclusive welcome of all of God’s children at Christ’s table. Today we visit John. In doing so, we move from the three prior witnesses who, despite their differences, rely heavily upon Mark’s story and tend to see and order things pretty much together. In doing so, we acknowledge significant differences—differences which lead some to dismiss John’s testimony as *just* a collection of stories fabricated by early Christians and an unworthy way of getting in touch with the *real* Jesus, the Jesus of history. If by our stories we come to know who we are, however, John’s contribution to the pool of knowledge we have about Jesus must be taken seriously. Let’s look at his differences and his contributions.

Stories of Jesus reflect the Jesus of history and the church’s continuing experience of the living Christ. John’s story of Jesus is, indeed, very different from the other three. Rather than the one year ministry reflected in the three synoptic Gospels, John speaks in terms of a three year ministry with Jesus observing three Passovers, not one. Rather than spending the bulk of his ministry in Galilee and making one trip to Jerusalem, John portrays Jesus making three trips and concentrating most of his ministry in Jerusalem and the surrounding area, not Galilee. The short, pithy sayings and extended parables, “strung together like beads” in the synoptics, are replaced with long, coherent speeches in John, many of them focused upon Jesus’ own identity. Rather than Jesus’ words of institution at the Last Supper, John depicts Jesus washing the disciples feet and delivering his Farewell Address, the longest continuous discourse by Jesus in scripture. As the Jesus scholars observe, “virtually nothing of the synoptic sage” remains [*Five Gospels*, 10]. In its place we have only the briefest of narratives, extensive irony and symbolism calling the reader to the task of serious discernment, and Jesus’ repeated “I AM” statements, reflective most likely of Moses’ experience at the burning bush.

Add to this the troublesome aspect of John’s seemingly deep hostility toward the Jewish faith. Rather than speaking of scribes, Pharisees, and chief priests challenging Jesus, John speaks bluntly in terms of “the Jews.” Written anonymously somewhere around 80 or 85 C.E. and some say as late as 90 or 95, John is writing during a time when conflict between Jews and Christians is rising. Three times he speaks of Christians being “put out of the synagogue.” We should interpret the conflict, however, as an intra-family conflict, taking place within the extended family of Judaism, rather than a broadsided attack upon Judaism. As is evident from his very first words (“*In the beginning was the Word*”) and throughout his Gospel, John’s use of Jewish scriptures is entirely positive. “John’s animosity to religious authorities,” Gail O’Day suggests, “does not extend

to Jewish religious traditions.” John “is thoroughly saturated in and shaped by the Jewish Scriptures” [*New Interpreter’s Bible*, X, 505]. We would do well, she suggests, to translate John’s “the Jews” as “the religious authorities,” thus avoiding the tragic historic implications of denouncing the Jewish people and their tradition as a whole.

The Jesus scholars did indeed come to the conclusion that none of the words John attributes to Jesus were actually spoken by him. Nevertheless, the words, Marcus Borg, a primary participant in the seminar, suggests, are true. They reflect the “experiential reality” of the living Christ. The great “I am” statements of Jesus, for example, reflect the truth of what John’s community experienced and what followers of Jesus have experienced through the centuries. Through their personal experience, worship, and devotion, they came to know the living Christ as “the light that led them out of darkness, the spiritual food that nourished them in the midst of their journey, the way that led them from death to life” [Borg, 16]. Just as many of us experienced many years ago with respect to the question of the relationship between Genesis’ stories of creation and the findings of science, truth is more than literal, factual truth. Literal truth is important and utilizing every tool at our disposal to learn more about the universe and all we can about the historical Jesus does not threaten faith. As a matter of fact, faith and our usefulness in God’s kingdom are probably never more at risk than when we encase the word of scripture in stone and fight—yes, literally fight—with every ounce of our being to safeguard its rigidity. Myth or story, I learned in some 45 years ago in seminary, is a vessel, a bearer of truth; and we should not confuse truth with the vessel itself, but look inside the vessel to seek the truth to which it points. “We need facts,” Harvard Divinity School Professor Harvey Cox insists, “if only to protect us from frauds, but we also need stories, to enable us to make sense of the facts” [*When Jesus Came to Harvard*, 37].

And so we look into the Gospel of John, seeking not so much the literal, historical events of Jesus’ life as we do the interpretation of the continuing significance of the living Christ. “These are written,” John says in explaining his purpose, “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). John’s writing is a confessional statement; and he writes, Gail O’Day suggests, to pull every one of his readers into the story. The story of Jesus is not just a wooden, far removed, detailing of external facts. The story of Jesus poses a living, breathing, dynamic question to each of us who would count ourselves among his followers. We resonate with John’s joyful anthem sounding forth in his prologue: “We have beheld his glory” (1:14). And we find ourselves questioned by in the enacted parables, stories found only in John—the stories of the Samaritan woman, the woman caught in adultery, and the raising of Lazarus. Some may choose to defend with their dying breath these stories as literal fact, and if they do, that’s okay. It’s okay as long as they recognize that is not the only way to be a faithful follower of Jesus; and it’s okay only if they go beyond drawing their battle lines to finding themselves questioned by the stories in the very depths of their being: How do you receive those long excluded from among the faithful (the story of the Samaritan woman)? Do you recognize yourself and not just the despised other as flawed sinner (the woman caught in adultery)? At bottom, do you find in the story of Jesus deliverance from death and freedom to walk in newness of life? It is only in such questioning, such soul searching that we lay our hands on the truth, the depth of meaning the stories seek to convey.

Writing from within a community that was threatened on every side by those holding tightly to wine skins too rigid to flex and include the newest of God’s children, John called those who would follow Jesus to a new standard. “A new commandment I give to you: love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples” (13:34-35). A community living by that standard, you see, experiences the openness, the freedom, the love and the truth of God. Thanks be to God!