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BRING ON THE STORY TELLERS

A Modest Proposal to Fellow Preachers

Barry Bence

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A CLOWN

Once upon a time, in a little church not far away, a very strange thing happened one Sunday morning.

It seems that just as Rev. Blowhard had begun to preach and pound his pulpit, into that little church walked — of all people — a clown!

At first nobody noticed — their eyes were all closed anyway — just as they always were when Rev. Blowhard began one of his long sermons.

But then, a little child in the middle of the church said in a very loud voice: “Look, mommy, there’s a clown!”

And so there was!

The clown never said a word. He just walked up almost to the very front of the church and sat down right next to a very fat lady — well — *almost* right next to her. You see, he actually sat down on her lap!

The lady forgot she was in church and yelled, “Get out of here you crazy idiot!” and she hit the clown as hard as she could with her purse.

But the clown never said a word — he just pointed up in the air, and when the poor lady looked up he gave her a big kiss right on the cheek!

This *really* got the lady all flustered, and again she shrieked: “Ahhhhh! Get out of here!” and she got ready to hit the clown again, but this time the clown got the message and quickly hopped off her lap and moved across the aisle where he sat down.

Next to him was a little boy who wasn’t listening to Rev. Blowhard’s sermon either. You see, this little boy was very sad.

Just a few days ago the little boy’s grandpa had died, and right now all the little boy could think about was the good times he and his grandpa used to have every Sunday afternoon. Sometimes they would go fishing, sometimes they’d see a movie, and sometimes they’d just sit in a corner somewhere and talk and talk and talk.

But today there would be no fishing, no movie, no talking . . . no grandpa . . . and as the little boy thought about it big tears began to roll down his cheeks and

before he knew what was happening, he began to sob louder and louder.

Of course, all this noise was quite disturbing to the people who were sort of listening to Rev. Blowhard's sermon, and so they began to turn around toward the little boy and shake their heads, and some even whispered: "Why can't this brat be quiet!"

But the clown seemed to understand, and he took out a big handkerchief from his sleeve, and he began to wipe the little boy's tears, until the boy stopped crying.

But — uh-ohh — the clown was so interested in cheering up the little boy that he forgot to watch where he wrung out his towel — and a big gush of water spilled over Mrs. Snerdnagle's lap!

"You clumsy bum!" she cried, "What are you doing!" And it was very clear that if Mrs. Snerdnagle wasn't in church, she would have taken care of that silly clown then and there with her World Mission Hymn Book!

"And so, my brethren . . ." droned Rev. Blowhard, "Let us give generously to meet the great needs of the church today." And right on signal two serious looking men in black suits began passing an offering plate around the congregation. Some people put in big cheques, and others threw in their jewelry and credit cards — nothing was too good for their church!

But when the two men in black suits passed the offering plate in front of the clown, he took a big fat peanut butter sandwich out of his pocket, and with a great big smile threw it into the offering plate!

YUCK! That peanut butter sandwich got all the money sticky, and the two ushers in black suits were horrified at getting all that peanut butter on their fingers when they counted the money after church!

But shush now! It was time for the blessing! The people grew very solemn as Rev. Blowhard put on his most sober face and he raised his hands up high to ask God's blessing on the people.

Just then, the clown popped up behind Rev. Blowhard and began tickling him right there in the holy of holies!

Rev. Blowhard couldn't help himself! He began to laugh and laugh and laugh until he fair shook with laughter — but suddenly — he jumped free of the clown's fingers and with all the thunder and lightening human anger can ignite he SLAPPED THAT CLOWN on the face so hard that the poor clown fell down on the floor and didn't move.

The congregation gasped!

How dare this awful clown spoil their dignified service like this!

The ushers rushed up with anger all over their faces; they'd throw this trouble-maker out into the street where he belonged — right out of the side door and smack into the pile of trash cans in the alley!

Everyone seemed happy to get rid of this uninvited clown who acted like he owned the place — all — that is — except the little boy, for he for some reason had begun to like the clown very, very much.

And so the little boy slid unnoticed out of his seat and went out the side door too, until he found the clown all doubled over in pain and hurt.

The little boy bent down and kissed the clown on the cheek.

"There, there, mister clown," he said, "don't be sad. You can come to my house today. I have lots of peanut butter sandwiches for lunch — and afterwards the two

of us can go to the park and play — if you want to.”

The clown slowly got up from the gutter and shook off the pain.

Then he smiled at the little boy, and took him by the hand. He shook his head “yes” and off they went together.

Meanwhile, back in the church the people were all ready to go home, too, when — one after another — they began to find strange messages in their coat pockets and purses and hat bands! Where had all these come from? The messages seemed to have been left behind just for them, as if they were some sort of living fortune cookie!

One message read:

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

And another said:

Greet one another with a kiss of peace.

And still another said:

And he took the bread and lifted it up to heaven and blessed it, and gave it to the people.

Even Rev. Blowhard found a message in his robe pocket:

And you shall bless my people with joy.

And would you believe it — both ushers found the same message pinned to their shirt pocket with what looked like a little rose thorn:

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

The people scratched their heads in wonder and what all this might mean.

But meanwhile, on the way to his house, the little boy stopped and looked at the clown’s hand which he held in his own.

“How did you hurt this hand so badly?” the little boy asked.

But the clown just squeezed the little boy’s hand, and then pointed to all the churches and the factories and the homes and the stores and the government buildings — and then they walked on home together for lunch.

The End

COMMENT

Is there a human experience more boring than watching a friend show you his colour slides of last summer’s vacation? Probably only one — listening to a Sunday sermon where someone drones on about what someone else said about God. The surest sign of the end of the age is a boring sermon — leftovers are fed to the congregation because the oven fires are no longer hot enough to bake soul food!

A recent Town and Country workshop on worship in the small church led off with a terrible question. Could anyone recall the message of any sermon heard during the past week. No one could! Yet every one admitted they could describe at least five meals their wives had served them in the same period. There must be a moral in all this somewhere.

Maybe it’s time we canonize story tellers again. A good story teller calls us to mentally climb into a canoe and push out from our comfortable shore, to enter another’s story so fully that their pilgrimage becomes ours and ours is invested in

the story teller's characters. We are led to imagine, and so we celebrate our being made in God's image. We are called to ponder the meaning of things as they flow by until the commonplace teems with divine hiddenness and potential. Finally, in a skillful tossing of the hand to the horizon, the story teller challenges us to risk further travel and discovery. Go into a new world and be led by the Spirit who spins yarns as well as galaxies! Or do we do well to confine preaching to a dreary rehash of things Luther is supposed to have said?

This past year I've experimented in the power of stories. Our parish has had the courage to climb aboard my experiment as well. Briefly, we take an Old Testament text which I study in Hebrew until my wrestling with the words leaves me open to hearing what it has to say today. Then, I spin a story, a narrative tale out of my study, a story that attempts to take the conflict and the victory and the agony of this text and release it to talk to us anew and afresh. After telling the story, I then take a tape recorder into the congregation and ask them what they heard. "In one sentence tell me the message you heard this story tell you!" I ask them to think about who needed to hear this story. Over coffee in homes I try to pick up just what this story continued to say to people weeks and sometimes months after. Sometimes I play back tape recorded sermon stories to youth gatherings or to adult Bible study groups. The feedback sessions become the whole people of God doing their common ministry of the Word! And sometimes that ministry consists of telling me I flopped. But sometimes together we discover a new horizon even I never saw before.

Before describing one such sermon story, let me share a little secret. Tape recordings of the sermon reveal how well the congregation is listening: coughing spells and crying children are nonverbal, unconscious ways the congregation tells me that I'm missing them by a million miles. Wrinkled brows, deep in thought, may be saying "I've got to do a lot of thinking on this." At first, such homework was irritating to some, like a raspberry seed stuck in your teeth. Some wondered why I couldn't just tell them "what it meant" and let them peacefully leave it in the Church as they left. But others began to see that Jesus preached only in stories. Together we began to wonder — do we have to climb up steep walls to get into God's Kingdom instead of just being lowered like tea bags into sermonic hot water for twenty minutes a week?

Finally, sermon story telling became just another way we do things in this parish. Soon many of our people began joining in our sermon story sessions, from children to adults. Sometimes I would write a story and a Sunday School class would act it out. Sometimes I would recruit one or two people to help me deliver the tale of the week in an unexpected way. After a year of doing Old Testament tales I tried some New Testament stories. Here's one in which the narrative was all on tape with a kazoo music introduction. The preacher entered the Church with a bag of suckers, dressed up in a clown costume. All other characters existed only in the imagination of the hearers, all except the little boy who was played to perfection by a second grader with a flair for high art! The rest I think you can figure out. I only add that when the tape announced that the little boy began sobbing, my young friend pretended to do just that, and my own one year old son reached across the seat and patted him on the shoulder. I think that speaks for itself.