

*Stories Yet Untold*

A Sermon on 2 Samuel 6 and Mark 6 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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Jesus helps us understand God's way of doing things. In his life and through his words, Jesus taught us the importance of listening to the stories of all of the people. Jesus helps us see the importance of listening to the stories of the women and the men, the poor and the rich, the widows and the little children, the people who follow different religious traditions, the people who are sick, the blind, the people who have withered feet and legs and hands, and those who seem to be tormented by demons. Jesus tells us to listen to the stories of the people who usually get shut out of the conversation.

We have to be intentional if we are going to listen to the stories of all of the people. We are attracted to certain kinds of stories. Sometimes we are hesitant to tell other stories. I notice this about the stories that were told, and the stories that were not told, in my family when I was young. I loved asking my parents questions about my Grandpa Carl. So my parents told me lots of stories about Grandpa Carl.

Grandpa was born in 1894 in Southwestern Wisconsin, the sixth child of immigrants from northeastern Germany. Carl was the youngest child, and was always considered the runt of the litter. He was skinny and short, not tall and strong like his brothers.

Growing up in the years before childhood vaccinations, Grandpa seemed to be especially susceptible to the viruses that got passed around the schoolhouse. Grandpa missed many weeks of school due to illness, and was almost twenty by the time he graduated from high school. Grandpa didn't have many girlfriends. He was quiet and shy.

But Grandpa loved animals. He was gentle and patient and had a special knack for working with the draft horses. After he graduated high school, he worked with his father on his farm. Day after day he worked with a team of horses as they plowed the rich, deep Wisconsin soil. After sixteen years of working for his father, saving his money, Grandpa bought the little farm, across the road from his dad's farm. It was just 80 acres, and the house wasn't big, but some people were surprised, because Grandpa was always considered the runt of the litter.

Around this time my grandpa began courting my grandmother, Louise. When grandpa was 36 and grandma was 26 years old, they got married. These were the years of the great depression, but grandpa and grandma's family prospered. They worked together every day, milking the cows, mending the fences, plowing the fields, canning the produce.

My mother, Flora, was born in 1933, the first of their four children. Grandpa bought three sheep; a ram and two ewes. Grandpa would take care of an ever-expanding flock of sheep for the next twenty years; all of the money from the flock of sheep would be used to pay for Flora's tuition to attend college or university.

Ten years after my mother was born, Grandpa's father died. By that time my Grandpa and Grandma had saved up enough money to buy the big family farm. That was a really big deal, because it was 160 acres, with big, beautiful barns and a big house, and trees lining the driveway. Some people were surprised, because Grandpa was always considered to be the runt of the litter.

All during these years grandpa had his own little food pantry ministry. When he brought his family into Belmont to attend church on Sunday, he would drop them off early so the children could attend Sunday School. Then Grandpa would drive through the town, dropping off boxes of produce for some of the widows and families that didn't have a lot of money and didn't have their own gardens.

Grandpa's farm was beautiful and successful. People turned to him for help when they needed help and couldn't get a loan from the bank. A few of the old folks were surprised, because Grandpa was always considered to be the runt of the litter.

You can guess why my sister, brother, and I were always asking to hear more stories about grandpa. But there was part of the story we didn't hear much about. From what we know about Jesus, I'm pretty if he was one of the children in our family, he would have been asking, "What about grandma? What was grandma's story?" Jesus was always concerned about listening to the stories of more of the people.

I was about fifty years old when I began to ask more questions about my grandmother. Grandma Louise was born in 1904 in Nebraska, the seventh of eleven children. Grandma's parents were immigrants from Baden-Wurttemberg, in the Southwestern corner of Germany.

Grandma's story reminds me of the stories of our Sudanese members. Our Sudanese members want their children to learn Dinka, but the children act as if English is their native language. In my grandma's family all of the children were learning English very quickly. When Grandma was a little girl, she remembered all of the adults, her parents and aunts and uncles speaking German at home. But when they went into town, if one of them was speaking in German, all of the others would say, "Speak English! Speak English!" That's because there was lots of discrimination against German immigrants. Of all of the children, Louise was chosen as the one to be taught German, so that her grandmother, who had been brought over from Germany to live with the family, would have at least one grandchild who could talk with her. So my grandmother was bilingual.

When she was about ten her parents sold their farm and packed everything, including the livestock, onto a train and moved East, to Wisconsin. The farmland in Nebraska wasn't very good and there were terrible droughts. Grandma's uncle had a farm in Wisconsin, and helped them start over again in the fertile farmland of Lafayette County.

Louise's father and mother always counted on her to help out on the farm. She was small, but she was strong. When she graduated from eighth grade her dad told her she had to stop going to school because he needed her help. He needed my grandmother's help because she worked harder than any of the other kids who were still at home.

So Grandma Louise, at the age of 13 or 14 began working full days, every day on her father's farm. Grandma was more patient and probably smarter than her dad. She knew how to fix the fences so they would be sturdy and straight. She made sure things got finished and the tools were put away.

Many mornings, soon after breakfast, Louise's dad would come into the house and say to one of the little girls, "Tell Louise to put her pants on and come out and help me in the barn." There was always some sort of emergency that demanded her attention. One day when she was 21 years old, Louise's dad came into the house and made his usual summons to "Tell Louise to put her pants on and come out and help me." And Louise said to her little sister, "Tell dad that I have put on my pants and I have my bags packed because I'm taking the bus to Madison and moving out on my own."

So Louise struck out on her own and moved to Madison. She found a job as an au pair, taking care of someone else's children. She loved the freedom. She could make her own decisions. What she wanted most was to finish high school. She went to the high school in Madison and talked with the principal. She was 21 years old. He suggested she should go to Madison Business College and get a practical degree. After she graduated from Madison Business College, she got a job working as a secretary at the Mautz Paint Company. She was very happy, living with a group of young women in an apartment in Madison.

At some point, Louise went back to visit her family and was reintroduced to my grandfather. She was an independent woman, and had no plans to marry, but my grandpa fell in love with her and asked her to marry him. Grandpa was certainly happy when he married my grandmother, because there were some jobs on the farm my grandpa just couldn't do. Grandpa could never kill an animal. So when it was time to kill and pluck a chicken for a roast chicken dinner, my grandmother would do the slaughtering and the plucking.

Grandma was also what you might describe as a very strong communicator. She was patient and hard-working, but she wasn't shy. My grandfather was the farmer, but I'm pretty sure that my grandmother was the Chief Financial Officer. I think if she had been born in 1984 instead of 1904 Louise might have ended up as the CEO, not the secretary, at the Mautz Paint Company.

When my grandparents moved into Carl's parents' home, Carl's older sister, Annie was still living there. Annie was twenty years older than my grandmother, and apparently, not the easiest person to live with. My grandpa couldn't bring himself to ask his sister to find another place to live. But after one or two years of living with Aunt Annie, Grandma delivered the ultimatum, "Either she goes, or I go!" So Grandpa finally had the hard conversation with his sister. Annie found another place to live and my grandparents' marriage survived. My grandmother was the person who was willing to have the difficult conversation.

The strange thing is, I didn't learn most of these things about my grandmother until just a year or two ago. Her story is just as important as my grandpa's story, but it wasn't told the same way my grandpa's story was told.

Jesus teaches us to listen to the stories of the people who have been shut out of the conversation. The New Testament includes many stories about Jesus, but you may have noticed, Jesus didn't write any of the books in the Bible. I think if Jesus had been the one to tell the story of the beheading of John the Baptist, I think we might have heard some slightly different versions of the story we heard from the Gospel of Mark today. Perhaps we would have heard more of the story of Herodias or more of the story of Salome. As we find it in the Gospel accounts, Herodias' story is not really heard.

We have even more reasons for thinking we are missing an important story as we listen to the passage about David and Michal from 2 Samuel. The story of Michal and David is long and complicated and tragic. From references in 1 and 2 Samuel we can piece together more of her story than is told here, but there is no place where Michal is the central character in her own story.

Michal was Saul's youngest daughter. She fell in love with David when he was a young man, and her father was still king. But her father used Michal's love for David as part of a scheme to try to kill David, his rival.

By the time we arrive at today's story from 2 Samuel, Michal has lied to her father in order to save David's life, and has become David's first wife. Yet notice that she is described as 'Saul's daughter'. She watches David dancing from afar. Why is she watching from a distance? Why was she, the wife of King David, not included in the procession? Why does she despise David the way she does?

The common characteristic of both of these passages is that they are told from the perspectives of the men in the stories. Stories told from the perspectives of the women were not included in today's assigned readings. This is deeply disturbing. This is not what Jesus taught us to do. In his teaching and in his life, Jesus taught us to listen to the stories of all of the people, including the stories of the girls and the women.

So we remember that we don't worship the Bible; we worship the God who is the source of everything we have, including the Bible. We worship the God whose love and intelligence and faithfulness are never perfectly described or explained in scripture. We remember the stories of the Bible are sacred to us, not because they give us all the answers but because they trace the story of our journey with the God who created us out of love and for the purposes of love.