

The Good Samaritan

Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz

The Beatitudes

Jacob at the Jabbok

Mark 16

**Story Matters:
Claiming our Biblical Identity
for the Sake of the World**

Lydia and Paul

Jonah

John 3:16

Psalms 23

Romans 5

Preface

A proposal from folks working with the Faith Practices Initiative, the Book of Faith Initiative, and Mission Development of the ELCA

Goal:

To help congregations discover and articulate, in a deep and biblically based conversation, their unique identity and mission.

The Proposal:

Congregations are invited to participate in a conversation that centers on the one biblical story that they identify for themselves as their defining story. Members of a congregation will discover and explore this story together over an extended period of time. Throughout the process of naming and exploring this story they will ask questions about their own stories as a congregation and a community. The hope is that extensive engagement with their chosen passage will help the congregation to form their identity as a missional community, to deepen their practice of faith, and to live out their specific vocation as a called and sent community of disciples.

Underlying Rationale:

Several movements are afoot throughout the ELCA. We are committed to strengthening our congregations in their capacity to be biblically rooted, evangelically committed, and missionally engaged. We are committed to encouraging the discipleship of all our members to our Lord Jesus Christ, and to building communities of witness and service. We are committed to deepening our faith practices by fulfilling our baptismal promises to:

Live among God's faithful people

Hear God's Word and share in the Lord's Supper

Proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed

Serve all people following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ

Strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

Living into these commitments is not always easy, and the paths we should take are not always clear. Among the many challenges we face is the growing unfamiliarity folks have with Scripture which makes it difficult for congregations to root themselves in their biblical identity. Such rooting is foundational. Our biblical identities are the source of our missional identity and our commitments. Through the Scriptures we hear the depth of God's call and promise. Through Scripture we are called to lives of discipleship and mission.

So what is a congregation to do to meet this challenge? Many congregations have committed to strengthening their faith practices, writing mission statements, engaging

in the Book of Faith initiative, and many other creative practices. *Story Matters* is yet another tool a congregation might use to deepen and supplement these other practices.

Initial Description:

Stories matter. Each congregation has multiple stories. Each community in which we live has multiple stories. Each individual within our communities and congregations has multiple stories. And God enters and guides all of these various stories as we are able to center them in and interpret them through our biblical story.

The proposal contained here is one way of engaging our congregations with Scripture for the sake of both discipleship and mission. What is presented here is a leader's guide for a process of engagement with three extended steps. These steps are not intended to be used mechanically, in lock step. Rather the intention is to invite congregations into an extended and meaningful conversation with the Bible, with one another, and with their surrounding community.

Three defining invitations and questions will guide this conversation:

- Discover and Name Our Biblical Story: What biblical story best captures our own stories of who we are and who God is calling us to be?
- Explore and Live into Our Biblical Story: How might our biblical story gather us together and help to form us as a community of disciples?
- Live Out of our Biblical Story: How is God calling us through our biblical story into mission in God's world?

Step One: Discover and Name Our Biblical Story

Guiding Question: What biblical story best captures our own stories of who we are and who God is calling us to be?

What is our identity?

The Goal of step one

The goal of this step is to help the gathered members of the congregation to identify and claim a story¹ from the Bible that best expresses the identity and commitments of the congregation. That is, the goal is to discover a biblical story that both tells your congregational story and informs your congregational commitments and calling.

¹ Your biblical story might be any biblical passage – a parable, a psalm, a set of verses, a book, a narrated event, or any well defined passage.

Four Challenges

Challenge One: In order to discern which biblical story best fits your congregational identity and mission, you will need to work on telling, listening to, and bringing together the various stories of the community and the congregation.

Challenge Two: In order to insure as representative a story as possible, you will want to involve and get input from as many folks and groups within the congregation as possible.

Challenge Three: Knowledge of the Bible will be very uneven within the congregation, and many folks will have difficulty identifying and claiming a biblical story. You will want to calm the fears of those who are less comfortable with Scripture and set up a fun and inclusive process that helps to open up the Bible to all.

Challenge Four: Choosing one biblical story that both reflects the identity of the congregation and challenges the congregation to fulfill its mission might be very difficult. You might wish to choose two stories that help keep the conversation lively.

Some Possible Ways to Meet these Challenges

How you meet these challenges depends entirely on the nature and make-up of your individual congregations. What follows are some suggestions.

Challenge One: In order to discern which biblical story best fits your congregational identity and mission, you will need to work on telling, listening to, and bringing together the various stories of the community and the congregation.

Often folks do not know the histories of their congregations, the stories of members, and some of the key issues of the surrounding communities. So setting up a process in which you engage one another with certain central questions such as the following can be helpful:

- Who are we, and how did we get here?
- Can we draw a timeline of crucial congregational moments?
- Which events on the timeline are essential to “telling the story” of our congregation?
- How do our individual stories fit with our congregational stories?
- What is the story of our surrounding community?
- Who from the community might we invite to come and tell us their stories? (e.g., the superintendent of schools, a farmer or business leader, someone from law enforcement, a child care worker)

How we tell our stories can be as crucial as what stories we tell. Part of the overall goal of *Story Matters* is to tell our stories in such a way that they connect to God's story. One approach is to wonder aloud how we, as individuals and as a congregation, have lived out our baptismal promises:

- What is our baptismal story?
- What marks us as living among God's faithful people?
- What events have led us to hear God's Word and to share in the Lord's Supper?
- When have we, alone or collectively, proclaimed the good news to others, served others, or striven for justice and peace?

Finally you might ask certain concluding questions that help move the conversation forward:

- What opportunities and challenges are emerging from these stories?
- What themes are emerging about who we are as a congregation?
- What keeps coming up as an important aspect of who we have been or want to become?

Challenge Two: In order to insure as representative a story as possible, you will want to involve and get input from as many folks and groups within the congregation as possible.

How you meet this challenge depends entirely on the nature, size, and inclination of your congregation. You know your own congregation best.

You might begin first with either the church council or some other designated committee. Help the group become familiar with the ideas of this proposal and settle on a strategy.

Identify different groups within your congregation and imagine who needs to be reached, how they might be reached, and where these conversations might happen. And then listen, listen, listen.

Possible Groups to Join the Conversation:

Adult forum, youth group, Sunday School, post-confirmation youth, singles or couples groups, men's or women's groups, intergenerational gatherings, coffee hour gatherings, work affinity groups (healthcare workers, educators, laborers, etc), theology on tap groups, folks gathering in homes, church retreat, church council listening posts.

For many congregations connecting with the congregation at worship is crucial since worship is where the largest portion of the congregation comes together. Perhaps take time for 'ministry moments' structured in a way that meets the needs and habits of your congregation.

Challenge Three: Knowledge of the Bible will be very uneven within the congregation, and many folks will have difficulty identifying and claiming a biblical story. You will want to calm the fears of those who are less comfortable with Scripture and set up a fun and inclusive process that helps to open up the Bible to all.

The goal of the biblical conversation is to help the congregation identify some biblical stories that carry aspects of the themes and challenges that have arisen from the stories of the congregation and community without shaming folks about what they do not know. The tone should be fun and invitational. Here are some ideas:

- Identify folks in the community who have been studying the Bible longer or more in depth than others. These folks might want to take the lead in identifying stories.
- The pastoral leaders might wish to take the lead and suggest four or more stories as likely candidates.
- Challenge family groups to pick up the conversations in their homes.
- Invite folks to submit ideas of some verses or stories or general themes that seem to fit the congregation's story.
- Consider symbols or metaphors that stand at your center and then work on stories that help you live into these.
- Consider passages already important for some reason to folks in the congregation:
 - Favorite passages folks bring to the table
 - Passages linked to the name of the congregation
 - Passages linked to church windows or art
- Perhaps you might wish to work with a pre-determined list of popular biblical stories such as one found on the Book of Faith website**
<http://www.bookoffaith.org>

Discovering your one defining biblical story together might happen in a number of different ways. As a community, you might hear someone tell a Bible story as you have never heard it before. You might find yourself with a number of passages that folks bring to the table.

Challenge Four: Choosing one biblical story that both reflects the identity of the congregation and challenges the congregation to fulfill its mission might be very difficult. You might wish to choose two stories that help keep the conversation lively.

At some point in the process, you will have narrowed down the stories to a limited number. You might want to consider the criteria for deciding which passage might best be your defining biblical story. You might invite folks to talk about these stories with one another asking the following questions:

- How is each story like or unlike our congregational story?
- Does this story identify us, challenge us, or both?

- In what ways might this story capture the imagination of the community?

At this point you have another option. Here the nature of the Bible and how it works to bring God's Word to us comes into play. Individual stories/passages within the Bible often work on us in multiple ways, both encouraging and challenging, as both gospel and law. So sticking with one multi-dimensional, defining passage is often the best option.

Still, one of the gifts of how the Bible speaks to us is that we have four Gospels, rather than one; we are given multiple epistles, numerous laws, and both prophetic demands and promises. Often the Bible speaks to us most persuasively when we hear two passages in conversation with one another. We might find one story comforting and another discomfiting. One might speak to us of who we are, our current reality while another speaks a prophetic word to us, calling us to who we want to be.

Proceeding in either way brings its own gifts and challenges. This decision will have some effect on how you would design the following steps. For the sake of simplicity, the next steps are written with the first option in mind.

Step Two: Explore and Live into Our Biblical Story

Guiding Question: How might our biblical story gather us together and help to form us as a community of disciples?

How does our story help us to hear God's call to us as individuals and as a congregation?

How does our story help us to deepen the practices of our faith?

The Goal of Step Two

The goal of this step is to take extended time, as much as a year, to gather around and live deeply into your defining story. Journey with your chosen story allowing it to seep into the community and come alive.

Once you have chosen your defining Bible passage, post it, enter into it, study and engage it as a whole congregation. There is grace to be discovered in dwelling richly with one text over time. We do not often give ourselves the opportunity to have this experience. Part of the joy of this adventure into Scripture is engaging your passage deeply, faithfully, from a variety of perspectives, and in various contexts. Put your story at the center of your ongoing conversations. Be of good courage. Be playful and unleash your collective biblical imaginations. As a bonus you will discover new ways to engage other biblical texts in the future.

Some Possible Ideas About How to Study and Engage Your Biblical Story

- Have folks design their own Bible study using a variety of devotional, historical, literary, and theological questions (see the Book of Faith website for an extended description of each of these ways of asking questions**). These four methods can provide the structure for your extended congregational discussion.
- One way you can ask devotional questions is to return to the question of faith practices. Consider how your story interacts with each of the faith practices of living among God's faithful people, hearing God's Word and sharing in the Lord's Supper, proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, serving all people following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, and striving for justice and peace in all the earth.
- One way you can ask historical questions is to set up a contest in which folks find out as much as they can about when and where their story was written, who wrote it, and why it might have been written.
- One way you can ask literary questions is to ask a local English teacher to lead you in discovering not just what the story says but also how it says it.
- Another approach might be to learn from Biblical Story Tellers how to memorize and/or act out the story. You might have different groups in the congregation do skits involving the story. You might ask how you would tell this story to a friend, to a child, to a person from a different culture than your own.
- One way you can ask theological questions is to have the pastoral leaders bring in issues of law and gospel, justification, vocation, and other central Lutheran ideas as they relate to your story.
- Collect music (hymns and popular songs), film, and art that express your story.
- Have folks from different cultures give their take on the story.
- Design intergenerational events. Have older generations read the story to younger generations using children's bibles.
- Have a Youth Retreat about the story and let the youth lead the congregation with their own set of questions.
- Sponsor small group meetings in homes, churches, or other settings.
- Look at the story in work affinity groups such as those who work in education, health, food production or preparation, etc. Ask how the story is relevant to their vocations.
- Write your own congregational liturgy using your biblical story.
- Engage the full variety of gifts present in your midst.

A congregation should consider stretching the involvement with their biblical story longer than they might initially think – 9 months to a year would not be too long. Leave room for the Spirit and let the story claim you and form you into a community shaped by the Word.

Step Three: Live Out of Our Biblical Story

Guiding Question: How is God calling us through our biblical story into mission in God's world?

Who is our neighbor? What is God calling us to do?

The Goal of Step Three

The goal of this step is to follow the call of your biblical story, to let your story inform how you listen and speak to as well as act with and for your community both near and far.

Your encounter with your story culminates in hearing the missional call of God issued through your passage. Invite folks to explore the implications and consider some steps that might help you answer this call as a congregation. Then set up a process to take those steps.

Challenges and Possibilities

As with step one, certain challenges come to the fore in this step:

- One strong temptation in any engagement with the Bible is to allow the encounter to remain an internal congregational exercise in intellectual or spiritual enrichment (not bad things) without consideration of how the encounter impacts one's relationship with God's wider world. This step is intended to help the congregation discover its vocation outside the walls of the congregation and then act on that vocation.
- Another challenge is to put the call to speak and act in the proper context. When we act as instruments of God's mission, we inevitably discover God's presence and action precedes us.
- We are challenged to remember the importance of the balance of listening and speaking, giving and receiving. You might return to some of the first steps of listening to the community. Then ask such questions as, "How does our story help us to hear other people's stories?" "How do the stories of the neighborhood sound when heard along side of our biblical story?" "In seeking our own vocation do we learn about the gifts and assets already present in the community?"
- Finally we might be tempted into thinking the whole process here described as three steps is really that lock/step. Avoiding thinking this is an exercise in "three steps to becoming a missional congregation" on the one hand while still pushing the missional significance of our scriptural engagement is an art, not a science. The practical question is how you can develop a creative plan that will let the congregation's biblical challenge bear real fruit.

The final goal is about community relationship, biblical imagination, and the free reign of God in our lives.

Resources

This resource list is very preliminary. The hope is that folks who engage in this process will add to the list.** Additionally we hope to have a video of test congregations which will be the primary resource.

Helpful ELCA websites:

<http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Discipleship/Christian-Education/Discipleship.aspx>

<http://www.bookoffaith.org/>

Other Helpful Material:

Gilbert Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations*. Alban Institute, 2003. Under Resources, see *D. Finding Our Biblical Story*

Harold O. Jacobson, DEM for NWPA synod, *Front Porchin': Making Disciples and Forming Faith in Exile*. Free download at:

www.wrestlingwithjakob.com/.../Frontporchin-ap0s%20Workbook

**We need to have these resources available at the Book of Faith website.