

Our Story Faith Study

Session 4: The Danger of a Single Story



Opening Questions *(select 1 or 2 questions)*

- What do you enjoy about this season of the year?
- Share with the group something that they might not know about you (for example, your first job, something on your “bucket list”, a hobby ...)?
- What is something you've changed your mind about or you see differently than you did at another time?

Opening Reading *(This responsive reading has been used in worship. Select someone to read the “one” section, while everyone reads “all”).*

One: From the beginning, God called Abraham and Sarah and blessed them so that they could be a blessing to all nations.

All: Their story mattered to God and to their world.

One: Through Jesus, God called a community of people and loved them so that they could love their neighbors as they loved themselves.

All: Our story matters to God and to our neighbors.

One: Our stories can speak bane or blessing to one another. For the times when they speak of greed not generosity; division rather than unity; fear instead of love, we ask for God's forgiving love to make our broken lives whole again. (Pause for a moment of silence)

One: God's Spirit writes a new story on your life each day through forgiving love. Be awakened to God's love each day. Be a blessing to the world. Live in love with your neighbor.

All: Our story matters.

What Does the Bible Say?

As Jesus eats at the home of a Pharisee named Simon, he tells a story to disabuse his host of prejudice against the woman, identified only as a “sinner.” The story Jesus tells looks into the woman's heart and uncovers her desire for forgiveness. It also helps Simon understand how he has misjudged the importance of not only the woman's actions, but his own lack of hospitality.

Luke 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar

of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak."

A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Think About...

(optional, select 1 or 2 questions)

- What do you notice in this story today? What surprises you? What do you wonder about?
- Jesus says, "Do you see this woman?" What are some of the different ways of interpreting this question or phrase? What do you think Jesus meant?
- What part does love play in this passage?
- How does this Biblical story speak into our stories, individually or as a community?

Dinner at the Pharisee's House Illumination

*(optional - use as a group or
individually)*

Explore the text from a different perspective by using an illumination (artwork) of the text from *The Saint John's Bible*.

In the *additional resources* you'll find a copy of the illumination, a guide with questions, and a YouTube link to a guided meditation (to use instead of the printed illumination).

Find the *additional resources* section at:

www.incarnationmn.org/our-story/.

Guided meditation:

<https://youtu.be/luK3iasD62U>

What Do Others Say?

My first summer as a camp counselor, I was walking out of the Retreat Center at the camp I was working at and a black man came up to door asking if he was in the right place. He had a neck tattoo and was wearing baggie shorts and a white tank top with a few stains on it. I looked at him, not knowing what to say, cycling through my mind were all of the things that he could mean by "Am I in the right place?"

The weekend before the camp held a free family camp weekend for families of single parents, and I thought . . . well maybe he forgot something and was looking for the Lost and Found. I didn't know what to say. After few moments of quiet awkwardness he said, "I'm Nate. I'm the chaplain this week at camp. Is this where my family is sleeping?" I felt so ashamed of myself. Looking at the outside appearance of him and judging quickly that his life was in tatters, because of the color of his skin, because of the way he carried himself, because of the clothes he was wearing. I had him pegged.

That summer, Nate was the best chaplain we had. He challenged all of the counselors in our daily Bible studies to look more intently at the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. He was the most engaging speaker that our campers experienced all summer long. He taught them the story of Jesus in a way that they will never forget. Today, Nate is the teaching pastor at my parents' church in Michigan.

What happens when we only pay attention to a single story line and assume that the people we encounter follow that same pattern? Perhaps, these story lines are based on past experiences we have had that are a part of our own story. Sometimes it's related to race or assumptions around their socio-economic status. It might even be based on their age.

The Pharisee had this woman pegged. One look at her, the way she was dressed, the way she carried herself, maybe even things he had heard she had done, and she fit into a single story line " ...she is a sinner," he thought. Jesus' ability to recognize that this woman was ready to seek and receive forgiveness for her past and be embraced by God's love demonstrates Jesus' desire to look at a person's heart, rather than the outside appearance. This enables Jesus to see her beyond the "single story line" of the Pharisee and recognize that she belongs as a part of God's bigger story of redemption and reconciliation.

In the Old Testament story in 1 Samuel 16, when the prophet Samuel was preparing to anoint the next king of Israel, he met with Jesse and seven of Jesse's sons. As Samuel walked in front of each son he waited to listen to God's voice share with him who was to be the next king of Israel. Each son was not chosen and Samuel in turn said, "The LORD has not chosen this one." In verse seven we discover what God is after, as God says to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see what mortals see; they look on the

outward appearance, **but the LORD looks on the heart.**" Maybe you remember how this story ends. After these first seven sons stand before Samuel, he asks if Jesse has any more sons, and they remember that there is still David, the youngest, the afterthought, the eighth son who wasn't even invited to meet the prophet! The danger of the single story as found in Scriptures reveals just how easy it is in the human experience for us to fall into dehumanizing others based on bias, or racism, or ageism without even realizing it.

In one of the most watched TED talks of all time, *The Danger of a Single Story*, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, "The consequence of the single story is this: it robs people of dignity." She goes on to say: "Stories matter. Many stories matter. . . Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity."¹

The woman anointing Jesus' feet with her tears was being robbed of her dignity, instead of being seen as a person who is worthy of God's love. David, as a young boy, was being robbed of his dignity, because of his age, rather than being seen as someone who is uniquely gifted to shepherd God's people. When we pause and reflect on what we are thinking and why, it might convict us of our own biases, helping us to resist the temptation to rob them of their dignity. It might give us the opportunity to confess and seek the heart of the person standing in front of us. What would it look like for you to see others as God sees them? What would it take for you to set aside the outward appearance and discover their heart? Are there biases you already know you have to work on in your own heart?

-Reflection by Pastor Joel Vander Wal

Think About (select one or more questions)

- What resonates with you from this reflection?
- When have you experienced something similar to Joel's opening story? How did the experience make you feel?
- Has a single story ever been told about you? How did you know?
- What prevents us from seeing others fully, as God sees them? How can we move beyond the single story to see each person as a beloved child of God?
- How do we perpetuate the single stories that are prevalent around us today?
- Think about how stories are created and told in the places where we work, serve, learn, or belong. Who are the storytellers? What might be missing? How are the stories passed along or shared?
- What are some ways to preserve and protect the dignity of other people, as we go about our everyday lives? How can we encourage others to do the same?
- What words or phrases (of your own or from the Bible) could you use to remind yourself to see the **heart** of people?

Connecting Faith with Daily Life

(for individual reflection & action)

- Try to watch or listen to the news on a different station or from a different news outlet to hear another point of view. We each have our own point of view and tend to watch or listen to things that support our view.
- Listen to a sermon (or watch a movie) with your friends or family. Afterwards, ask a few questions to see how others might see or interpret things differently.
 - What do you think you'll remember from this?
 - What did this story tell you about living life?
 - What did you learn about your relationship with God?
- Look at the illumination of Luke 7 in *The Saint John's Bible*. See the instructions in the box earlier in this session.
- Watch the TED talk, *The Danger of a Single Story* (28+ million views!):
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

Prayer

This session may have brought up differing viewpoints or perspectives and tough topics to consider. Pause for a few moments of silence before reading the prayer. Remember that while we may have differences, we are all children of God, dearly loved by God, and gathered together in God's presence. Hold up any discomfort or difficulties for God's grace and love.

Read this blessing together. It is a blessing you offer to one another. Select a phrase from this blessing to silently pray as you encounter other people this week. What do you notice as you experience this prayer throughout the week?

The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen

-Numbers 6:24-26 (NRSV)

¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story" TEDGlobal 2009, July 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en#t-4539. Accessed on 20 July 2021.