

Year B 16th Sun OT

## Swapping Stories

"The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught." So today's gospel informs us. It was debriefing time. The apostles, recall, had been sent out with the gospel good news and now were reporting back their experiences—experiences of not only how they did, but what they saw, what they learned. "How did things go today?" Jesus was asking.

And so they sat there catching their breaths, bonding, and swapping stories.

In the spirit of the gospel, let me do the same. Let me share some simple stories that I came across since we last met as I was scanning the magazines and newspapers. Call this "Homily Lite" if you want—but maybe not as lite as you might first think.

For example, let's start with a throwaway item. Daughter texting to dad:

*Daddy, I'm coming home to get married soon. So get out your checkbook. I'm in love with a boy who is far away from me. I am in Australia and he lives in Scotland. We met on a dating website, became friends on Facebook, had long chats on Whatsapp, he proposed to me on Skype and now we've had two months of relationship through Viber. Dear daddy, I need your blessing, good wishes, and a really, really big wedding. LOL, Lilly.*

*Dad's reply; "My dear Lilly. Like, Wow! Really! Cool! Awesome! Whatever... I suggest you two get married on Twitter, have fun on Tango, buy your tickets on Amazon, and pay for it all through PayPal. And when you get fed up with this new husband, sell him on eBay. LOL, Daddy.*

A laugh, yes, but with a serious commentary about our times and the bumps on our spiritual journey.

More than 40 years ago, writes another woman, my husband and I lived on the first floor of his parents' home. We had four children—two budding teenagers and two younger tykes and so, needless to say, our living quarters in that two-bedroom apartment were pretty cramped. I had a younger sister who worked for a prominent investor as governess to his children. One day he came to our home to pick her up and

saw our tight living arrangements.

"This is not good," he said to me. "These children need room to play and sleep without falling over each other. Go find a house to buy." I laughed, replied the woman, and said I'd be glad to do just that after I get rich. Without skipping a beat, the man shot back, "You find the house, then we'll talk." She couldn't believe her ears.

"That weekend," she continues, "my husband and I found a three-bedroom ranch house in a suburb about 40 miles outside of Chicago. And sure enough, this wonderful man made the down payment, which was about \$3,000 and a lot of money in those days. We moved right in."

She reflects: "My gratitude to this man, now deceased, is never ending. Because of his generosity, my children were raised in a safe, clean, and fun environment with plenty of room to run around and play. I still say thank you to him, and I'm still living in the house."

*The Good Samaritan story retold*, I thought.

After her bartending job at a casino was over, Jill Bien boarded a charter bus for Chicago where she lives. About 35 miles into the 90-mile trip, Jill suddenly felt the bus drift to the right shoulder of I-94. The bus scraped the concrete barrier and veered back into traffic.

"Stop the bus!" she yelled to the driver, but his seat was empty and she saw him lying crumpled on the stair well floor. "Call 911!" Jill yelled to the passengers who were bouncing around in total panic. Jill then leapt into the driver's seat and grabbed the wheel. She finally turned the bus onto the shoulder of the road bringing it to a stop.

Emergency personnel eventually arrived and took some 34 passengers to the hospital for minor injuries. (The cause of the bus driver's collapse hasn't yet been released.)

Despite lingering anxiety and bruises, Jill took the same bus back to the casino the next day. She was a hero when she needed to be, and I thought of Jesus saving his frightened disciples on the sea by calming the water and the winds.

This story is cousin to our first story—which means it too has a serious subplot: A man says, "We had a power outage at our house this morning and my PC, laptop, TV, ROKU, DVD, iPad and my new surround sound music system were all shut down. Then I

discovered that my phone battery was flat and, to top it off, it was raining outside, so I couldn't play golf. I went into the kitchen to make some coffee and then I remembered this also needs power. So, I sat and talked with my wife for a few hours. She seems like a pretty nice person."

Maybe that brings a spiritual "ouch" or two.

Then there's this story from the well-known minister, Tony Campolo, who tells of the time he attended a funeral in an African-American church in the South and he was the only white person there. A young friend of his, Clarence, had died.

The minister was a powerful orator, speaking about life after death in such glowing terms, that Campolo said he wishes he would die so he could listen to him again. Anyway, at the end of his remarks the minister went over to the open casket and yelled at the corpse, "Clarence! Clarence!" with such authority that Campolo said he wouldn't have been surprised if Clarence had answered.

"Clarence!" continued the minister, "Clarence, you died too fast. You got away without us thanking you," and he listed all the good things Clarence had done. Then he said, "That's it, Clarence. When there's nothing more to say, there's only one thing to say, "Goodnight!"

Now picture this: the minister then grabbed the lid of the casket and slammed it shut with the sound ricocheting all around the church, as he yelled "Goodnight, Clarence, Good Night, Clarence 'cause I know, yes, I know God is going to give you a good morning!"

Then the choir sprang to its feet and sang, "On that great getting up morning we shall rise, we shall rise!" and in a flash, all the people were up on their feet dancing and hugging.

Campolo remarks, "I knew I was in the right church, the kind of church that can take a funeral and turn it into a celebration. That's what faith is all about. It's about the promise of eternal life ..."

I can't imagine any of our staid churches doing that. I can't imagine faith so vibrant, so colorful, so loud, and joyous.

Finally, this item I stumbled on: about a month before Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered, he singled out one of the many threatening phone calls he received. The caller said simply, "If you come here, we're going to kill you." He'd had life-threatening

calls many times before, "But that night," he said, "for whatever reason, it shook me to my roots. I couldn't go back to sleep. I brewed some coffee. I drank the whole pot. I began to cry at the kitchen table, and I lost all my courage. I put my head in my hands and I thought, I can't do this anymore. I don't want to die." Then he added, "At that moment, I felt this strength in me that I had never felt before. I knew what to do, what I needed to do."

And I thought: another man quietly facing Calvary.

There we are: a half-dozen minor stories that happened to come my way these past weeks, with even the funny ones being commentaries on more serious themes, stories of unheralded generosity, heroism, faith and a sense of mission no matter what the risk—small thoughtful stories beyond the usual scandal, or violence and vapid celebrities we're used to.                      Stories that should prompt us to pray:

"Lord, don't let me remain where I am. Help me to reach where you want me to be."

If we ever achieve that prayer, then some day we may wind up in someone's homily as a story to be retold as signs of God's presence.