

## Why Tell Stories? | BY RAEWYN HANKINS | PHOTOGRAPHS BY GERRY CHUDLEIGH

The following was adapted from Raewyn Hankins's sermon at the SONscreen Film Festival, at the Adventist Media Production Studios in Simi Valley, California, on Saturday, April 6, 2013.

In Matthew 13:10, Jesus's disciples come and ask him why he speaks to the people in parables. *The Message* paraphrase of the Bible asks, "Why do You tell stories?" That's a good question, as about one-third of Jesus's recorded teachings are parables, and Mark goes so far as to say that "without a parable he did not speak to them" (Mark 4:34 NKJV). Jesus responds with a troubling quote from Isaiah about hearing and not understanding, seeing and not perceiving, dull hearts, deaf ears, and closed eyes. What do Jesus's stories conceal? What do they reveal? How do his stories heal hearts and change lives?

You are storytellers. Each year since 2002, SONscreen has been bringing people together, Christian, young, young at heart, visual, storytellers. Jesus was a storyteller. Sometimes, though, this confused and frustrated his disciples. Sometimes it confuses us today. Come with me as we join Jesus and his disciples on a very long day. Jesus's disciple, Matthew, writes about this day, starting in Matthew, chapter 12. Jesus goes on retreat to Capernaum, possibly to his disciple Peter's house. Peter's place was on Lake Galilee, the perfect getaway from the crowds and critics. But they follow him.

That day, that really long day, starts at Peter's house, where Jesus heals a blind and mute man. The crowd is amazed, but Jesus's critics claim his

miracles are demonic and demand a sign. Which is a bit counterintuitive. The crowds, the critics, even Jesus's mother and brothers show up at this retreat, and come to the door, wanting to talk to him, perhaps to encourage him to slow down and stay out of trouble. Jesus says his disciples are his mother and brothers.

Then we have a scene change. "On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. And great multitudes were gathered together to him, so that he got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore" (Matt. 13:1–2). Jesus is so bombarded by the crowd and critics that he gets into a boat, sits down, and starts telling stories. The Bible calls them parables. The word *parable*, in Greek, means, "to place beside." A parable is an everyday story "placed beside" a spiritual truth.

Jesus looks at the scene in front of him and starts telling parables. It's autumn, and farmers are scattering their seeds. Jesus sees and tells the story of a sower. Then, still sitting in the boat, he tells more stories, starting them with "The kingdom of heaven is like..." The kingdom of heaven is like a man sowing good seeds and an enemy sowing weeds. It's like a mustard seed. It's like leaven in dough. It's like hidden treasure, like a pearl of great price, like a fishing net. In Mark's account of the day, from his angle, he adds two more stories: it's like a growing seed, it's like a lamp on a stand (perhaps it was getting dark by then). It's like a film festival, one story after another, but Jesus's disciples don't get it.

Mark tells us that when the crowds are gone,

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the disciples ask about the parable, particularly the Parable of the Sower. Matthew has them interrupting Jesus's storytelling session, right between two films, with an urgent question. "And the disciples came and said to him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" (Matt. 13:10). In *The Message* paraphrase, the disciples ask, "Why do you tell stories?"

It's been a long day, week, month, long couple of years, and I imagine the tone of this question is not only confused, but frustrated, and maybe even accusatory. "Jesus, why do you tell them stories? Why don't you tell them who you really are? Why don't you give them a sign? Why don't you declare the kingdom of heaven is here and rally the crowds into a militia and tell Rome a thing or two? Why don't you give them answers?"

Has this question ever reverberated in your heart? "Jesus, why do you tell stories about what the kingdom of heaven is supposed to be like, stories of other people being healed, stories, when what I need right now are some answers?"

One of those moments came when I was a sophomore at La Sierra University in Riverside, California. I'd come from my home in Berrien Springs, Michigan, to take Religious Studies, Pre-Seminary, believing that Jesus was calling me to be a pastor. In my ethics class, I was assigned to write a paper on women's ordination, i.e., if it is appropriate for the church to officially recognize and authorize women to serve as pastors. The paper required reading both sides of the debate. On the anti-women's ordination side, I read an article from a magazine called *Adventists Affirm*, which turned out to be anything but affirming, at least to me. Having grown up as a fifth-generation Seventh-day Adventist Christian, with great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents who helped start the work of the church in South Africa, for the first time I felt shut out. I felt like the church I loved and believed in wasn't big enough for me to belong to. Me, a woman who loves Jesus, loves my church, and felt God was calling me to serve in full-time pastoral ministry. I asked, "Jesus, why

don't you tell them how it's supposed to be? Why are you telling them stories?"

Jesus loved telling stories. It's estimated that at least one-third of Jesus's recorded teaching are parables.<sup>1</sup> When you add other types of stories, narrative makes up as much as 91 percent of Jesus's preaching. This was frustrating to those who came to Jesus with questions and wanted answers. Here are a few shots of these Q&A moments that didn't quite make the cut, at least not as questions and answers. In Luke 12, someone from the crowd demands an answer from Jesus: "Lord, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me" (Luke 12:13). Jesus doesn't ask for the details to make a decision or a declaration. Instead, he tells a story about a rich man who builds bigger and better barns, and then dies. And that's the end of Jesus's story.

When Jesus's disciples ask him to teach them how to pray, he doesn't offer a formula and training; he prays and then tells a story of a man receiving a guest at midnight. The man goes over to his friend's house, knocks on the door, and finally gets some bread, only because his friend is afraid that if he keeps knocking he'll wake up the whole neighborhood. In Matthew 18, Peter comes to Jesus with a question: How many times do I forgive my brother? Jesus gives a ridiculous answer, seventy times seven. Peter thinks, "OK, this is sin number 261, that means you have, ah, exactly 229 left, but who's counting, right?" Then Jesus tells a story about two debtors and their relationship to the king and to each other.

Possibly one of the best-known stories Jesus told, the parable of the Good Samaritan, he tells in response to a question from one of his critics, a lawyer who was testing him. The lawyer asks, "Jesus, the Bible says I should love my neighbor as I love myself, but who exactly is my neighbor?" Instead of giving an answer, Jesus tells a story about a man who wouldn't have been included in the Jewish lawyer's list of "neighbors": a Samaritan, an ethnic and religious rival of the Jews, who helped his Jewish neighbor when no one else would.

## Jesus Tells Stories. Why?

In Luke's telling of this long day by the sea at the beach, Jesus simply tells the disciples, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand'" (Luke 8:10). Why would Jesus tell stories to conceal?

Just before this long day started, the whole reason Jesus retreated with his disciples to Peter's place by the Sea of Galilee is that in Matthew 12, for the first time, the religious leaders had a meeting where the number one and only agenda item was how to destroy Jesus. Jesus keeps healing people, but insists that they not tell anyone. The kingdom of heaven was threatening to the religious and political powers of the day, and in order to continue his mission, Jesus had to go underground.

In Matthew 21, his critics, still working on accomplishing their destroy-Jesus agenda, come to him with a question, "Who gave you the right to do this?" Jesus tells two stories. The first one is about two sons, one who says he's going to do what the father wants and doesn't, and the other who says he won't and does. The second story is about a vineyard, an absentee landowner, and the workers, who end up beating up the landowner's son to death. This time, Jesus's critics, the religious leaders, figured out he was talking about them, but couldn't get their hands on him because the crowds hadn't figured out he was talking about them.

Jesus tells the disciples that he tells stories to conceal the truth. Then, he explains the story of the sower. In that story, the seed sown is the word of God. The word of God would be concealed or sown in several different types of soil—along the wayside, where it gets eaten by birds; stony ground, where it grows, but withers in the sun without roots; thorny ground, where it grows, but gets choked out by weeds; and good ground, where it grows and produces a crop, thirty times, sixty times, one hundred times more. Jesus told stories to conceal truth, to bury the word of God deep in the soil of people's

Hankins presenting her sermon on "Why Tell Stories?" at the SONscreen Film Festival.



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hearts. But for a seed, burial is never meant to be the end of the story.

A year and a half ago, my cousin Chelle bought some tomatoes at the farmers' market. The farmer wanted to sell her a tomato plant as well. Chelle explained that she wasn't a good gardener, but the farmer insisted that this plant was indestructible. So, she decided to give it a shot. She put the plant in a pot on our step where it could be watered by the sprinkler. She thought about it a couple weeks or months later, and looked at it—it was dead. She gave it a burial in the front garden and forgot about it, until half

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a year later. At Christmastime, my parents were here. They said, "You've got lovely tomatoes in your garden." We were shocked! The following year's crop was unbelievable; tomatoes everywhere you looked. We were giving tomatoes to our neighbors, trying to think of tomato recipes, and making lots of pasta sauce, frozen tomatoes, etc. Chelle buried that plant because its life was over. The Sower had different plans in store.

Jesus conceals, in order to reveal. A little further in the chapter, Matthew 13:34–35 summarizes,

*All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable he did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:*

*'I will open My mouth in parables;  
I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world.'*

Jesus told stories, not to keep secrets but to share things kept secret from the beginning of time. He tells stories to reveal truth.

Jesus's storytelling sessions, his film festivals, had some very strange audiences. One evening a couple weeks ago, I went to Pasadena for the Banff Mountain Film Festival World Tour: Caltech; it was amazing. We saw stories of trail runners, and twenty-somethings kayaking off

waterfalls; climbing up rock walls, without ropes, that had never been scaled in so little time before; mountain biking over parked trains; a team climbing up a rock face in Yosemite for several days—not too unusual, except that all three climbers were amputees. As an audience, we loved it. When they gave out prizes at the end, I could see why. Everyone there was an outdoor adventure enthusiast. We were watching the stories because we wanted to be part of them. They revealed something about who we are.

Often, Jesus's audiences didn't believe they were part of the story. In Luke 15, Jesus is at a party with "tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 15:1 NIV). Jesus's ever-present critics complain about the company Jesus is keeping. A mini three-film festival begins: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. In each, Jesus's strange audience is drawn into the story. I am the lost sheep the shepherd goes looking for. I am the coin, lost in the house, that the woman searches so desperately for. I am the son, who left home for Hollywood a long time ago, and is now eating stuff only fit for pigs, but my father, when he sees me from a distance, comes running to meet me. Most of all, I am the one who was lost and is found, the one sinner for whom heaven wants to throw a wel-

come home party. Jesus's stories conceal truth, to reveal truth.

Remember the quote we saw in Luke—"seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand"? In Matthew 13:14–15, Jesus quotes more from the prophet Isaiah, not just a couple lines:

*And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:*

*'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,*

*And seeing you will see and not perceive;*

*For the hearts of this people have grown dull.*

*Their ears are hard of hearing,*

*And their eyes they have closed,*

*Lest they should see with their eyes and*

*hear with their ears,*

*Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,*

*So that I should heal them.'*

Jesus tells stories to conceal truth, in order to reveal truth, so he can heal hearts. Stories heal my heart. When magazine articles, Internet blogs, rightwing sermons, and the self-righteous religious leaders of the day impose answers that hurt my heart and tell me that I don't belong, stories heal.

When I insist that Jesus debate his opponents and deliver conclusive answers, he tells stories. I hear the story of Deborah, a judge leading her people into battle, and Esther speaking up and saving her people from disaster, and Mary, encouraged to sit at Jesus's feet as a disciple instead of getting stuck in the kitchen, and the Samaritan woman at the well, who was sent off as Jesus's first evangelist, stories of Mary Magdalene, who was chosen to be the first witness of his resurrection in a culture where a woman's testimony wouldn't count in a court of law.

I hear stories of Paul working with women like Priscilla and Junia to spread the gospel and lead house churches, encouraging women to learn in the posture of disciples instead of interrupting with uneducated questions, stories of

Paul, who was working toward a dream of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female all being one in Christ Jesus.

Not only did I hear stories of God using women in biblical times, I read stories from a book that healed my heart. *Called by God* tells stories of women in the history of our particular church, the Seventh-day Adventist Christian church, who served as preachers and evangelists in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Their stories capture my attention, turn my eyes toward Jesus, and heal my heart. Through *Adventist Women + Equality = Unity in China*, I was excited to hear stories, not only from the Bible or from the nineteenth century, but from women alive today, in China, who are called by God and are part of sharing Jesus's story. I'm looking forward to seeing *The Irrevocable Call*, which reveals the struggle of ordaining women to ministry through Adventist history. The stories of these women help heal my heart. Like the sinners and prostitutes watching Jesus's film festival, I am drawn into the story, the concealed Word is revealed, and my heart is healed.

What about you, as a disciple? Have you ever had a long frustrating day, week, year, looked for answers and gotten stories instead; stories of what the kingdom of heaven is supposed to be

**Will you tell stories that conceal the Word, in order to reveal Jesus, and to heal hearts?**



**Movie producer Felicia Tonga, from La Sierra University, discusses the award-winning film, "The Irrevocable Call," which she helped produce.**



The production team behind the *Adventist Women + Equality = Unity* short documentary campaign poses for a photo after their film featuring the ordained women pastors of China was screened. From left: Rajmund Dabrowski, Bonnie Dwyer, Alexander Carpenter, and Timothy Wolfer.

like, stories of other people being healed? Have you cried out, “Jesus, why do you tell stories?” I invite you to keep watching Jesus’s stories, to keep finding them in scripture, and to keep showing up to his film festivals, because the word of God, when it is sown, cannot be concealed for long. It’s concealed to be revealed and to heal your heart. Keep listening to the stories.

What about you? Will you be a regular contributor to Jesus’s film festival? Will you tell stories that confound his critics and invite the crowds to follow him, stories that create space for those lost and left out to come home and feel their Father’s embrace? Will you tell stories that conceal the Word in people’s hearts, where some seed is stolen away, yes, other seed sprouts but dries up, yes, other seed grows but is choked out, yes, but some seed, some seed bears fruit and produces thirty times, sixty times, one hundred times more? Will you tell stories that conceal the Word, in order to reveal him, and to heal hearts? Why tell stories? Why be part of his film festival? Because there are hearts that need healing, hearts that need the Word, who is Jesus. ■

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enth-day Adventist Church in Victorville, California. She was born to a South African family, but was transplanted to Berrien Springs, Michigan, at an early age. In high school, Raewyn felt called to full-time pastoral ministry. Due to the obvious absence of female pastors, and not wanting to be seen as a rebel, nor actually go against scripture, she hesitated. When she saw Jesus’s treatment of women, Paul’s work with women, and read Galatians 3:28, she answered the call. After graduating from La Sierra University, she served as an assistant pastor in Chula Vista, earned her MDiv at the Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Seminary, and pastored at the Yucaipa SDA Church. In June 2011, she was “ordained-commissioned” by the Southeastern California Conference, and was recognized by the Pacific Union as “ordained” on September 4, 2012. Raewyn lives in Loma Linda, California, with her cousin, Rochelle Webster, who is also pastoring.

## References

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2. Josephine Benton, *Called by God* (Smithsburg, MD: Blackberry Hill Publishers, 1990).