



Let's do something just a little different today. I promise it won't hurt, and it will be fun. In just a moment I'm going to ask you to turn to someone seated near you and share just two pieces of information with them. Tell them the very first phone number you remember having, and where that phone number was. So, for instance, my phone number growing up was ME5-0235. Can some of you remember when phone number included letters? And that phone number was for the house I grew up in, located just outside of Philadelphia. Got it? Turn to someone now and tell them the first phone number you can remember having, and where that phone number was. Ready, set go!

Wow! Lots of energy there. How many of remembered the phone number you had as a kid? Amazing! Since that went so well I'm going to ask you to share one more thing with that very same person. You've got about 60 seconds to trade stories about a time when you got into trouble as a kid. Don't pretend like you don't have a story to tell! For instance, I remember the day the police showed up at our door on a winter afternoon because someone in our house had been out throwing snowballs at cars. And it didn't help that the best place to throw snowballs at cars was the corner where our church was! Got a story? Go ahead and swap stories with someone.

Wow. Even more energy! Apparently some of you were quite naughty as kids. Now let me ask you – which told you more about the person you spoke to: a couple of facts or a story? The story, of course! When it comes to revealing who we really are, stories are always more powerful than facts. Facts can be easily forgotten, but not a good story. Facts can stimulate the mind, but a good story engages the heart and the imagination. And that's been true from our earliest days as human beings. Long before the written word, communities gathered around campfires at night and

listened to the stories that defined them as a people. In fact, the stories contained in this book [holding the bible] began as stories that were told from generation to generation. And these stories continue to shape our identity as children of God. These stories tell us who we are.

And that's what today's scripture reading is all about – the power of story to shape our identity as children of God. But before we read scripture lesson, let me set it up.

For 400 years God's people, the Israelites, had been slaves in Egypt. Four hundred years! Can you imagine? Abused. Deprived. Forsaken. That was the story that defined them. But then God wrote a new chapter into their story. God sent a man named Moses to convince Pharaoh to set the people free. And while it took some considerable convincing, Pharaoh finally did set the people free. But God knew it would be easier to get the people out of slavery than it would be to get the slavery out of the people. Let me put that another way: while God changed the people's circumstances in a single night, it would take a whole lot longer to change their story – to change it from abused, deprived and forsaken to blessed, beloved and free.

And so, to help the people change their story, God commanded the people to gather their families over a meal once each year, and through that meal tell the story of how God, in great love for them, set them free from slavery. With that background let's read Exodus 13:3-8.

For thousands of years now our Jewish brothers and sisters have been living out those very words, celebrating what is called The Passover Feast. I grew up in a very Jewish area of Philadelphia and each spring, for a week, bread made without yeast, called matzah, was served with lunch. Why all the talk about no yeast? As you know, yeast is what makes bread rise, but that process takes a while. When God announced that Pharaoh would set his people free from their slavery he said that it would happen in a hurry, and the people needed to be ready. So God told them to make bread without yeast because they had no time to let their bread rise.

But that's just part of the symbolism in the Passover Feast. Participants eat bitter herbs dipped in salt water. The bitter herbs remind them of their bitter years in slavery, and the salt water reminds them of the tears that their ancestors shed. They drink wine as a symbol of joy and celebration. And most importantly, one of the children at the table asks, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" That's when the story is told, the story of how God set the people

free because God loved them. That is the story that shapes the minds and hearts of our Jewish brothers and sisters. That's the story that tells them who they are.

And we also have a meal to share and a story to tell, a story that shapes our identity and tells us who we are. A story told in bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. It's a story of how God's love revealed in Jesus has set us all free from guilt and shame. Ever wonder why we come to this table over and over again? Because we need to hear the story of God's great love for us. We need to hear it over and over again because we struggle to believe it. We too easily believe a story that says we are the accumulation of our failures, that we're not enough, not worthy of love, not really forgiven. And that story keeps us enslaved to guilt and shame. But we worship a God who loves us and has set us free in Jesus' death and resurrection. That's the story that this meal tells. So, if you're here today and you're stuck in a story that has you enslaved, I want you to come to the table today and hear again the story that shapes us, the story that defines who we are.

At a couple of our services this weekend we handed out bibles to kids. It's how we fulfill the promise we make in their baptism, a promise to place the scriptures in their hands. And we do this because we believe that this story matters. This story is worth telling our kids over and over again, because the world is going to tell them a different story. It's going to tell them that they only matter if their smile is white enough, if their athletic performance is stellar enough, if their clothes are cool enough. But that's a slave story. Look in your bible again at verse 8 in today's scripture reading. Notice what it says, "On the seventh day you must explain to your children, 'I am celebrating what the LORD did for me when I left Egypt.'" Underline that verse. That's what the Passover was all about – telling the story to the next generation, so that they knew who they were. And that's why it's so important that we don't leave this book on the shelf. We need to open it and tell the stories to our children, our grandchildren, and the children of this faith community so that they might know the story of God's love in Jesus, the story that sets them free, the story that tells them who they are in Christ. So next to verse 8 write this question, "Who am I passing the story on to?" With whom in the next generation are you sharing the story?

We, as Prince of Peace, are a part of God's story. For over 50 years we've lived a story of inspired worship, growing faith, caring community and faithful service. It's a remarkable story, and one I've been proud to be a part of for over 8 years. And God is writing a new chapter into our story, a chapter that calls us to be a Connecting Church, collaboratively providing hope and wholeness to all people

south of the river, with special emphasis on children, seniors and people in poverty. That's not a new story. It's a continuation of the story we've been living. And this new chapter is challenging us to consider how to best steward this campus. How do we invest in this campus in ways that facilitate our new vision and bless the generations to come, so that they might hear the story, and know who they are, and be set free?