

The Gift of Gab

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

More and more, I've been seeing on TV these commercials by companies that will run tests on your DNA and tell you the different places where your ancestors came from, showing the percentage of your genetic makeup that traces back to those places.

That sounds neat! Doesn't it?

I won't get one of those tests. Besides being a bit of a cheapskate, I don't think I would learn much that I don't already know. Because I'm pretty sure that most of my ancestors (sticking to at least the last 400 years or so) came from the British Isles, especially from England, Wales, and Ireland. The pale skin, the freckles on my elbows, the red in my beard (okay, alright, it's mostly gray now; whatever) are physical markers suggesting, with a high degree of probability, that my forefathers and foremothers were English, Irish, Welsh, and Scottish.

There's a famous rock in Ireland. How a rock would become famous throughout the world, I can't really say. But this one is. It's called the Blarney Stone.

Maybe you've heard of it.

The tradition, you may know, is to kiss the Blarney Stone. It's not easy. I understand you have to kind of twist yourself into position, leaning backward until you're almost upside down, and then plant a smacker on this old rock jutting out from the cliff.

Supposedly, when you've kissed the Blarney Stone, you are then given ... the gift of gab, which (you may know) is

a talent for talk,
a great facility with the spoken and improvisational word,
the ability to hold forth on the many subjects you know something about
and even the many more you know nothing about,
the skill to talk fearlessly with anybody about anything.

I've known people who clearly have the gift of gab. I don't count myself among them. Rather, I like to be with them. I like to soak up the flow of words that comes effortlessly from them. I enjoy the stories they tell and how they tell them.

There's some self-interest here. Often when I hang with those talkative types, I am hoping that some of their gift will rub off on me. I hope to learn by observation some gabby skills, so when *I* have to hold forth or speak off the cuff in order to entertain or to impress (or both), I won't look, or sound, like a doofus (which — it may surprise you! — I *have*, many, many times).

I think it's about stories.

So much of human history and experience revolves around and is driven by stories: the telling of them, the hearing of them. All cultures have had the passing-on of cherished stories as a significant and formative characteristic. In centuries long receded from us, the stories were

told around campfires, or in the fields, or while on the move in search of fertile lands that would support the tribe. But even today we have campfires and fields and the search for fertile lands, or modern versions of them. Even today, as was done in ages past, we tell stories and we hear stories.

Now by “story,” I don’t mean only fiction. I don’t mean just something that is untrue. I mean a narrating of events. I mean an account of something, either imaginary or real, told to others to entertain or to instruct ... and actually, often a little bit of both.

Stories frame events. They shape perceptions. From the stories that are told, people see their world in particular ways, which influences the things they think, the things and people they love, ... and those they hate.

Because of stories told,

fences have been mended,
and bridges have been burned.

Because of stories told,

races have been won,
and those of the “wrong” race have been killed.

Stories have been the inspiration and the catalyst

for awesome courage and for awful war,
for justice and for injustice,
for clean living and for ethnic cleansing.

We love stories. We love hearing them, and we love those who tell them.
But what *are* the stories we tell, and are told? And how do they shape us?
When, and how, is the gift of gab truly a gift?



A few minutes ago, I read from a psalm. And it reflects a recognition of the power that telling and hearing a story can have ... especially, if the story is *true*, and its truth is about what God has done.

*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.*

It doesn’t matter that the story is familiar. It doesn’t matter that the telling is a repetition, or that the hearing is a taking-in of what has been heard before, many times before. That these are “things that we have heard and known” is counted in this psalm as a good thing, and to hear it again is not at all a cause of boredom.

*In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels
in the land of Egypt,
in the fields of Zoan.
He divided the sea and let them pass through it,
and made the waters stand like a heap.*

Like the best songs, the best movies, the best books, the story of God's mighty deeds — as it is repeated and retold and re-heard — becomes better known, better understood, better loved. It's as if this story has a power that compels repetition, and also a power that will, in the repetition, more profoundly shape heart and disposition, affect thought and action.

*In the daytime he led them with a cloud,
and all night long with a fiery light.
He split rocks open in the wilderness,
and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.
He made streams come out of the rock,
and caused waters to flow down like rivers.*

And yet those who have heard the story before, who are hearing it again, don't remain just listeners to the story. They promise to become *tellers* of the story themselves, recounting it and passing it on to the young:

*We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.*

Because they know the power of story, and especially the power of *this* story. They know this story is a gift, for it contains and conveys the gift of God's love that has acted for their benefit and salvation, and will do so again. And they know that they are given the gift to share with others, so that the others, too, may know it, and remember it, and be shaped by it, and rejoice in it.

They are given the gift of gab.



Scott Momaday is a Kiowa Indian.¹ He's written a lot about Native Americans, their history and their experiences. He's also written about his life as a young boy. And he tells of when his father took him early one morning to the cottage of an old Kiowa woman.

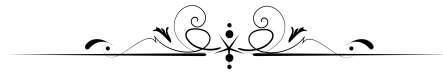
His father left him there. And all day long the old woman told him the story of the Kiowa:

the beginnings of the tribe at the headwaters of the Yellowstone river,
the movement of the Kiowa south into Nebraska and Kansas,
... the wars with other tribes...

¹The following is from a sermon I heard Fred Craddock preach years ago.

... the buffalo hunts...
... the coming of the white man...
... the terrible winters...
... moving on south...
and finally,
being conquered by the white soldiers and settlers
and moved to a reservation in southern Oklahoma.

The old woman told the stories to the young boy and she sang the songs.
At sunset his father came for him. "Son, it is time to go."
Scott Momaday said, "I left her house a Kiowa."



We are given God's gift of gab. We are blessed with hearing, each week, a recounting of God's mighty deeds:

ancient creation and daily provision,
exile and restoration,
divine patience in the face of human wickedness,
Emmanuel in a manger,
the Nazarene feeding
and blessing
and challenging,
the Son of God on a cross,
then rising,
then ascending,
then eternally interceding,
for our blessing, and living, and loving,
so we may serve this great and only God.

This gab, this godly and God-given talk, we hear each week, and join our voices to it in hymns and in prayers.

It doesn't matter that the story is familiar. It doesn't matter that the telling is a repetition, or that the hearing is a taking-in of what has been heard before, many times before. That these are "things that we have heard and known" is a good thing, and to hear it again is not a cause of boredom.

If you're bored, then something else is going on.
If you're bored, then you're not hearing the story.
If you're bored, help me understand why.

But we must not be only *receivers* of the story. We, too, must be *tellers* of the story. In this aspect as well we have been given the gift of gab.

Maybe you don't think that this is your gift. Maybe you feel that you don't have a way with words. (Guess what: Moses said the same thing about himself.)

But I'm not talking about kissing the Blarney Stone here. I'm talking about us together being all about passing on the story of God's redeeming love, all about making sure that the

children, those of “the coming generation,” hear again and again the story, so that it will for them, too, become better known, better understood, better loved; so they too will be shaped by it; so that their minds and hearts will likewise be formed and transformed by it.

As the choir sang at the beginning of the service:

*One generation will call to the next:
“Our God is good, and his hand is strong!”
All of the world sings his marvelous acts,
and our voice will join with them in the song.*

May we see, more and more, how deeply we are blessed with the gift of gab.