



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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“There is Enough”

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On June 26, 2024, from Mark 5:21-43

Recently I had dinner with a friend I hadn't seen in a while and there was a lot of catching up to do. After talking about our kids, work, all the things, our conversation zeroed in on a particular event that my friend had a very passionate perspective about and began to describe in detail with tremendous confidence. When I say my friend was confident, I mean CON-FID-ENT! They knew the date, time, location. They were not only confident about the details, but certain about its meaning as well. Yet I found my friend's confidence and certainty to be quite stunning for a very specific reason: my friend did not attend the event they were talking about. I, on the other hand, was at the event and had a very different memory of what happened. Sure, my friend had some details right, but they were missing critical pieces, 30-40% of the information, which significantly altered their understanding. I tried to share this with my friend, but they were having none of it. They doubled down on their certainty, insisting I was mistaken about what took place even though I was there, and they were not.

It was a troubling experience that made me doubt myself and wonder if I was a reliable narrator of my own experiences. But then I remembered an extraordinary TED Talk by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie called, “The Danger of a Single Story” in which she warns us of listening to a single story, representation, or interpretation. In her talk, Adichie recalls her education in Nigeria reading novels written by American and British writers, which led her to write stories in which all her characters were white with blue eyes—a reflection of what she was reading. Adichie (uh·dee·chee·ay) said, “I loved the American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So, what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are, [what humans are, what communities are.]”¹

Then Adichie tells the story about her first college roommate in the US: “I was nineteen and my American roommate was shocked by me. What struck me was this: she had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a patronizing, well-meaning, pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a story of catastrophe. In this single story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her, in any way. No possibility of feelings more complex than pity. No possibility of a connection as human equals. The story my roommate absorbed about “Africa” was, “incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and wanting to be saved.”



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“The problem with stereotypes,” Adichie states “is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”² For Adichie, “The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar. Stories have been used to dispossess and malign but stories can also be used to empower and humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people but stories can also repair that broken dignity.”³

Imagine if we only had one gospel—a single story of the life of Jesus? That would be very dangerous. In fact, one could argue that the reason Christian Nationalism is so dangerous is that it claims the radical deficiency of a single story of Jesus and America—a Jesus who blasphemously baptizes the stars and stripes and blatantly blesses the lie of American exceptionalism. Placing our confidence in a single story is dangerous. It is dangerous for us, for other people, and the world. We need to be saved from the dangerous logic of a single story and to do what we need, to learn how to celebrate an abundance of stories.

It is not just Jesus and America that we have the tendency to reduce to a single story. We can fall victim to the danger of believing a single story about the world, about Charlotte, or Myers Park Baptist. We can fall victim to the danger of believing a single story about our neighbors, our bosses, our co-workers, our pastors, our fellow church members, our friends, our family, our spouses, and our children. We can even fall victim to the danger of believing a single story about ourselves. We can reduce everything in the world and everything in our lives to a simple story.

Many have fallen victim to believing our text today in Mark 5 is a single story. New Testament scholars call this pericope, an ancient example of sandwich technique, where a writer engages in interpolation by placing one story within another story, thereby creating a new story with a larger and grander meaning. And that may be a legitimate way to read Mark 5, but it can also be seen as two completely different, yet truthful, accounts of a single day in the life of Jesus—a dramatic reenactment of a time when people viewed the exact same event from various points of view—a scripture containing multiple gospels, a text with an abundance of stories that defies the danger of a single narrative. We don’t have just one story in Mark 5, we have at least two stories and probably more. We have the story of Jairus’ daughter and the story of a woman who had been suffering with a hemorrhage, and without both these stories we deprive ourselves of the ability to grasp the full meaning of Mark 5 and fall victim to the dangers of a single story.

Imagine if we only had Jairus’ story. We would only have the story of the powerful leader of the synagogue who fell on his knees and begged Jesus to save his twelve-year-old daughter who was dying. We would only have the story of a wealthy man of power, privilege, and prestige, who came to Jesus to advocate on behalf of his child. We would only have the story of a head of the household and religious leader whose daughter’s situation was so dire he didn’t have time go through the proper channels or follow the traditional process of going to the Temple for healthcare, but used his power, privilege, and prestige to go straight to the source to try to get whatever healing he could find for his daughter.



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We would only have the story of a man whose plea for help was so powerful that Jesus and his disciples asked no questions and made no comments in response, but immediately headed down the road toward Jairus' house. If we only had the story of Jairus, we would only have the story of one man, one daughter, one family, one 12-year-period of time, and one healing, and we would fall victim to the danger of single narrative.

One of the many reasons people seek to sell us a single story is because it is one of the easiest ways to exert power. Later in her talk, Adichie (uh-dee-chee-ay) claims, "It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. How stories are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story. As the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes, 'if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story.'⁴

On Thursday evening, we witnessed an embarrassing Presidential debate, where candidates of the two major political parties sought to sell us a single story of America to gain more votes and power. It is unclear if either were successful, but regardless, we must remember there is no single story of America. There are many, and we need many more. Yet it's not just politicians who engage in this exercise. Anyone can wield the weapon of a single story for their own gain, for self-aggrandizing or self-promotion, or to defend their own righteousness, or for the sake of delegitimizing another person, or to ensure we never hear the whole story. Gossip, rumors, manipulative marketing, toxic advertising, fake news, and propaganda all work the same way. They begin with a half-truth, told with confidence and certainty, as if it is the only story. And unwitting people believe a single story all the time! Why? Because countless forces are competing for our attention and it is much easier for our overloaded brains to hold simple binary truths, like everything is black and white, right and wrong, good and bad, conservative or liberal, this way or that. We don't think we have the time for gray areas, nuance, context, depth, complexity, or multiplicity, in our lives, our church, our society, in our world, and we are all the worse off for it.

The gospel of Mark explodes our easy and simplistic clinging to a single story with the stunning interruption of another story. Suddenly a poor, sick, and destitute woman who has been suffering with a hemorrhage for twelve years slices into Jairus' story. Unlike Jairus, who approached Jesus from the front, as a man of power, privilege, and prestige, the woman came up to Jesus stealthily from behind because she was on the opposite end of the social ladder, hoping to go unnoticed as she reached out to touch his cloak, desperate for healing. We learn an incredible amount of information about her in two sentences.



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She had been bleeding for twelve years and she suffered under the care of many physicians who exploited her resources until everything she had was gone. Yet tragically despite all the expensive medical care, her condition did not improve, but grew worse instead.

She was oppressed by the medical establishment, excluded from the religious system, marginalized from family and society, and rendered invisible to the world around her. Yet even though she'd lost everything, and was still suffering, she had the hope and the audacity to take matters into her own hands and do something about her condition! Her faith literally stopped Jesus in his tracks. And when he turned, and said, "Who touched me?" The disciples thought Jesus had lost his mind because the crowd was so large, many were touching him. But Jesus could feel something different in this woman's touch, a loss of power, and when she came in fear and trembling, fell at his feet, and told him the whole truth, he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.' At that moment, the sick, poor, oppressed, and invisible woman suddenly became the center of attention, and at least for one moment—the center of the world. But we should not say she became the center of the story because when she reached out to grab Jesus' cloak, she became the author of a new story—her own story. And because her story interrupted Jairus' story—both of their stories were changed forever.

It is tempting to imagine we only need the story of the poor and marginalized woman who was suffering a hemorrhage, that we don't need Jairus' story, because her story seems to have the ability to stand alone, as a single story without any of the others around her. And if there was a story that could stand alone in the gospels, it would be the story of the poor and marginalized, but Mark disabuses us of that notion as well. Even the story of the poor, sick, exploited woman cannot stand alone, lest it run the risk of becoming a dangerous, monolithic, soliloquy. Her story needs Jairus' story, just as Jairus' story needs her story. Without both stories, Mark 5 would be incomplete—merely a half-baked gospel of nice narratives and convenient conclusions that only reinforce the character's delusions of grandeur or victimization.

If we didn't have the story of Jairus and the story of the woman suffering, we would miss the reason Mark weaved these narratives together. Two people are suffering in these two stories, and both are unnamed women with the number twelve in common. As scholar Ched Myers' notes, "every detail is there for a reason and Mark's aside that the girl was twelve years old is case in point. She has lived affluently for twelve years and is just on the edge of puberty. In contrast, the woman bleeding has suffered for twelve years, permanently infertile. The number twelve symbolizes the twelve tribes of Israel and represents the key social meaning of this doublet. Within the family of Israel these women represent the privileged and the impoverished who are both considered daughters. [Both daughters are wanted. Both stories are needed. Both are welcomed. Both are accepted in the ministry of Jesus and the kingdom of God.] Yet, because of the inequality between them, the [future of the] body politic, [of society, and Israel itself] is 'on the verge of death.'"⁵ In other words, the danger of believing a single story has put the entire community in peril.



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Some of us are familiar with the parable of the blind men and the elephant that is common in the eastern religious traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism, where “A group of blind men hear a strange animal, called an elephant, has been brought to the town, but none of them were aware of what an elephant looks like: its shape or form. Out of curiosity, they say: “We must inspect the animal and know it by the touch of our hands.” So, they seek out the elephant, and when they find it the first man whose hand lands on the trunk, says, “This animal is like a thick snake.” Another one whose hand reached its ear, claims “it seems to be like a kind of fan.” Another, whose hand rests upon its leg, says, “the elephant is a pillar like a tree-trunk.” A man who places his hand upon its side says the elephant, “is like a wall.” Another who feels its tail, describes the elephant “as a rope.” The last one feels its tusk, and states that the elephant is “hard, smooth and like a spear.”

This humorous parable illustrates the danger of trumpeting a single story about anything. Yet one of aspect of the parable few of us are ever told is that in the original versions, dating as early as 500 BCE, when the men begin to describe the animal to each other and find that their descriptions of the elephant are different, they begin to suspect the others are lying, start to bicker, and eventually their disagreements leads to physical combat. The meaning of the parable is not only that things are not always as they seem and our senses can betray us, but also that a single story has the power to destroy lives, relationships, churches, communities, cities, and countries.

As Jenny Xie writes in her poem *Invisible Relations*, “There are no simple stories, because language forces distances... a question stammers in the mind for weeks, one key aquiver on the piano. In the course of a day, your head will point in all the cardinal directions... Police sirens clean the air and the TV burns out. Without your knowing, the unseen borders of your hunger are redrawn. Far off, you are being stitched into a storyline in the smooth lobe of another’s mind.”⁶

Friends, there are no simple stories. So don’t let anyone sell you a single story of a neighbor, friend, spouse, child, boss, co-worker, colleague, a pastor, or parishioner. Don’t let anyone sell you a single story of your family, your neighborhood, your church, your city, your state, your nation. Don’t let anyone sell you a single story of history or of an event you were not present for, or even of one you saw with your own eyes. Don’t let anyone sell you a single story of America, or Charlotte, or Myers Park Baptist Church. Don’t let anyone sell you a single story on FOX, CNN, or MSNBC. Don’t let them sell you a single story on Facebook, Instagram, X, or TikTok. Don’t let anyone sell you a single story without any gray area, nuance, context, depth, complexity, or multiplicity. Do not hear it! Do not accept it! Do not believe it! Do not trust it! Do not buy it! We cannot succumb to the weapon of a single story because it is a lie that has the power to destroy our lives and our communities.



We do not have the whole story if all we have is a single story. With a single story all we have is partial truths, partial reality, and partial understanding. One-sided narratives are like a half-drawn rectangle, they need more sides. Scarcity is a lie. There is no quota on stories. We need more. In fact, we need all the stories, and we need each other's stories. If there is enough room in the Bible for four gospels and enough room in Mark 5 for Jairus and the woman suffering, then there is enough room in this world for more than one story. There is enough room in this nation for more than one story, there is enough room in this city for more than one story, there is enough room in this church for more than one story, there is enough room in our families for more than one story, there is enough room in our lives for more than one story, there is enough room in our hearts, our souls, our minds, and our bodies for more than one story. There is enough room for all our stories. As Walt Whitman said, "we contain multitudes." And we need all the stories we can get to see the full picture of humanity and find our way forward in a world that is trying to ride a single story all the way to Hell. Because "When we reject the single story and realize there is never a single story about any person, place, or event, we regain a kind of paradise."⁷

¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story" TED Talk, July 2009. ² Ibid. ³ Ibid. ⁴ Ibid. ⁵ Ched Myers, *Say to This Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship*, Orbis Books: 1996. ⁶ Jenny Xie, "Invisible Relations," in *Eye Level*, Greywolf Press: 2018. ⁷ Ibid.