

Stories that Shape Us

About six weeks after Ken and I were married, I distinctly remember getting up for my morning coffee, walking into our kitchen and looking down at the morning newspaper. The headline read “Princess Diana Dies in Car Crash.” I don’t know what it was about that story, about her death, about that headline, but it left me absolutely spinning. I had a tremendous amount of respect for the princess, but I wasn’t a fanatic. I thought the way she struggled silently and then openly about her burdens was healing for so many of us. The way she poured her energy into caring for others was modeling Christ-like behavior. So, when she died, I had this kick in the gut feeling. And from the position of once respecting her and wanting to serve like her, I turned into her fan, elevating her to be so much more than she was. After she died, she became more famous, more God-like than ever, and I, like millions of others around the world, became her fan.

Her story and Jesus’ ascension story reveals a similar theme - “what happens when a great leader dies?” Well, when a great leader dies, sometimes we forget what made them great and we lift up their fame and their glory over the reason why they’ve achieved that same fame and glory. I always had trouble with this “Jesus being sucked up into the heavens” story because I never bought it; but, I didn’t know how to interpret it either.

McLaren has really helped me by presenting the idea that this story asks us - “Are you a fan of Jesus or a follower of Jesus?” As the disciples gazed up at the heavens, astonished at Jesus’ greatness, they seemed to have forgotten all the lessons that he taught them. As long as they were focused on this miracle, they weren’t doing the work that Jesus called them to do. When Jesus was alive, they followed him, learning to live like he did, and truly loving God by serving others. But when Jesus - poof – vanished – they became fans instead of followers. Fans don’t transform the world, but followers do.

So, are you a fan of Jesus or are you a follower? Fan’s lift Jesus up as a beloved leader, someone who is famous, and someone everyone should know. Fan’s feel like the person they admire is totally out of reach. Separate from the rest of us, elevated on some pedestal.

Followers however, are different. Followers continue the work of their leader even when the leader is no longer there. As Christians, we can be fans or followers and quite frankly, I think this “fan vs. follower” idea is the cause of the great divide within Christianity today. Some Christians are fans of Jesus and some are followers. Probably most Christians are a little of both, but I do think that if Jesus were here today in this room, he would be more prone to say, “follow me” and not “worship me.”

McLaren makes the point in this chapter, “Stories that Shape Us,” that the way we interpret stories can shape how we live our lives. So, for example, this crazy Jesus-disappearing-act story, when interpreted, is asking the question, “Are you a fan, or a follower”? It can shape how we actually live out our faith and that includes what we do in our day to day decision making.

Some might argue that I take myself too seriously because I'm continually insisting that theology matters. The theology in scripture, the theology in our witness, the theology in our hymns, the theology in the symbols in this room - the theology of all these stories, in all these forms, they matter. Why do I think theology in church matters so much? Why can't we just come here each Sunday and hear a warm fuzzy feel-good message and sing the songs we sang as children and let it go at that?

Why? Because we are shaped by stories. Our thinking and acting are shaped by what stories we hear. If all we hear are the stories on the news, then our thinking and acting will be shaped by those stories. Sometimes, we elevate stories outside the Bible and consider them to be far more important. Sometimes we think these Bible stories happened so long ago they have no relevance for us. Sometimes we don't know the stories in the Bible, so they can't shape us. Why is theology on Sunday so important? Why can't this just be a time we gather with friends? Some of you want to know, 'Susan why can't you just tell us that Jesus loves us and leave it at that?'

Why? Because the stories that Jesus has to share with us are far more important than the story of some talking head on our favorite news channel. Which stories are we going to let shape our thinking and our acting?

I don't believe that being Christian means that we become fans of this middle eastern guy who lived 2000 years ago and simply say "Jesus is the coolest guy on earth of all time, in fact he was so cool that he was a god!" I believe being a Christian means that we become followers not fans. We do what Jesus did, we treat people the way Jesus treated people. We fight for justice the way Jesus fought for justice.

Most of us, in some way or another put our fingers in our ears and go - LALALALALALA - so that we don't have to hear what Jesus has to tell us about the Muslim widow, or about the Mexican orphan, or about the African American teenager, or about the gender fluid young woman.

Somewhere along the line, when we see the refugee as the world wants us to see the refugee and not how Jesus saw the refugee, then we have to acknowledge that other stories, not gospel stories, but other stories are shaping our thinking and our actions.

Somewhere along the line, when we see the single mom on welfare the way the world wants us to see her and not how Jesus sees the Samaritan woman or Canaanite woman or the prostituting woman, then we've let stories other than Jesus' stories shape our thinking and our actions.

Somewhere along the line, when we see an Arabian young man as a threat simply because he has the same coloring and features of the handful of other Arabian men who attacked us on

9/11, then we've let the world's stories shape our thinking and actions instead of the gospels of Jesus Christ – who, by the way, was also an Arabian young man.

What stories do we let shape how we think and how we live? Is being a fan of Jesus enough for us? Or are we feeling the call to follow the founder of this new movement that spreads the kind of stories that turn the world upside down and transform the world?

As Christians, we have a story to tell to the nations. Let's be crystal clear that the stories we tell others are the same stories that Jesus tells us. And let those stories we tell be the ones that continue to shape our thinking and our living in a way that emulates our leader, our teacher, our rabbi, the one who saves us from ourselves. And let's let this gospel-like thinking invade all our thoughts and lead all of our actions in every circumstance, in every decision and with every position we hold to be true. Then and only then, will we be not merely fans of Christ, but we will truly be his followers.