

Let me tell you a story



Gemma Gillard, founder of Truth Be Told: Storytelling for Life, a Christian storytelling charity, unpacks the power of storytelling and why it's still the most powerful way to communicate the good news.

Suppose you had 100 coins, two sons, or a fig tree?

Suppose you were preparing a great banquet, or had a friend and went to him at midnight?

Suppose there was a much greater story unfolding all around you, one that had the potential to surprise you, challenge you and even change you?

Well, you might just be onto something. Storytelling is a powerful and persuasive method of communication. It transcends intellect and ability. It is for everyone.

Research shows that 65% of our talking time today will be telling tales. We are constantly recalling experiences, events and memories. We think in narratives all day long, and when we externalise these narratives (aka tell a story), the listener gets much more than just information.

Stories activate more than just the language processing parts of our brain. For example, if we hear a story about a delicious meal, our sensory cortex lights up. If it's about running a marathon, our motor cortex activates. This shared pattern of brain activity between speaker and listener is called neural coupling. In other words, God has literally wired us to be enthralled by and engaged in storytelling.

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When communicating the message that all are loved by God, we can worry about making clever arguments, but research shows that if we just tell a story – no compelling animation, visual aids, or impressive stunts, just a simple story – then our audience has a 70% chance of remembering it.

How incredible! Even with increasingly sophisticated communication methods, the simple art of storytelling is more eye-catching, ear-pricking and heart-turning than ever.

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I've seen this first hand over many years of telling modern-day, gospel-centred parables and watching how they awaken the curiosity of people who'd either never opened the Bible or had discounted it. We all know from childhood that it's important to tell a story well, but this needn't be seen as an insurmountable challenge. The tricks are in fact relatively simple.

Just take Yvonne here (storyteller pictured). She's telling the Truth Be Told version of The Parable of the King's Banquet to an intergenerational group, so she needs to unite her audience and hold their attention. She starts with an invitation to enter the story, asking her audience, 'If you were to have a special guest around your dinner table tonight, who would it be?'

Then she'll tell a modern-day version of the parable using actions, varying her voice and expressions, using her space and involving as many people as possible. The Latin for 'parable' (*parabola*) means 'comparison', and the Greek (*parabole*) means 'a throw alongside',



which are helpful ways to think about how we might be able to use our own context to emphasise the messages at the centre of these special stories. The Parable of the King's Banquet ends with the simple, memorable truth: 'We are welcome'.

To extend the storytelling, she'll lead the group in something physical, such as actions to a song, or a game that everyone can play or enjoy watching. For this story, it's fun to play with a parachute and some kitchen sponges, linking to the washing up required after a feast. They'll finish up with a rendition of 'Jesus loves me this I know' and then share a meal. Story is at the centre, but every bit of the experience is about storytelling and echoing a simple, gospel truth. These methods of storytelling are proven to create a sense of belonging across generations, cultures and abilities; they create space for listening to one another, learning about and experiencing God's love.

Ultimately, at Truth Be Told, we believe that Jesus doesn't just teach us through stories; he teaches us to tell stories. As Bob Hartman puts it, 'Everything points to the story. And the story points to Jesus.' Just as Jesus often left his listeners with lingering questions, we want to do the same to encourage curiosity and faith exploration.

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What stories do you have to share? Who might need to hear those stories? And what's stopping you from telling them today?

Truth Be Told: Storytelling For Life is a Christian storytelling charity. Gemma also works for the CofE's FLOURISH pilot and Out of the Ark Music, www.gemmagillard.co.uk.

Roots offers you lots of ways to engage with storytelling, from dramas, Children's Bible story retellings, Share the Word activities and more.

 Listen to Melanie and Gemma discuss parables and storytelling on the Roots podcast: rootsforchurches.podbean.com