



I want to begin by saying Happy Mother's Day! It is a happy day, a day to celebrate and rejoice. A day to say thank you, mothers, for all you do. I am certainly grateful for my mother.

I liked the skit we just saw because it acknowledged something that I think many of you are experiencing. My wife asked me recently, "Why do the happiest days always have to be the saddest ones?" For many of you, this happy day is a sad one. Some of you lost a mother or grandmother this year. Some of you lost your wife, the mother of your children. And some of you have lost children. Some of you have broken relationships with your mother or with your children, and you are just waiting for the day to end so you can forget the guilt you feel for not calling them. For some of you this day is a harsh reminder that you don't have children, even though that is what you want more than anything else. Some of you feel the pain of a miscarriage all over again. And for some of you this is the day in which that decision you regret from years ago to end a pregnancy haunts you the most. I don't presume to fully know or fully understand all that pain or to put all that sadness in the same category. But I do know, and I hope we can recognize, there is a lot of pain in the room right now.

Romans 12:5, a passage we just went over a few weeks ago, says we should rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. And we should do both today. Let us rejoice today. Moms, we love you. You are wonderful, and we are so grateful for you. We joke in our staff meetings that it seems like every other woman that walks into church on Sunday either has a stroller or maternity clothes, and we love that! We love the life—literally—that you bring to this church. And so we rejoice with you today.

But for those of you for whom this is a sad day, we mourn with you too. We love you and we want to care for you today. There will be prayer teams up here at the end of the service who would love to listen to you and talk with you and pray with you.

We are taking a break from Romans today and we are going to look at a passage from the book of Psalms—Psalm 78. The book of Psalms, 150 of them, is a collection of songs for the nation of Israel. We are just going to look at one of them. And while you turn to Psalm 78, I'd like to tell you a story.

When I was growing up we always read books before bed, and one of the books we read a lot—that my brother and I loved—was *The Little Engine That Could*. If you don't know that story, you probably didn't grow up here, but here is how it goes.

There is a long train of toys that needs to get over the hill to little boys and girls, but its engine breaks down. The broken-down

engine asks several big, powerful engines for help but they all decline for various reasons, mostly because they are too busy or too important to tow toys.

But there was this one little blue engine that usually just pattered around the train yard. The engine was little and wasn't built to carry long trains over the hill, but in an act of desperation, the broken-down engine asked the little blue engine to carry the load over the hill to the children so they wouldn't be sad.

The little engine, unsure if it could actually make it up the hill, courageously agrees, and hooks into the train full of toys before starting its way up the hill. As it strains to pull the train up and over the hill, the little engine begins chanting "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can."

It huffs and puffs and pulls and strains, chanting to itself and finally, the little engine gets to the top of the hill and over and comes down the other side saying to itself, "I thought I could, I thought I could, I thought I could," finally greeted at the bottom with a station full of happy kids.

This story is a great story; it has great characters and suspense and drama and a happy ending. But that's not why we like it. That's not why my parents read it over and over and over again to us. We love the story of *The Little Engine That Could* for the same reason we love all the stories we love—because it teaches us something about ourselves and our world. *The Little Engine That Could* is not really a story about a train riding over a hill. It's a story about perseverance and optimism. It's a story that teaches us to believe you can do it, to not be arrogant like the other engines, but to stretch yourself to help other people. It teaches us to believe you can achieve difficult tasks with hard work.

All stories do this, or all good ones anyway, and that's why we love them. Stories have this inherent power to engage not just our minds, but our entire selves to teach us about ourselves and about our world and about our place in our world. You can tell a kid to persevere, or you can read him *The Little Engine That Could*. We all know, while the first is more efficient, the second is longer lasting. And we know because you've said, in your own head, to your own embarrassment before, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can."

Stories are powerful ways to shape what we believe and how we act, both internally and externally. And the guy who wrote our psalm today knew that. So in Psalm 78, he encourages you and me to become God's great storytellers.

The transforming power of the gospel is found not in propositional truth—that has its place—but it is in stories. Stories of God working in loving, merciful, and powerful ways to save

people. And those stories must be told. So this morning, Psalm 78 is encouraging us to become God's great storytellers. So how do we become God's great storytellers? The psalmist gives us two steps to becoming God's great storytellers.

Listen Carefully to God's Stories

The first thing you must do to become God's great storyteller is to listen carefully to God's stories. This makes sense. You've got to know the stories if you are going to tell them. And this is how the Psalmist starts off: with a call to hear. *"My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth."*

He is calling us to hear both his psalm and, as we will see, God's great stories. But before he moves on, the psalmist tells us that his stress on hearing isn't just because you have to know the stories, but also because you have to listen carefully to them. Look with me at verses 2 and 3. *"I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old—Things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us."*

There's a little bit of a paradox here, right? The psalmist says that he is going to tell us "hidden things" in verse 2, and then he says they are "things we have heard and known" in verse 3. How can both of those things be true? The key is in the words "parable" and "hidden things." The word for "hidden things" in the Hebrew can also mean "riddles," and riddles use words that are common to conceal special meaning.

For instance, I've been working my way through the *Lord of the Rings* books, and in *The Hobbit* Gollum asks Bilbo this riddle:

Riddle: This is a thing that is devoured by all things; flowers, trees, beasts, birds; bites steel, gnaws iron; grinds hard stone to meal; beats mountain down, ruins town and slays kings. What is it?

Answer: Time.

There is nothing mysterious about the language; it's common. And yet, it is not obvious unless one carefully considers it, at which point you say, "of course!"

The word "parable" is similar. Literally parable means "to cast alongside." A parable is a story where you cast one story alongside another so we can learn by comparison. The most famous parable teller in history is actually Jesus. He says things like, *"the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it"* (Matt. 13:45-46).

We learn, by comparison, that the kingdom of heaven is of great value and worth all that we have. And it is actually just before this parable that Matthew quotes Psalm 78, our psalm to explain why Jesus spoke in parables. He says, *"So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world'"* (Matt. 13:34-35).

The psalmist is getting ready to tell us a parable. A story that, by comparison, should help us to learn something about the way the world works. But here's the thing about parables—if you don't listen carefully to them, they just sound like stories about pearls and treasures and weeds and seeds. But with careful

attention, careful thought, real consideration, you find that the plain meaning is really about something more important. And, like the riddle, once you carefully consider it, it seems so obvious.

So what parable should we listen to? The psalmist is creating tension, he's working up to something. It's poetic. *"My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old—Things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation. The praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done."* It is the great stories of God, the stories of his salvation of his people, the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord that we must listen to carefully. It is the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord that serve as a parable for us to learn from. To become God's great storytellers, we must listen carefully to God's great stories.

Pass on God's Great Stories

But we don't just listen carefully so that we will know the stories, but there is a bigger picture here that the psalmist raises. Look with me at verses 4-6. *"We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children, So the next generation would know them, even children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children."*

We don't simply listen carefully to God's great stories for ourselves, but also for the generations to come. That is, after all, the nature of stories—to be passed on. That is always why stories are created and recorded. Not simply to be given to one person, but to be passed on to many people and many generations. Stories are, by nature, artifacts from the past reaching into the future. As the psalmist declares, they are written for our children and our children's children.

It's important to note here that when the psalmist talks about "our children" he is talking about the community of faith. This isn't just your child that you are supposed to pass your faith to. And if you don't have children, or your children are grown, you're not off the hook here. This can be hard for us to understand, especially white folks like me, because we live in an individualistic society largely where the individual the primary unit. But Israel's society wasn't like that. It was a communal society, where the family, including the extended family, was the primary unit, and the community as a whole was more important than the individual. So when the psalmist talks about "your children" he is talking about the **community's** children.

I grew up in a Presbyterian church in San Mateo, and this is one of the things that church completely understood. I remember coming home from college and every time after the service I would have all these old people come up to me and ask me about how things were going and giving me advice. They would linger, and I was just trying to get to lunch. And I would think to

myself how annoying it was to have all of these old people who I recognized but didn't really know coming up to me all the time.

Then one time, on one of these breaks, I went to church and they were baptizing a baby that day. Now, I've seen lots of babies baptized in my years at that church, but something stuck out to me that day. They brought the baby and the parents up, and the pastor held the baby, and looked at the parents and asked them, "do you commit, to the best of your ability, to raise this child to know and love the Lord?" And the parents said "we will." Then the pastor turned and faced us in the congregation and said, "do you commit, to the best of your ability, to raise this child to know and love the Lord?" And we all said "We will." If you've been around this church for a while you know that we do something similar here.

Then it hit me. All those old people that I had found annoying were in the congregation 22 years before when I was up on stage. And that pastor held me and asked them if they would commit to raise me, to the best of their ability, to know and love the Lord. And they said "we will." Their interest in me had nothing to do with me being inherently interesting, but everything to do with a promise they had made to God and my parents to invest in my spiritual well-being. And I know and love Jesus because they colluded as a community to do that.

That is exactly what we are supposed to do. We are supposed to tell **our** children God's great stories. We are supposed to invest in **our** children's spiritual well being. But why? Why should we tell our children so they can tell their children God's great stories? The psalmist tells us in the next verses. *"Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands. They would not be like their ancestors—a stubborn and rebellious generation whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to him."* The reason we should pass on God's great stories is relatively obvious: so that the next generation would put their trust in God, put their confidence in God. Then the psalmist gives us two central pieces to the next generation putting their trust in God.

First, the next generation must not forget his deeds. It is in God's deeds that his character is revealed, and by celebrating God's past acts, we can hope in the new acts of God in the future.

I read an interesting article this week that talked about these great churches who used to be thriving just a generation ago, and now none of them exist. The author argues that it really only takes one generation for a church to die, for this reason exactly. Churches forget. God's people forget. We forget what God has done in the past and so we make our faith more about following rules than about trusting him.

So how does this happen? This happens because most of us try to use our predictive powers to figure out where to put our trust. We look into the future to decide what to trust for the future. That's why presidential candidates spend so much time telling us what they will do once they get elected: to try to help us predict. And that seems like a logical plan, except that your ability to predict the future is terrible. It's really really bad.

You actually can't know anything objectively about the future. That's what makes sports fun. Have you ever DVR'd a sports game to watch later and then had someone spoil it for you? Then, all of a sudden, you don't really want to watch anymore. It's because the whole premise is based on the idea that you don't know anything about the future. Honestly, I do not objectively know if I will wake up tomorrow morning. I can't actually know anything about the future. And that's fine. It's part of human nature to not know the future, but the issue comes when you try to decide who to trust based on your predictions about the future.

When we do that we are tempted to run quickly from God because it looks like he is not there, he does not care, or he simply isn't real. We say things like, I can't give that money to the poor because it looks like the stock market might crash and then I won't have any money left. And we disobey God's express commands because we don't actually trust him. We trust our bank account. But if you look back instead of forward, you will remember the ways God worked in the past. And when you see how he worked in the past, you realize you can trust him to work in the future. Remembering the deeds of God is central to trusting him, and so we must pass on the stories of these great deeds to the next generation. This is where their faith will come from.

The second central piece to the next generation trusting the Lord is that they keep his commands. Verse 7 says, *"Then they would put their trust in God; and would not forget his deeds; but would keep his commands."*

The second part to putting one's trust in God is keeping his commands. This is actually the second time the psalmist talks about God's commands. In verse 5 he says, *"He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children."*

Why this shift? We were talking about story, now all of a sudden we are talking about commandments. Didn't we say that stories are more powerful than commandments? It is because God's commandments come from God's great stories. It is God's stories which create his commandments. God's commandments come out of how God acts. The basis of God's commands for human living and flourishing are the stories of his salvation. And to make an even larger point, morality is always based in story. Let me give you an example.

Let me take a harmless, non-controversial example: America's role in the Syrian refugee crisis. The idea that people from one nation should not cross the border into another nation is not an objectively moral or immoral proposition. For instance, even in our own country, no one seems to be really worried about Canadians crossing the border.

So why is there so much moral outrage over Syrian refugees being allowed into the US? And so much moral outrage on the other side over Syrian refugees not being allowed in the US? It's story. The two sides are telling different stories. And their ideas of morality are coming from those stories. The "keep them out" story goes something like this: most of these people are perfectly fine, but if we let these refugees in, some ISIS fighters will also

come in, and they will attack us and hurt our people, and so we must keep the borders closed or let in very few. This is why the Paris attacks created such a powerful anti-immigrant response. It was a real story that created a moral imperative: we must protect Americans from harm.

The other side disagrees, not because it denies that ISIS fighters could sneak their way in, but because it is telling a different story. This side tells a story of Syrian men, women, and children who are homeless because they've been forced to flee their homes and risk impossible odds for a hope that maybe they won't die. This is why the picture of the boy who washed up on the beach in Greece was so powerful. Because it was a real story, which created a moral imperative: we must save children from dying, no matter where they are from. Incidentally, the Bible actually tells a story about foreigners and refugees also, but it takes it a step further and actually says that all of God's people are foreigners and refugees, so we ought to treat other foreigners and refugees with compassion. The Bible actually puts us in the story!

Morality is always based on story. And so following God's commands is an embodiment of trusting him. It is a declaration that you recognize that his acts of salvation prove that he loves you and thus his commands are extensions of that love. That following them is actually the best thing, both for you and for the rest of the world. So we tell the next generation about God's great stories so that they might trust him too because they won't forget his deeds, but will follow his commands, unlike, the psalmist says, their ancestors.

If you've ever read the Old Testament of the Bible, you know that God's people are serially unfaithful to him. Over and over again God saves them, and then they rebel against him, and then God saves them, and then they rebel against him, and then God saves them, and then they rebel against him. Actually, this psalm goes on for 72 verses illustrating that story exactly. If you are a Christian, you have to realize that you have a heritage of rebellion, and that is why we have to be so diligent in passing God's stories on to the next generation—your spiritual ancestors didn't.

Let's go back to *The Little Engine That Could*. I love that story, and it teaches our children great lessons. But the problem with that story is that we constantly fall short of that ideal. We want to be like *The Little Engine That Could*, but we aren't. And as we get older we discover that we quit more often than it does, we are more pessimistic than it is, and we are just as arrogant as the bad guy engines. So while *The Little Engine That Could* tells us something about ourselves, it leaves something out too. Which is why I think God has told his story a little differently. God's story is the greatest story ever told; it is a brilliant story. Because more than any other, it reveals who we are and why we are here.

God's story goes something like this: In the beginning, God. God existed before all things, and all things came into existence by

him. He created light with a word, planets and stars simply appeared. And he created plants and animals and finally on the sixth day he created humans; in his image he created us. He created us to be like him. He put his Spirit in us and gave us dignified work to act as his representatives on earth, to care for the earth like he cares for all things. But we were not content to be like God; we wanted to **be** God and so we rebelled against him. And when we rebelled the world that God created was broken. Sin came into the world and with it all sorts of pain and suffering. You know that pain as well as I do. Not least of all, death entered the world.

But God looked on us, and while he was angry looking at the damage we had caused to his world and to his people—his image-bearers—he was characteristically merciful. He set a plan into motion to fix things, to repair brokenness inside and out. He raised up a nation to be his witnesses in the world, but instead of telling God's great story, they forgot it and rebelled against him too. Over and over again; just like you. So God was in a seemingly impossible situation. His justice demanded that he destroy humans for what we have done, but how could he destroy that which bears his image?

And so, in an unthinkable act God sent his son, his only Son Jesus, to come to earth. And Jesus lived the life you and I were supposed to live. The life we were created to live! He bore the Father's image and revealed to the world who God is. He lived exactly as we should have. The life you wish you could live but can never seem to live up to.

Then men murdered him. Jesus took on himself the sins of the world. All of the brokenness and chaos and pain you have created was nailed to that cross. And God forsook him like he should have you, and he breathed a final breath, like you should. And though he had lived the life you and I should have lived, he died the death you and I should have died. It should've been you and me. But instead it was Jesus—God Himself—taking the punishment, the justice of God paid in full. But death could not hold him and on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead, defeating death and reversing the effects of our sin.

In his resurrection we could once again have hope of life. By the power of his Holy Spirit he enables you to live the life you were always meant to live, that you were created to live. Not a life without pain, though that day will soon come. But a life bearing the image of God and telling the stories of God to generations of people in desperate need of love and hope and joy and peace.

In God's story we find out who God is—merciful and loving and slow to anger. Powerful, yet gentle. In God's story we find out who we really are—rebellious, yet God's image-bearers. Insignificant, yet worth dying for. Sinners, made into saints. Characters in the story, but now God's storytellers.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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