What’s in the Story

**Jeremiah 29:11; “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.**

**Matthew 7:7; “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.**

I love a good story! I am part of a story telling family. My wife comes from a family that cannot relay a message without giving you the entire story of the person or persons involved. Story is very important – without it, we would simply relay facts and figures to each other.

Jesus used story as a primary method of teaching. He used parables, more than 2/3rds of the Gospel writings are in parables. One might ask why, so I will get there in a moment.

First, I want to tell you a story about a young student named Fred. Fred was a student of mine back in 1973 in Laurel, MS., where I taught for 5 years as general music teacher and choral director. Fred was a young African-American who loved to sing. Fred loved coming to my class. He came in one day and looked upset – he often looked like he needed sleep and maybe some cleaner clothes – but this was different. Fred had just left the office after being sent there by the English teacher for falling asleep during class. I knew Fred was having problems with English and Geography because the teachers had complained in the teachers lounge about him. Remember I said Fred loved to sing! I asked him to come to my office before class began and he told me his story. He said, “Mr. Rollins, my mama has 7 children and my father left us on our own. I work every night at Sanderson Farms catching chickens for slaughter. Most nights I don’t get home until midnight and I am just tired.” Having grown up on a farm, I knew the work involved in catching chickens and the accompanying smell one could acquire from doing that work. I responded to Fred and told him that any day he came to my class and needed sleep, to go back and sit at my desk and sleep. I also told him he would never fail choir!

Fast forward to 2012. My sister Brenda’s eldest son Brian was getting married and had asked me to do the wedding. When we arrived at the church, Whitesand Baptist Church, it was well before the scheduled time. I walked out to the front of the church and happened into a conversation with 2 chicken farmers. I ventured into my story about Fred and his job of many years ago when one of the guys stopped me and said, “Oh we know Fred very well, he just retired and gave his company over to his sons”. I asked, “what was his business”? They replied, “catching chickens”. It seems that Fred had taken the job that had been dealt him as a teenager and built a business out of it, a very successful business.

Now this is a feel-good story and it happens that it is true. I use it today for that very reason. Remember the Jeremiah scripture. I also was aware at the time of the story that Fred’s family were people of Faith, therefore I believe that Fred was led to knock on the door (Matthew 7:7) and it opened to a purpose God had for him and his future family. So, when we look into the story, we get the greater meaning.

So, back to the use of parables by Jesus. Jesus was a Jewish boy in a Jewish household which indicates that he attended Temple School growing up. He was taught by Jewish Rabbis’ who used as a primary tool, Marshal or Hebrew parable. The point or main ingredient of each parable is embedded in the story. The use of the parable to this day is for the hearer to listen and dig into the story for the meaning it holds for them. The hidden meaning for the one hearing the story may not be the same for any two different persons. How many times have you heard a parable used in a sermon and come away with something that felt like it was customized for you alone? That is the power of the story.

So often, I think people hear a sermon that just makes them feel good, not a bad thing, but doesn’t challenge them to knock on the door for a deeper understanding. I want to say to you that listening and applying are two different functions. The story could have applicability to a number of situations.

What does it mean when we lose sight of our own story, the one that holds the meaning for our existence? We often hear in sermon that God has a plan for us. I believe that with all my heart, but we also have choice. We can change that plan and follow our own. Let me tell you another story.

In November of 1991, the Berlin Wall fell and dawned the end of the Soviet Union. Just days after that event, I along with my boss, Rev. Dr. Bruce Weaver were called to Geneva, Switzerland for an emergency humanitarian meeting with the World Council of Churches. We represented the entire United Methodist Church through UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief) on that committee. When assignments were given out at the end of the two-day session on the former Soviet Union, UMCOR was asked to be responsible for food distribution in the city of Moscow. (If you want to know if I was nervous, just remember I spent my growing up years during the Cold War and threats of nuclear destruction from within this very city!) Dr. Weaver and I then traveled to Moscow. There we were greeted by a friend we had made with the Russia Peace Foundation just days earlier. In the process of gathering information that would dictate how such a program would be implemented, we found Methodists – Russian Methodists. We discovered that the church had gone underground and had survived the seven decades+ of the Soviet rule. (That is a story in itself that the church lived out its story under the worst conditions possible.) We also had a meeting in the Kremlin, a place I had never evened imagined I would ever be, with leading nutritionists of the country. We were given menus in metric tons for the types of food that were needed. Dr. Weaver and I were totally overwhelmed with these facts, but we took excellent notes and the next day we were on our way back to New York. Dr. Weaver asked me, “how are we going to do this?” and I answered I really don’t know. Our first flight took us to Amsterdam for a connection on to New York. We both were exhausted, so we slept for the duration of the flight. I had a dream that was a remembrance of something from my childhood of boxing canned goods and sending them overseas for distribution by missionaries. When I awoke, I said to Dr. Weaver, I know the answer! We took the food items from the giant list and broke it down to 50-pound boxes. Then we ask our United Methodist Churches to fill boxes and send them to New Windsor, MD where we packed containers and shipped the food to Moscow. 948 forty-foot containers of food.

What is the takeaway from this story? For me, God spoke to me in my dream and used something from my childhood to usher on the program to meet these huge needs. It was nothing short of a miracle, on the other hand, that the Methodist church had survived and continued to function during those awful years of suppression.

Pastor Catharine challenged us, just last week, to live in the ministry that is before us now. We can do all things when we center ourselves on the story God is giving us, Pender UMC, to do ministry now, where we are. I thought for a long time that I would be the most unlikely person in the world to have been in leadership for such enormous ministry. But, when you factor in the fact that I did say yes to God and then God did the rest, anyone could have been called to do this ministry.

I have been personal in my stories today. What can we accomplish for the Kingdom, if we say yes to living out the story that is Pender United Methodist Church? It is not a solo mission but calls for a full team effort. What will be your answer? When the story of your life is told, what will that be? Only you and God can answer that question. But you ask, ‘how?’ do you discern what God really has planned for you? The best answer I can offer is to pray, meditate on Scripture and learn what your Spiritual Gifts are. We have that process here at Pender. If you truly seek to know, the answer will come. Then follow what God has given you in response to your discernment. Not rocket science, but still hard to surrender our selfish ways and let God have our lives so we can live in the story God has planned for us.

Blessings and Peace be with you always and don’t forget to ASK, SEEK, and KNOCK that we may, together with God’s help, live out the ‘plans God has for our future’.

AMEN!