
The Danger of a Single Story

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 9, Year B

Sometimes, often, the biggest barrier to knowing a person is what you think you already know about them. The biggest barrier to seeing, really seeing, can be what you have seen before.

My son has a friend, a neighborhood friend we've known since they were both toddlers. He was the smily-est, giggliest, happiest, most tow-headed child I've ever seen! He's twenty-three now, a college graduate with thick, dark-brown hair. Though his hair didn't change color overnight, and though I've seen him a lot over the years, it always takes me a second to recognize him, because no matter what, I still expect to see that snow-white hair. You'd think I'd have learned over these years, but I haven't. The dark-haired man he is today continues to take me by surprise.

Likewise, I'm repeatedly surprised by the grown-ups my own children have become. Of course I'm delighted! And I'm so proud of them! And there is a part of me that is dismayed, too—that wonders what these changes, what their independence and maturity—mean for me and my relationship with them. Plus, when on earth did I become old enough to have adult children?

If you've been paying attention to our Gospels these last few Sundays, which of course you have been, then you know that Jesus, too, has grown up! He has become a great teacher and miracle worker: healing people, exorcising demons, stilling storms, and even raising a girl from the dead. People are coming out of the woodwork just to touch his clothes and hear him speak. Jesus has arrived!

Then he goes home. He goes to his hometown, to the place and people who grew him up, and who knew him way back when—when he was learning how to tie his sandals, hiding behind his mother's skirts, trying to grow his first beard. They don't know what to make of this man in front of them now, speaking and acting with such authority. "Where did this man come from? Where did he get all this? Isn't this Jesus, the carpenter's kid, who grew up just down the road?"

You'd think they'd want to celebrate him. Put up a sign at the edge of town that says "Nazareth: home of Jesus Christ Superstar." Line up to touch his clothes and take selfies with him. But no! They take offense at him. They don't believe him. They don't believe in him—in who he has become. They've frozen him in time, nestled him safely in a single story: the story they remember and choose to tell. They know him, yes! They know part of his story, but only part. The part where he belonged to them.

And I get it! I do! At a time when they may be feeling unmoored, unsettled, they want to get everything and everyone back into place. They want to cut the unknown down to size. With this new thing happening before their eyes, they cling to what's familiar. They do what so many of us do when we're afraid or challenged, or when someone changes and risks upsetting the relational ecosystem: they take offense. They try to squeeze him and this new thing back into the story they know and control.

And that diminishes his power among them. "He could do no deed of power there." (Well, except curing some people, but the evangelist doesn't seem to count that!)

Stories can be used to diminish, disempower, constrain; or they can be used to empower, humanize, liberate. So says Nigerian storyteller Chimamanda Adichie in a 2009 Ted Talk titled "The Danger of a Single Story." "It is impossible," she says, "to talk about the single story without talking about power.... Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person."

Adichie recalls being raised on a mono diet of British stories, the only literature available to her as a child in Nigeria. When she started to write her own stories, they featured snow and ginger beer and pleasant talk about changes in weather, things she had never experienced herself. Then there was the single story she held about Fidé, the boy who worked as a servant for her middle-class family: a story that summed up his life and family as “poor.” Period. And missed the many riches they did have.

Later, when she came to the United States for college, she found that she was a character in a single Western story about the diverse continent of Africa, “a story of catastrophe.” Her American roommate, having learned this story, expected that Adichie would not know how to speak English or use a stove. “She asked,” Adichie recalls, “if she could listen to what she called my ‘tribal music,’ and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey.”

One of the most painful things we can do to someone is to insist on a single story: the story we like to tell, which is often a story that gives us power over, and separates us from, others. We diminish others when we believe that we already know everything there is to know about them. When we don’t listen because we already know what someone is going to say. When we can’t see the living person in front of us, not really, because of the story or image we hold of them.

When we close ourselves off to the possibility of change—of their becoming, and ours—, it diminishes all of us. It doesn’t just diminish the other. It diminishes us all. That’s what we see in our Gospel, where so many townspeople miss the Savior in their midst and the healing he brings because they think they already know who Jesus is.

I suspect we all know how painful it can be to be or feel trapped by a single story. How invisible it can make you feel to be seen through the narrow lens of a single role or stereotype or memory. To be defined by the worst or most praiseworthy thing you have done. Both can be defining and limiting. But for these stories to have that kind of power over us, we have to believe them, too.

We all have many stories. The people you know most intimately, and the people who you know only from a distance, through stereotypes: they have many stories. More than you could ever know. Which means that no matter how well you think you know someone, there is always more to discover.

That can be scary! The more we care about someone or something—the more intimately our lives are bound to another’s—the more vulnerable we feel, and the more we want certainty and control.

Maybe that’s why people cling to definitive, single stories about ultimate matters, too—about God and faith; and argue about which one is right; and split when they can’t agree. Maybe that’s why sometimes, we bend over backwards to make the Bible do and say what we think it should, or to make the Jesus we encounter there or in our lives behave as we expect.

It’s strange, though. I’m completely comfortable with mystery in some areas. I like to go out into nature, and gape in awe at the wonders of creation. I love to behold the night sky and wide-open desert and deep ocean, and marvel at their vastness and the mystery of their origins and the diversity of life in them—and at the mystery of my own place: who I am and how on earth it is that I matter, in this magnificent universe. Maybe you do, too.

What if we approached people with this same awe and wonder? With curiosity about their many many stories, old and new and works in progress? What if we approached God this way, too? And looked and listened every day for the stories we don’t yet know about God, others, ourselves—and got curious about how God weaves them together in a living story, the living Word?

**The title of this sermon references a Ted Talk given by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in October 2009:
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story*