

SOUL SAVING STORIES

By John Powers

WINNER OF 1998 STORYTELLING ANTHOLOGY OF THE
YEAR
BY STORYTELLING MAGAZINE

Dedication

To my Brothers and Sisters: Tom, Peter, Mary, Ann, Margaret and Kathleen

Thanks to:

those who have helped restore me to sanity and restore me to serenity, Jeff Anderson, Susan Boyle Busque, Eugene Bonacci, Nick Bonadies, Mark Dupont, Daniel Eakin, Brice Edwards, Michael Foley, Graig Harrison, Robert Joerger, Terence Kristofak, Michael Nelson, Bill Perri, Tom Pollard, Francis Roberge, Kevin Sousa, Bill Walsh, the members of the Passionist Community and the staff of St. Michael's Paraclete Community

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CONTENTS

Introduction – 2

The Story Carver.....	5
The Treasure Seeker.....	15
The Outcast.....	22
The Shepherd.....	25
The Rock Thrower.....	31
Lazarus.....	33
The Haunted Priest.....	38
Daniel of Emmaus.....	42
The Wine Steward.....	46
The Vinedresser.....	52
The Money-Changer.....	57
The Prodigal's Friend.....	61
The Crossmaker.....	64

INTRODUCTION

“If citizens of the bible could speak to us today, what might they say?” *Soul Saving Stories* answers this question in a collection of creative scripture soliloquies that are so emotionally moving – so well defined – that the images become forcefully arresting and unforgettable.

In separate midrashed monologues about the common issues of the human story – fear and courage, rejection and acceptance, scapegoating and responsibility, success and failure, truth and denial – I explore how our thinking has not changed over the years despite complicating factors of time, morals, class, and culture. The bible characters within these pages are presented in monodramas for the sole/soul purpose of adding a personal dimension to the bible, thus making it relevant to people today.

If you are seeking a greater understanding of humanity, for the sake of humanity, I believe these soul saving stories are consistent enough with the original intent of the bible to point us directly to the truth in a sort of unique “self-study” program of spiritual psychotherapy.

Although *Soul Saving Stores* is a work of fiction, the tales told are true.

Fiction can tell the truth as well as fact can, and perhaps, at times, with even fuller meaning. Fiction has imagination on its side – that nation of images, that incredible resource, that energy that helps us to re-story our lives.

Albert Einstein says that “the imagination is more important than knowledge.” If this is true, then it is also true that revelation cannot exist without imagination.

Kathleen R. Fischer, author of *The Inner Rainbow* (Paulist Press 1983), tells us that only imagination enables us to reach the heart of Christian ministry. We must embody imaginative truth in our own persons, she says, so that we can continue Christ’s mystery. Thus, we can create an inspiring and uplifting life from an otherwise mundane day-to-day existence.

Soul, the innermost unity of emotion, intuition, mind, body, and spirit, is the imagination pointed in the direction of truth.

The most common but also most unjustifiable word linked to the imagination is the word “just.” Every time a person says, “It’s just your imagination,” another possibility dies.

Ann and Barry Ulanov, authors of *The Healing Imagination* (Paulist Press, 1991), tell us that imagination is the creative activity of psyche and soul. This is because it plays in all our ways of being – thinking and feeling, intuiting and sensing. Our psychic life, they tell us, speaks first to us in images before it speaks in words. This combination is always insightful, provocative, and engaging. It provides us with a framework in which we can respond sensibly to our complicated lives.

In *Soul Saving Stories* I will introduce you to some relatively well known and some fairly well unknown bible characters who not only wander in the holy land of scripture but are also alive, well, and residing in the collective imagination.

As a parabolist, let me make one very practical suggestion as you read this book of characterizations. *Use your imagination – don’t suspend it. Let your imagination go into the white spaces behind the letters, words, and sentences of the bible stories.*

Perhaps, then, you will discover that these scripture friends live first in your psyche and soul, in the nation of images that gives you life.

THE STORY CARVER

Jesus then walked around the village teaching. He summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two, giving them authority over evil spirits. And he ordered them to take nothing for the journey except a walking stick; no food, no bag, no money in their belts. They were to wear sandals and were not to take an extra shirt. (Mark 6:7-9)

THE STORY CARVER

My name is Benjamin. I'm the son of a carpenter from Jerusalem. I'm a woodcarver. Have been most of my life. Picked up the trade from my father.

For years I worked side by side with my father. In the carpenter's shed. Outside our home. Near Golgatha hill.

Loved every minute of his company, especially when he'd tell me stories.

As my father often said, "Human beings are storytellers by nature and, at best, are nurtured by the traumas and joys of life to value and share their stories."

I think I learned more about life from my father's stories than I ever learned from him about carpentry. Oh, I'm not a poor carpenter. I learned what I needed to make a living. But, to make a life, well, I'd rather listen to and tell stories any day.

As far as I'm concerned, there's no greater pleasure, or more intimate human endeavor than telling someone the tale of your life or listening to someone else spin his or her story.

After all, don't we carve our very souls out of the tragedy, comedy, irony and romance of our lives? Sharing our stores is soul-making.

If human time is anything, it is a storied affair. In a very real way stories are us.

In fact, I believe that where two or three are gathered together honestly sharing their stories there is God in their midst. Well, since a story is really a community of memories let me tell you one about my father and me.

“Papa,” I said as we worked in the shop, “tell me the story you told me yesterday.” “But, you already know that story, my father replied. “Why do you want to hear it again?” he asked.

“Oh, but Papa,” I answered, “it’s your favorite story in the whole world, and you love telling it so much. Tell it to me again, please?”

With that my father put down his tools, sat down, smiled slightly, and said, “On the sixth day, after the God who is nameless had created the mountains and oceans, light and darkness, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and animals of all kinds, God decided to play in the mud on the banks of the river. That God had scratched into the earth with a walking stick “God played almost all day in the mud, forming, shaping and reshaping the wet humus, soil, into the first animal to become human.

“God had designed many other animals, with legs going this way, arms going that, brains the size of peas or plums, tails to follow up the rear and heads that could turn almost all the way around, but God had a unique design in mind for the bring that would become human. “The legs God stretched long enough to lean uphill or down. “The head God put on the top to be closer to the sky.

“The eyes God made big enough to see far and wide in the light but only a short distance in the dark.

“The heart God put in the middle with a beat and rhythm to keep pace too.

“The brain God made just the right size for imaging, knowing, and feeling.

“God made every organ of the body out of the wet earth, molding each with a fine beauty and a function all its own.

“God then wove into the marrow of the bones, fiber of muscle, and core of the brain the instincts of an animal without which the mud could never become fully human.

“Then God poked a big divine finger into the muddy face to form a mouth just round enough, and with a tongue just pointed enough, to make words and tell stories.

“Finally, God took two divine fingers and, gently placing one on each side of the human’s head, scratched out opening large enough for hearing.

“God played for hours fashioning just the right design for the ears. “It was delicate work, shaping the precise curves to catch the nuance and meaning of sound.

“When God had finally finished forming the first human, God leaned on a mighty, thick walking stick, knelt down in the brown river, bent over, put divine lips to muddy lips, and breathed the spirit of life into the first being to become human.

“When God had breathed just enough spirited life into the human to last for an eternity of change, God’s lips moved just a few inches to the ear of the muddy being, and whispered, ‘Once upon a time.’ “and with that, the human coughed and gasped, took the deepest of deep breaths, huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu, and the story came to life.

“The nameless one simply leaned heavily on the divine walking stick, sat back in the water, rested from a day of play and listened.”

Of course, when I was young I couldn’t do the intricate woodwork my father did or carve a truthful tale as he did so smoothly. Eventually, though, I learned the craft of carving a good story out of lived life.

I’ll never forget my father at the bench, hewing fine tables for someone’s home or chiseling strong tools for a field worker.

My father, even for a time, sad to say, was forced to cut the rough crossbeams used for crucifixion by the Roman terrorists.

Of course, my father would never allow me to help with the carving of the crossbeams.

“No son of mine,” he’d say, “is going to be forced into working for violence.” If someone had to do the crude work of chiseling crosses to protect and feed the family, it would be my father.

My task, when first apprenticed with my father, was to carve simple walking sticks for the travelers who made their way in and out of the city.

It was big business. Demand was always higher than supply.

A traveler wouldn’t think of leaving the city for the road without a good strong walking stick to guide, support, protect, and companion him along the way.

So, here I still sit, on the edge of the city, in view of Golgatha hill, carving walking sticks

And trading stories with travelers who dare the way of the road.

Oh, you don’t have to be rich to purchase one of my walking sticks.

In fact, for a poor traveler I often make an even swap.

You tell me your story, where you’ve been and where you’re going, and I’ll give you one of my story-sticks.

That’s what I’ve come to call my carved walking sticks. Story-sticks. Think about it. Isn’t a story just like a walking stick?

Both stories and sticks guide us on the road, especially through the tangles and thorns, support us when the road gets rough, protect and save us from human and not so human dangers, and in truth are like companions that faithfully keep company. I actually believe that a good story-stick can help you get from here to the only important “there” there is.

After all, isn’t that what most travelers want to do, get from “here” to “there?”

For example, I met a man once upon a time who desperately sought after, fantasized about and wished for only one thing, to get out of “here” and to get to, where else, but the happily ever after of “there.” The traveler hated “here.”

“Here,” he felt sad, bored, lonely, frustrated, angry, afraid, poor, ugly, empty, and in the dark.

“Who wouldn’t want to get away from ‘here,’” he cried. “Here is for losers. ‘There’ is for winners. ‘There’ is greener, warmer, more comfortable, peaceful, beautiful, and brighter than ‘here’ could ever be.”

The traveler took every easy road that stretched before him to get from “here” to “there.”

He tried the escape routes of fantasy, denial, addiction, greed, prestige, power, position, depression, and fundamentalist religion, and on and on he traveled down this seemingly smooth road and that so-called easy path to get to his desperately desired “There.” The faster he sped, however, to get from “here” to “there,” the further “there” seemed to be from “here.”

Finally, frustrated that he was not able on his own to get out of “here” and get “there,” he resigned himself to being, of all place, “here.” Slowly, so slowly it almost seemed as if he was going backward over all the trails he’d traveled, sad resignation turned into a bit of heartfelt acceptance.

Eventually, when the traveler fell headlong into muddle age--not middle age but muddle age--he realized he needed to ask for help.

That’s when the traveler arrived at my shop, seeking directions and a walking stick. “I can certainly carve you a fine story-stick.” I answered to his request, “but regarding directions from ‘here’ to ‘there,’ well, I can’t help you ‘there.’ I have an idea, though,” I said.

“Perhaps if we tell each other which roads we’ve each already taken, that took us nowhere fast, we might discover the untried path.”

So, while I carved the traveler's story-stick we shared our tales of the road, how we'd each gotten lost along the way, to the so-called happily-ever-after of "there."

When, at last, we fell into a long silence, I gave the traveler his new story-stick. And off he went, carrying firmly in his grip the lessons life's story has to teach us all:

That there never was a "there" there anyway, that "there" is actually already "here."

That no matter where you go you can't get away from "here," That "here" is found in every "there,""

And that all you have to add to "here" to find yourself "there" is a graceful touch of acceptance.

After all, the only once-upon-a-time or happily-ever-after you'll ever find is already "here."

Stories help you learn the way to "here."

It's a wise traveler who accepts the support of a good strong story-stick along the way. Stories carry energy, truth, lessons, insight, emotions.

At least that's what I try to cut into every story-stick I carve.

So, my friends take up your stories and follow me, as I show you how best to walk with a story-stick.

The road can be pretty rough, and very long.

In fact, I've been told by a lifelong traveler that you can expect to walk almost 115,000 miles in your average life.

So, let's practice the art of walking. Practice may make for a bit of progress.

When walking you have to lean forward slightly, lose your balance just a bit, and begin to fall.

To walk you must constantly let go of the previous stability, falling all the time, trusting that you will find a succession of new stabilities with each step.

Walking, however, can be risky business especially when climbing a steep grade or gingerly making your way down into the valley.

Falling is a risk you take with every step.

The story-stick is here to help you keep your balance or to help you rise up when you stumble and fall.

If you take the risk to lean on your own story, it will support you for another step, and then another, and then another.

If you carry your own tried and true story-stick, you'll also be protected and perhaps even saved from the dangers of the road. That's right, I believe stories have the power to save us, especially from ourselves.

Here's a fable about another traveler you might consider.

I carved a story-stick in exchange for this tale.

The traveler was walking through the great forest of trees and buildings when he came upon a snake sunning himself in the middle of the path.

Frightened by the snake he saw the traveler picked up the closest stick he could find to kill the snake.

The problem was, however, that the snake he saw was really a stick and the stick he picked up was really a snake.

After asking the traveler to repeat his twisted tale (that the snake he saw was really a stick and the stick he picked up was really a snake) I asked the man a few probing questions.

First, I asked what he feared most in life, what terrified him along the way.

“Well,” he answered with head down, “I’m most afraid of what others might think of me if they knew what a mistake-making fool I can be.” “Ah,” I answered, “so the fear of what others will think of you is the snake waiting for you on the path.

“What stick then, did you pick up to kill such a slithering fear?” I asked.

“Well,” he answered while blushing, “I usually keep my story to myself. In fact, I prefer to travel alone. You never know whom you can trust along the way.”

“So,” I said, “the stick you picked up to kill the frightening snake of what others might think of you was actually the more poisonous serpent of isolation and mistrust.

“Certainly a more deadly enemy than the judgment of others could ever be, don’t you think?”

Perhaps the greatest truth I’ve learned from many travelers who have purchased my carved story-sticks has been that the road is always safer and much more enjoyable when you travel two by two.

Let me at this point make a few suggestions regarding traveling companions. I recommend that you:

- walk only with those who can admit that they belong to the community of the used, abused, and confused. They’re much better company.

- take the risk of putting your story-stick out in front to meet the road first, whether others trust you with their tale of travels or not. Perhaps they’re just more afraid of what you will think of them than you are of what they will think of you.

- listen carefully, however, to any companions courageous enough to share their life tale with you. Such sharing can become fuel for the road.

- never change directions just because a larger group is hurriedly going another way.

Don't let others tell you what path to take or what your story should be. Follow the authority of your own true experience, not just the experience of someone else's authority.

- avoid those who need to say "Been there" or "done that." You can be pretty sure neither is true.

- travel only with those content to be followers of the way, rather than with those with enough contempt to want always to lead the way.

- remember, when you come to mountains or valleys, that no one said you have to keep pace with your companions. After all, everyone needs a little down time.

- and finally, walk only with those searching for truth.

You know, I've met the truth. He's a tall order. He was on the road. Actually, the first time I saw the truth I avoided him. He was stark naked. I felt embarrassed that the truth was so exposed and raw. Down the road, however, I ran into the truth again. This time, he was dressed in the finest of parables and fables and walking with a fine story-stick.

Of course, I know no parable can cover the whole truth. Still, wrapped in parables, the truth can be a pleasure to behold.

Now, I've been a carver of stories almost all of my life, a storyteller, A maggid or misapear in Hebrew, Le conteur in French, El cuentista in Spanish, Rozpravac in Slovak, Bajarz in Polish, Novelliere Narratore in Italian, Ananse Seem in Akan, African dialect, Badmapan in Armenian, Kiventista in Tagalog, Phillipino dialect, Mythologos in Greek, Narrator in Latin, Sean chai in Gaelic, Xing Giu Shi do Jen in Chinese,

**A teller of tales, A spinner of yarns,
A midrash maker, A weaver of narrativity.**

I've carved hundreds, perhaps thousands of story-sticks, to help travelers on their way. I've carved story-sticks for the great, near great, greatly poor, and those who just grate me the wrong way.

Why, I even carved a story-stick for one of the greatest Parabolists in history, the rebbe Jesus of Nazareth.

It was only a few days before Passover when Jesus, and one of his followers, Mark by name, I think, came into my little shop near Golgatha Hill.

After telling me that he too was the son of a carpenter and had carved many a story-stick in his day, he asked to purchase one of my poorly fashioned sticks.

"Oh no, rebbe," I said. "You are renowned throughout the land as one who shares the most telling of tales and saving stories. I will trade you any stick you see in my shop for just one word of revelation."

Jesus then picked up one of the most knotted and twisted of sticks and said,

"In the beginning was no only the word, but the phrase, sentence, paragraph, chapter, and Story, and the Story was with God. And the Story was God; the Story was in the beginning with God."

Only days later I found the same twisted story-stick that Jesus had carried away from my shop, leaning, balanced against a heavy boulder, just outside an empty tomb near Golgatha Hill.

An empty tomb.

Now there's a story that will last, at least as long as, say, forever.

THE TREASURE SEEKER

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. The man who finds it buries it again; and so happy is he, that he goes and sells everything he has, so that he can buy the field. Matthew 13:44

THE TREASURE SEEKER

Did you know that most of the stories Jesus told were true? Well, I'm not positive that all the tales he told actually happened. As a matter of fact, now that I think about it, I can vouch only for the authenticity of the stories I told Jesus as we worked together in the fields.

You see, I knew Jesus and his parents quite well since my father's farm was just outside the village of Nazareth. In fact, whenever my father needed good carpentry work he'd call on Joseph, certainly the most talented carpenter in the area.

It's too bad that Jesus never picked up his father's ability to work with wood though, so when Joseph died Jesus had to find whatever work he could.

Since I knew, however, what it was like to lose a father, I decided to hire Jesus to work in my fields clearing rocks. The work, I hoped, would not only help Jesus support his mother but would give him something to do as he grieved his terrible loss.

Besides, anyone who would argue with the old men in the temple I wanted working for me. Every rock that stood in the way of the plow became a personal challenge for the young man.

He was a good worker and an even better companion, especially when we'd take a break from our work to rest and talk. I'll never forget, for example, one particularly blistering hot day as Jesus and I took a few minutes' refuge from the open field to sit in the shade of an olive grove.

We sat silently for a time just looking out over the half-plowed field, when Jesus finally spoke up saying: "A rich piece of land is like a treasure."

“That’s almost exactly what my father used to tell my older brother and me when we were children,” I said.

Suddenly, I could almost see my father standing out in the middle of the field, with his rough hands at the plow, turning to my brother and me, as we picked rocks out of the overturned earth, and saying, “Boys, there’s a treasure buried in this field, a treasure that will be yours some day.”

Of course, when I was young, I believed my father’s treasure tales so much that I dreamed of one day digging it up. As I grew older, however, my father seemed to grow crazier. My brother and I usually just laughed behind his back as he rambled on about the treasure, the treasure. If there was such a treasure why hadn’t he dug it up, the old fool? At least that way he could live in ease and comfort instead of all of us having to break our backs laboring in the fields.

When my father would hear my brother and me snickering at his tall treasure tales he’d quietly remark again, “The treasure is your inheritance.”

My father was a wise man. I know that now. I’m just sorry I didn’t know it when I was younger. I guess I just wasn’t ready to put my hands to the plow. In fact, it wasn’t until after my father died that I really learned to appreciate his wisdom.

You see, when I was young I was a bit arrogant, rather self-centered to be honest about it. So much so that I was able to convince my father to sell one of his fields so that I could take my share of the inheritance and go on my way.

I had no intention of spending the rest of my life breaking my back plowing and planting, so I begged, demanded, and manipulated my father into selling the field and splitting the money between my brother and me.

With the money finally in hand I left home in search of the easy life. Can you believe I actually thought the world owed me a living, that the riches of comfort and security were mine for the taking?

It wasn’t, however, until I returned home, after years of aimless living, that I finally realized that my father was right all along. There really is a treasure buried in the field of life. Oh, it isn’t a box of silver or gold that

makes life easy. It's something far more precious. Hidden in the field of every person's life is a treasure, a treasure of truth, the kind that sets you free with purpose and meaning.

I had to learn this truth the hard way, but you know what they say; "Hard lessons can be the best learned." Ultimately I learned the lessons life had to teach, because I was lucky enough to find – or was it they who found me, who knows? – anyway I had some great teachers along the way, mentors willing to share their treasure of truth with me.

I remember, for example, a Samaritan man who taught me what real compassion is. You see, after I left home with my share of the money from the sale of my father's field, I wandered aimlessly, spending my money wildly.

Eventually, my travels put me on the Jericho road where I was unlucky enough to run into a band of thieves. Of course, when I refused to turn my money over to the bandits, they simply beat it out of me, leaving me half dead on the side of the road.

As I lay dying in that dirty ditch, all the stupidity and arrogance of my life flashed before my eyes. I have never felt as lonely and helpless as at that moment, especially as I watched two so-called charitable types, a priest and a Levite, pause momentarily to shake their heads in disgust and then stroll on.

Finally, someone did stop to help, however, much to my surprise. It was a Samaritan, a man who was by custom supposed to keep his distance from a Jew.

I'll never forget this man's goodness as he bandaged my wounds, carried me to an inn and paid the innkeeper to take care of me as long as necessary. I never in my wildest dreams imagined that there actually were people as compassionate as this Samaritan was.

It made no sense that someone should go so far out of his way for me. When I eventually tried to thank the man for his kindness, he said something that has become a treasure of truth for me. He simply shrugged his shoulders and said, "I give as I receive." As far as I was concerned this

Samaritan was God's compassionate hand, and all he would say was, "I give as I receive."

The Samaritan wasn't the only teacher to share a treasure of truth with me, however. There's another mentor I'll never forget, not only for the truth he taught me but also because he smelled worse than any person I've ever met.

This old man was a pig-feeder. He managed the feeding of hundreds of pigs on the farm where I got a job after I recovered from the robbery and beating.

Remarkably it was on that pig farm that a great truth was revealed: The truth that in the final analysis there are no easy roads, only those you pave with your own choices. You have to make the roads you travel. You have to make your own life.

You may not believe it, or – who knows? – maybe you will: I was a terrible pig-slopper, the worst. At least that's what the old pig-feeder told me when he finally fired me. After telling me that not even the pigs liked me very much, he said, "For God's sake, boy, and your own, go home. "Go home and find out where your heart belongs. "It's obvious," he said, "that your treasure isn't hidden in the mud of the pigpens, so go home."

I understood immediately what the pig-feeder meant. I knew he didn't mean that I should move back into my father's house just to have the security of four walls. No, the home the pig-feeder wanted me to return to was the home within myself. From the pig-feeder I learned that you have to dig for the treasure of truth in your own backyard, in your own life.

You have to belong to yourself before you can belong anywhere else. So, with guilt and shame as my companions, I made my way home to find the truth.

Did you ever notice, my friends, that the road that returns you home almost always seems shorter than the road that takes you away? It certainly seemed that way to me; because within only days of my decision to return home, I turned the last bend on the road to my father's house, there to find my father standing firmly in the middle of the path, as though he'd anticipated my return.

Now, either my father knew I was coming home that day or he came out to wait for me every day. Either way, I finally realized as I walked that final stretch of road that my father loved me the best way he knew how, by waiting for me to return his love.

I'll never forget as I stepped shamefully up to my father to beg for forgiveness how firmly he took my neck in his hands and how he kissed me. He refused to let me bow my head in humiliation wanting me instead to meet him eye to eye.

When I tried to tell him how sorry I was for ignoring his love, he responded by embracing me again. Where I'd traveled and what I'd done was not as important to my father as the fact that I'd come home to dig for the treasure of truth in my own back yard.

It seems that there's no greater fulfillment for parents than to see their children find the treasure of happiness. This was certainly true for my father because no one enjoyed himself more at the party he gave upon my return than he did. Why, he was even able to love my resentful older brother into letting go of his anger to join in the celebration.

Now, please don't misunderstand me here. I'm not proud of what I did, taking my father's hard-earned money and throwing it away on meaningless pleasures, but I learned through the pain of it all. I don't recommend that anyone seek out the teacher pain, but I have to admit that pain was a mentor that pointed the way home for me.

Once home, however, I had a great deal of work to do. I had to purchase back the field my father sold to give me my share of the inheritance. After my brother and I healed the wounds of anger, nothing could stop us from doing everything we could to buy back the field of treasure.

It took us years, selling all that we had, working wherever we could to get enough money to purchase the field. Of course, once we settled the field's ownership, we had even more work to do. We had to dig for the treasure my father had promised was buried in our own back yard. Every day we'd go out to dig. For two solid years all my brother and I did was dig hole after hole looking for the treasure. It was damn frustrating work.

Every hole we dug was empty. If there was a treasure in the field as my father promised, where the hell was it, we wondered?

When we asked my father to tell us exactly where he buried the treasure all he'd say was, "You have to plow it yourself."

Finally, frustrated by not finding the treasure and since we had no other income at the time, my brother and I decided that we might as well plant some seed in the already turned-over earth. Pretty soon, of course, we had a small harvest to cut, which took us away from our treasure hunt.

Since the harvest that year was small, we decided to plow and plant a bit more the next. As the years went on, we plowed and planted more and more of the field until there was no more time or desire to look for the treasure my father promised was buried there.

Gradually, gradually after years of digging, plowing, planting and harvesting, I finally realized where my father's treasure of inheritance really was hidden – in the living of life itself. I understood then that the treasure of life can't merely be dug up.

If you seek the truth, you have to plant the seeds of faith and hope. If you want to find life's treasure, you have to work your own life to bring in the harvest of meaning.

Let me share with you the real treasures I've discovered by working the field in my own back yard, the lessons that life has taught me.

First, I've learned that you can't plow someone else's field to find your truth. If you don't plow and plant your own field, you can't find the treasure of belonging, of home, of heart.

I've learned that no one is going to move the rocks and boulders out of your way either. Either you find the strength to move them yourself, live around them or ask for help. These are your only options. The healthiest of course, is to ask for help.

I've learned that everyone has a field to plow, and that I am obligated to do what I can to help those who either do not have a mule to pull their plowshare or to help those whose plows have been bent by the boulders.

I've learned that it's always good to stop plowing to make friends with those who pass by. Some of the greatest treasures in my life have been the people who have simply wandered into my field. I've learned that no one plows through life alone.

I've learned that there's a divine farmer giving me strength when I'm tired and purpose when I'm confused.

I've learned that the field I plow stretches far beyond this life into an eternal field that once you put your hands and heart to the plow you can never turn back. I guess you're never quite finished your labor in this life or the next, so you might as well enjoy the work.

And finally I've learned that it's much healthier to laugh when I foolishly get my plow stuck in the mud or when I plow a crooked furrow.

Anyway these were the lessons I learned and the stories I told Jesus as we sat resting in the shade of the olive grove that afternoon many years ago. I must admit, of course, that when I finished spinning my tales I expected Jesus to say something profound and inspiring in response.

Jesus, however, simply climbed to his feet, put his hand out to help me up, and said, "For God's sake, and your own, are you ready to get back to work?"

THE OUTCAST

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was passing along the border between Samaria and Galilee and, as he entered a village, ten lepers came to meet him. Keeping their distance, they called to him, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

Then Jesus said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

Now, as they went their way, they found they were cured.

One of them, as soon as he saw he was cleansed, turned back praising God in a loud voice and, throwing himself on his face before Jesus, he gave him thanks. This man was a Samaritan.

Then Jesus said, "Were not all ten healed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God but this alien?" And Jesus said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has saved you."
Lk 17:11-17

THE OUTCAST

I hated the self-righteous masters of ritual and money, the priests. What right did they have, after all, to grasp for equality with God, parade around wrapped in authority, declaring people with this illness, that occupation, this gender, that color, this orientation or that religious persuasion, unclean, alien, outcasts, to be shunned?

For years I was an angry and bitter man, suffering not only from a physical disease but from something even worse, a victim's mentality. Because society labeled me a misfit, I judged myself the same, that I wasn't worthy of belonging, of life, or love.

Who am I? You wonder. Well, I'm one of them, one of the different, the excluded, one of the ten lepers to meet Jesus along the borders of Samaria and Galilee.

You see, from my early teen years I suffered the chronic skin ailment known as sara-at, an illness that condemned me to live in hiding and humiliation.

I did not, however, have leprosy as you know it. Hansen's disease, the leprosy of your day, didn't appear in my country until the Middle Ages. My illness was curable, and I was determined to do whatever it took to rid myself of this disease, to become socially acceptable again.

"So misfits and untouchables, unite!" I cried. "Exiled and excluded rise up! "Today we seek the healer, Jesus, the one who will take away our illness and pain."

My nine companions and I didn't have to travel far to find the miracle worker, for he and his followers had camped overnight just outside our village. When we found the camp, we hid among the brush and trees, keeping our distance for a time, fearing that even Jesus might reject us.

Suddenly, one of the women of our group cried out to Jesus for mercy and compassion. Moved by this woman's daring the rest of us joined the chorus, pleading for Jesus to do whatever he could to cure us.

When Jesus heard our pleas, he turned quickly toward us, walked right up to us, and told us to go and show ourselves to the priests at the temple. As quickly as he came toward us, just as quickly did he walk away. Stunned we looked at one another in disbelief.

Was this man mad? We wondered. Nothing had changed. No healing had taken place that we could see. I looked at my arms and saw what I always saw, disease. I looked at myself and felt what I always felt, excluded, ashamed, like an exile in my own homeland. The more I felt like a victim of life and prejudice, however, the angrier I became. I was sick of being sick with shame, of believing that there was something wrong with me. Suddenly, in the midst of my anger, I realized that I was healed.

Oh, not of my chronic skin ailment but of the more terminal disease of shame itself. I realized, then, that by simply including me, that by just talking with me, Jesus had set free in me a growing confidence, a feeling value and worth, a dignity that was rightfully mine. As I stood transfixed in that moment of awareness, I knew that I was free to walk out into the open, yes, a man with a physical illness but a complete human being nonetheless, and one who would no longer let shame and bigotry, prejudice and social status, rule his life.

Suddenly I felt free enough to go to the priests of the temple if only to challenge them with the simply profound truth that no one has the right to cast other human beings aside because they do not measure up to the standards of a sick society.

In that holy moment of inclusion I chose to live as I am, not merely as I wished to be. No longer did I need life or God to take away what made me different. Instead I chose to find life in the middle of my struggle. Suddenly my nine companions began to hoot and yell, jumping up and down with wild laughter. They too discovered themselves healed of the shame they suffered. Could you believe it? Could anyone believe it? My friends were so wildly happy that they ran off in all directions, some to their families, others probably straight to the priests to challenge status quo.

With joy tears flowed from my eyes as I, however, ran after Jesus. When I fell on the ground before him in humble gratitude I realized how much my life had been dominated by what I thought I lacked rather than by the dignity I had been given by life itself. My Friends, let me ask you a question. Have you ever felt like an excluded person? It's a foolish question, I know. If you're a human being you've wondered at some time or other whether you belong. In fact, there are probably people (sitting in this room) (listening to my voice) right now who have felt oppressed by today's unjust social caste structure – poor people, women, the physically or emotionally challenged, those of diverse ethnic or racial backgrounds, religious beliefs, educational levels or sexual orientations.

Well, my friends, I come to speak with you today not only to share the story of how I was healed of a victim's mentality but also more importantly I come to beg you, my friends, to stretch out your faith to the Healer. Run to the one who will set your integrity free, to the one who will include you no matter what your diversity or disease. Seek the Lord on the road of your life.

He walks on the borders of faith and hope, always ready to include you in his overwhelming love. Be as you are, my friends, whole and free, not just in spite of your differences or struggles but through them. Be thankful for the life that is yours, my friends, and for the opportunity to make something of it. Believe in the Lord, my friends, and he will heal you into believing in yourselves.

THE SHEPHERD

“Truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a robber. But the shepherd of the sheep enters by the gate. The keeper opens the gate to him and the sheep hear his voice; he calls each of his sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all of his own, he goes before them and the sheep follow him for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow; rather they will run away from him because they don’t recognize a stranger’s voice.” Jesus used this comparison, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, I am the shepherd of the sheep. All who came were thieves and robbers, and the sheep did not hear them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved; he will go in and out freely and find food.”

JOHN 10:1-9

THE SHEPHERD

The first time I heard the whisperings of God, well, let me tell you about it.

I couldn’t have been more than twelve years old the night I helped my cousin and father herd our family’s flock of sheep down a hillside outside the village of Bethlehem.

Of course, while my father led the flock, telling story after story so that the sheep could follow the sound of his voice, I trailed the flock, keeping the stragglers in line, heading home to the sheepfold where we could protect them from the wolves. Anyway, just as I finished herding this one rather rambunctious lamb back into the fold a brilliance, brighter than bright, shone around me. I’m not sure where the light came from, whether from within or without me, or both, but there I stood flooded in light, listening to a whisper as soft as dust, so soft that I could hear only a few phrases here and there, phrases like, “good news,” “joy,” “savior born in Bethlehem,” and “peace on earth.”

Well, since I’d never seen a light so bright nor heard a whisper so soft, I did what you’d expect of a twelve year old, I stood frozen. That was a long time ago now – in fact, so long ago that I’d almost forgotten how

terrified I was when God first spoke to me. It wasn't, however, to be my last encounter with God.

The next divine whisper came some fifteen years or so later, when I was again out with the flock, preparing, this time with only my cousin, to lead the flock home for the night, when suddenly we realized that we were missing one of our one hundred sheep. Well, my father wouldn't allow us to lose even one of his flock, so I sent my cousin home with the remaining ninety-nine; and I set out after the one stray.

Now, I didn't think I'd have to go very far or that it would take very long to find the lost lamb because sheep have a reputation for being pretty stupid.

As soon as sheep realize they're lost, they do something really dumb – they just lie down where they are and bleat and bleat, until, of course, either a shepherd or a wolf appears.

Well, the stray on this particular night did just that, bleated in a way you wouldn't believe, being, of course, lucky that I got him before the prowling wolf.

Anyway, I picked the sheep up – heavy for a lamb, I thought – threw him over my shoulders and started to trudge home. If I kept up a good pace, I thought I might even catch up to my cousin and the flock. A flock of sheep moves rather slowly, you know, until, of course, they pick up the home scent and then they can really move if they're of a mind to do so. I guess that's true of people too, that the closer you get to your destination the faster you tend to move toward it.

Well, anyway, I walked with that sheep flung over my shoulder for what seemed forever, but I never did reach the home courtyard of my father. At least not the one outside of Bethlehem.

You see, it was somewhere on that journey that I heard another divine whisper, one that would change my course, one that said: "From this day forward, until far beyond the end of time, you will be a shepherd of people, guiding all those who have lost faith in themselves, in others, and in God, and lead them home to God's fold of forgiveness."

So, for some two thousand years I've shepherded people – who, by the way, are generally a hell of a lot smarter than any sheep I've ever known – people like you on the only road that leads you home to yourself, God, and community, confession road, telling, as we travel, some of my stories about truth and forgiveness, and listening to some of your stories about sin.

You know, it's amazing how far a story can take you. In fact, I believe stories can carry you all the way to salvation because when you tell a story about your sins and sufferings, they become a lot easier to bear.

So, let me tell you a story I like to tell everyone who plods along confession road. It's an old story about the truth.

One warm day the truth was walking along confession road seeking someone to guide when he came upon a beautiful lake. Invited by the cool water to take a swim the truth stripped off his clothes, hung them on a bush, and jumped in.

Well, while truth floated freely in the water, falsehood came walking along the same road seeking someone to lead astray. Upon seeing truth's clothes hanging on a bush, falsehood had an idea. Falsehood stripped off his own clothes, hung them on the bush, put on truth's clothes, and stole away.

Eventually truth came out of the water and discovered that falsehood had switched clothing with him. Truth, however, refused to put on falsehood's clothing, which is why we refer to him today as the naked truth.

Truth is creation's first born, born of honesty and self-esteem while falsehood is fashioned out of fear and denial. If honesty is the best policy, as so many of you like to proclaim, then I just don't understand why you don't purchase a little insurance. The premium isn't that high. It costs only the price of truth and that's usually pretty fair.

On confession road only the truth can help you strip off the rags of falsehood, help you honestly face your actual sins, help you admit that you are perfectly imperfect, and help you open the closets where your secrets hang wrapped in shame.

Now, while I know that not every secret you keep closeted away is a sin, I also know that every sin wants to remain a secret. That's why on confession road you must travel with the naked truth, you must be honest with yourself before you can walk honestly with others and God.

Now, as I said earlier, I tell this story about the naked truth to everyone I shepherd on the road, usually with very positive results. However, let me tell you about one rather anxious traveler who seemed confused about the meaning of God's forgiveness.

The man listened intently to my truthful tale as we walked together, paused momentarily, and then much to my surprise, responded angrily.

"I've been telling the truth ever since I started the journey on confession road," he said. "I've stood naked before God, admitted over and over how I've hurt other people, broken the covenant with community and God, missed the mark, committed what I shouldn't have, and omitted to do what I should have. I've done my part, shepherd," he yelled, "I'm waiting for God to do God's. I'm waiting," he concluded "for God to forgive so that I can forget."

Without a moment's pause I responded firmly to the traveler's flawed notion by telling him "You are sadly mistaken, my friend, if you think that God's forgiveness means your forgetness. "After all," I asked, "how can you learn from your mistakes if you don't remember them, and then remember them, and then remember them again?"

To forget your sins is to throw away dearly purchased experience. The strongest people don't forget their weaknesses, the most successful never forget their failures, and the greatest saints don't forget their sins. After all, God's forgiveness doesn't wipe away or erase your memory. It does however, give you permission to let go of the guilt. Remembering is the only way to salvation.

Let me tell you another story that might help clarify the confusion some people have about forgiveness and forgetness. This is a story about forgiving others.

While walking one day on confession road, I listened to a woman tell the tale of how she had been trapped in a very destructive marriage. The

story she told of her husband's cruelty was beyond belief, but I listened as she wove the details of her marriage and divorce together.

Finally I asked, "Have you forgiven your former husband?" To which she quickly replied, "No, I haven't. I'm still," she said, "consumed with hatred for him."

"In that case," I said, "you're still trapped." Now, I know that there are some people who believe that you haven't truly forgiven someone until you've forgotten how and when they hurt you. That's nonsense!

Forgiving other doesn't mean that you forget the harm they inflicted but rather that you face, embrace, and then let go of your resentment. Here's the choice. You either embrace your anger or it will strangle you. As a radical psychiatrist once said, "The stupid neither forgive nor forget; the naïve forgive and forget; the wise forgive (themselves and others) but they do not forget." (Thomas Szasz) They do, however, learn from the remembering.

After all, if it's truth that sets you free, then it's remembering that keeps you free. Let me share a classic tale that may help move you along confession road.

The story is about a famous actor who was invited to a party where he was asked if there was anything in particular the gatherers wanted to hear.

After a few moments an older priest asked to hear Psalm 23, "The Lord is My Shepherd." The actor paused for a moment and then said, "I'm willing to recite it but on one condition – that you will recite it also after I have finished."

Well, the priest was taken by surprise. "I'm not a famous actor," he said, "but, if you wish, I'll recite it too."

The actor began quite impressively. His voice was trained and his intonation was perfect. The audience was spellbound and when he finished, there was great applause. Now it was the old priest's turn to recite the same psalm.

His voice was not remarkable, his tone was not faultless, but when he finished, there wasn't a dry eye in the room. The actor then rose and with a quavering voice said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I reached your eyes and your ears, but this priest has reached your hearts. "The different is this: I know the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd."

My friends, if you know the Shepherd, you know the way home to forgiveness. Shhhhh. Can you hear it? Listen!

We must be close to home now because I can hear divine whisperings. Oh, you may hear the whispering of God in different languages; In Polish you may hear "PRZEBACZENIEI." In Italian, "PERDONO." In German, "VERZEIHEN." In Japanese, "YURUSU." In Swedish, "FORLATA." In Spanish, "PERDONAR." In Gaelic, "MATHANAS." The message, however, remains the same: forgiveness.

Since God is a given, for giving, it's God's task to shepherd you along confession road, whispering all the while. "Welcome home. Welcome Home."

THE ROCK THROWER

At daybreak Jesus appeared in the temple again. All the people came to hear him, and he sat down and began to teach them. Then the teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They made her stand in front of everyone, “Master,” they said, “this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. “Now the law of Moses orders that such women be stoned to death; but you, what do you say?” They said this to test Jesus, so that they could have some charge against him. Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with his finger. And as they continued to ask him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let the one among you who has no sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” John 8:2-7

THE ROCK THROWER

I just stood there in the temple, leaning against a pillar in the Court of Women, tossing a rock up and down in my hand, trying to decide whether or not I should throw it at the adulterous woman whom the simple-minded teacher, Jesus, was trying to protect.

I knew that when the Scribes and Pharisees dragged this criminal before the teacher, demanding that he pass the prescribed punishment, he would revert to type, handing out forgiveness instead of judgment – some of that sentimental love for enemies he’d been preaching about all morning – instead of the heavy hand of the law.

What this Galilean taught was heresy against the status quo, destructive of proper social order. This Jesus wasn’t just another foolish preacher. His message was dangerous. After all, this woman deserved punishment for her crime. She was one of them. She was an adulteress. God, she was one of them! The older penalty of strangulation would’ve made a better example of the woman, but stoning would have to do. At least, I was ready to dispense the proper judgment.

It wasn’t, however, until this Jesus said, “Let the one without sin cast the first stone,” that my arm flew into the air with a resentful rage. Life hadn’t been fair to me so why should I be fair? Life had kicked me around enough to teach me only how to kick back.

Cruelty tightened my grip around the rock as years of bitterness stretched the muscles of my shoulder so that the stone would fly with vengeful aim. Anger lifted my arm high in the air as self-righteousness took control.

Suddenly, in the split second just before I would set the rock free to do its damage, there appeared in my awareness a revealed imaging. Instead of seeing the adulteress woman standing before the teacher and the crowd, I saw myself, with my flaws, my arrogance and my anger.

Suddenly, I realized that I was one of them, a weak human being. When I turned back to look at the rock I held so high and mightily in my hand, I saw my name etched on its rough surface.

That's when I learned the lesson that the teacher had been preaching in the temple that day. In the instant of revelation, I saw that I and the woman were one. We were kin in sin and forgiveness, connected by something thicker than blood, by the spirit of our frail humanity. If I condemned her, I damned myself. If I deprived her of dignity, I lost my humanity. Remorse ran up the muscles of my arm while humility lowered it to my side.

When I looked around the courtyard to see if anyone had seen my violent act, I discovered that everyone else had quietly slipped away. I was the last to shamefully leave, carrying the weight of my arrogance as I moved toward the door.

I wanted to say something to the teacher before I left, perhaps even to beg for forgiveness from the woman. Instead, I silently slumped against a pillar in self-disgust. It was then that I heard the courageously compassionate teacher say to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

Even though it has been years since I heard Jesus speak those words of forgiveness and challenge in the temple courtyard, I still remember them. I hope he meant them for me, as well. I also still have the rock I picked up that day in the temple, and, yes, it still has my name etched on its rough surface.

LAZARUS

Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you, for you have heard me. I know that you hear me always; but my prayer was for the sake of these people, that they may believe that you sent me.

When Jesus had said this, he cried out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips and his face wrapped in a cloth. So Jesus said to them, “Untie him and let him go.” JOHN 11: 41-44

LAZARUS

First let me thank you for inviting me to rise up out of death to speak through your imagination. It’s indeed an honor to speak on behalf of the guesstimated seventy-four billion people who’ve died since the beginning of history, give or take a few million.

For those of you wondering who I am let me introduce myself. My name is Lazarus, and I’ve done this rising from the dead thing before. The reason I come to speak with you during this rising, however, is quite different than when Jesus called me forth from the tomb many years ago.

Basically, I’m here to remind you that although we, the deceased, have physically died, we still live on. Oh, we may have been radically changed by death, but as long as God lives everything lives. After all, all there is - is aliveness.

At this point, I imagine you’d probably like me to explain exactly what life after life is like. Well, that’s a problem, because even if I did describe it, you still wouldn’t understand. Trying to describe the after-life reminds me of the old story of the student who asked his teacher to describe the moon.

The wise teacher, in response to the student’s question, simply pointed at the moon. The student, of course, thought he understood, so he ran around telling all his friends that the moon looked just like a finger. If I told you what the after-life was like, you’d probably run around talking about heaven, hell, purgatory, golden gates, and harp-playing angels.

You'll just have to take it on faith that life is not ended with death but is rather dramatically changed. Therefore, because we, the deceased, do live on after death, I'm here to protest on behalf of the inalienable and legitimate rights that are due us in justice, to proclaim a bill of rights for the deceased.

First, we have the right to be remembered. Memory, after all, makes the dead come to life in an effective way. The only way you can hug the dead is through memory. When you, the living on this side of the grave, remember us, the living on the other side of the grave, by writing our names in a book of memorial. By etching on a concrete and marble wall the 40,000 names of the Vietnam War dead, by sewing a patch for the AIDS quilt, or by visiting our graves on a day of anniversary, you bring us to life in your imagination, hearts, and memories.

When you remember us by name, you light the flame of life for us. Now, when I say that we, the deceased, have the right to be remembered, I do not mean, however, that you should cling to the dead.

Quite the opposite. Clinging in grief to someone who has died will not bring you or them to life. There's a story we often tell in the after-death to illustrate the difference between remembering and clinging.

The story is about a deceased young girl and her father's grief. When the daughter joined us beyond the grave, we gave her what we give every newly deceased person, a candle to light the way on her eternal journey.

The father's grief was so ferocious, however, that his tears kept snuffing out the flame that would guide his daughter on her way.

It was only after we sent a dream into the father's sleep that he finally grasped the paradox that if he and his daughter were to have life, and have it to the full, he had to first let his daughter go. The second right of those who have died flows from the first.

Not only do we, the deceased, have the right to be remembered, but we have the right to be remembered as we truly were, not merely as you wish we had been.

Whitewashing our lives by recalling only the pleasant memories does those of us who have died a great injustice. To truly honor our memories, you must recall our light and darkness, our successes and failures, our beautiful and painful struggles.

Remember that the full life we lived belongs to us as much as our names did. To ignore our pain, mistakes, and struggles is to deny what made us most human.

Oh, it may make you feel better to forget that your father was an alcoholic, or that your wife had been abusive, or that your son lived wrapped in anger, but in the final analysis denial only takes life, it does not make life.

Remembering the whole truth about those who have died, and not just what makes you feel comfortable, is the only way to set you and us free to continue the journey of life and eternal life. The next right due in justice to those of us who have died is the right to be prayed to and prayed for.

At any time you choose, you can touch us through God. Since we are where God is, you can gather strength for your journey or share strength with us for our journey by simply praying, by placing yourself humbly in the presence of God.

As life does not end with death, so neither does the love shared between human beings. In fact, it could be said that it is only through love that we come to life and live eternally.

A love relationship, established in the life-before-death can continue to grow in the life-after-death. Love never dies. It can only continue to make life. There is no better way of loving those of us who have died than by holding our names in your hearts so that God can see them there and do what God does best, love us into fuller and fuller aliveness.

Loved ones travel best, after all, when they are bound by the kinship of prayer. All we ask is that you pray that we who have died might know the more-and-more of God's love. If you do that, we promise to share that love with you.

The last right due those of us who have passed beyond death is the right to be judged by God alone. Did you know that what most people believe about life-after-death is true, that in the final analysis you get what you deserve? The way I like to put it is that you ultimately get what you've given.

Actually, it's not really necessary for God to judge those who die because we pass judgment on our ourselves. What you get in the after-death is what you've given in the before-death. Let me tell you a story about what happened one day while I worked as a keeper of the gate to the after-life to illustrate just how human beings pass judgment on themselves.

There was a wealthy man who died and came before me as gatekeeper to eternal life. "Can I help you?" I asked the rich man. "I hope so," he replied. "I'd like to enter paradise, but I can't seem to open the gates." "I'm sorry, sir," I answered, "But I can't help you." "Well, who can?" the wealthy man demanded.

"It's quite simple," I responded. "All you need is the testimony of someone to speak on your behalf, and the gates will swing wide open. "Did you bring anyone with you whose witness might help you open the gates?" I asked.

"I certainly have," answered the man. "I've brought the pastor of my church, to which by the way, I contributed generously. "Oh, I may not have given quite ten percent of my income to the church – it was a fairly well-to-do church anyway- and although I didn't go to church very often, I still gave quite a bit of money over the years. "I'm sure my pastor's testimony will open the gates."

"I'm sorry," I replied, "but the witness of your pastor won't open the gates to new life. "Did you bring anyone else to speak on your behalf?" I asked.

"Yes, I have," the rich man answered, "I've brought my wife and children. "Certainly their testimony of my love for them will be enough to open the gates. "Oh, I may not have been the best husband or father in the world, and I know I didn't spend the kind of time with them that I should have, but I'm sure they will tell you themselves that I showed my love by being a good provider.

“I worked hard all my married life to keep my family in the comfortable style to which they had grown accustomed. “I expect the testimony of my family will do the trick and open the gates.” “I’m sorry, sir,” I answered. “This is not a trick and your family’s witness to your work addiction will not help you open the gates either. Have you brought anyone else to testify on your behalf?” I asked again.

“Of course I have,” he answered angrily. I’ve brought all the people I served along the way. You see, before my death I was the publisher of many fine books in psychology, philosophy and religion. In fact, my publishing house published some best-selling self-help books on the market. The books not only made my company a great profit, but they helped quite a few people as well. I’m sure the gates of paradise will open once the testimony is heard from all those I’ve helped.”

“Again,” I was required to say, I’m sorry to inform you, sir, but the witness of those you made a profit from won’t help open the gates either.” “Well, whom else was I supposed to bring to help me open the gates, for God’s sake?” the wealthy man yelled. “God,” I replied. “Didn’t you bring God with you?” My friends, we the after-living ask only what is due us in justice – the right to be remembered, the right to be remembered as we truly were not as you wish we had been, the right to be prayed for and prayed to and the right to be judged by God alone.

One last story, however, before I let your imagination go. It’s a story about a young man who sincerely doubted the existence of the after-life.

One night, while sleeping under the stars the young man dreamed that he was face to face with God. The doubtful young man finally had the chance to ask God, “Is there or is there not life after life?” God thought about the question for a moment and then said, “Hey, if human beings can make plastic, don’t you think God can create eternal life?”

THE HAUNTED PRIEST

**Jesus then said, “There was a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell into the hands of robbers. “They stripped him, beat him, and went off leaving him half-dead. “It happened that a priest was going along that road, and saw the man, but passed by on the other side.”
Luke 10:30-31**

THE HAUNTED PRIEST

First, let me thank you for the opportunity to tell my side of the story. Of course, it has been almost two thousand years now, so my memory may be a bit hazy.

As I remember it, however, it was on Yom Kippur. That’s right! It was on the Day of Atonement. Anyway, while I was waiting in a huge crowd of pilgrims outside the temple of Jerusalem for the priests to process out with the ritual goat, I spotted a man I thought I recognized standing not ten feet away from me. O my God, I thought.

Could this be the same man I had seen lying half-dead in a ditch on the Jericho road only a few months earlier? Could this be the man I’d passed by? My first instinct was to do exactly what I did the day I saw the man lying in that ditch.

I wanted to run. What if he recognized me? I thought. But then again, perhaps I was just seeing things. I’d been fasting and praying in repentance all day, so perhaps my hunger was causing me to hallucinate.

This stranger couldn’t be the same man. No one could have survived such a beating. I shifted to see past the people standing in front of me – yes, it was he.

As I recovered from the shock of seeing this ghostly memory come to life, I wondered if I should say something to the stranger. Perhaps, I thought, I should tell him how often I had prayed for him, or, at least, try to explain why I didn’t stop to help.

Perhaps he'd understand my predicament at the time, how difficult a decision it was to pass him by. Perhaps he'd even be compassionate enough to forgive me.

Now I know that there are a lot of people who have already jumped to the judgmental conclusion that only someone cruel and arrogant could ignore a man so desperately in need.

Just another typical priest. Right? Thinks he's better than others. Right? It's not that simple, and you know it. Let me tell you why I was traveling the dangerous Jericho road. Perhaps then you'll understand.

You see, my family is of the priestly class, a proud and loyal lineage in Israel.

Anyway, when the lot was drawn deciding which clan would serve for a week in the temple, my family name was chosen. Of course, as the eldest son I was obligated to fulfill my duty to family, temple and nation.

Don't you see? I had waited years to represent my family at worship. I might never get the chance again. I couldn't just throw away one of the most important opportunities of my life to pick a dying man's carcass off the side of the road.

If I had touched that man or let him touch me, I'd have become unclean, requiring the ritual purification, during which time I wouldn't be allowed to serve in the temple. That's the letter of the law. I was torn. My choice was between two goods.

Either I performed my duty in the name of family, tradition, and institution by worshipping in the temple, or I fulfilled my obligation to charity by giving comfort and aid to a fellow traveler.

Now, I was stupid. Like every other Jew, I'd been taught when I was young that religion is greater than the sum of its laws and rituals, that right and wrong are best built on the foundation of justice, and that what ultimately matters is how you have loved.

Still, I passed the beaten man by. It wasn't fair. Why, I wondered, should I be the one required to stop help this man? It wasn't my fault that

he'd been beaten down. Why should it be my responsibility to pick him up?

After all, I was about the business of worship. I don't know where this stranger was going, but it certainly wasn't to fulfill temple duty. Anyway, he got what he deserved, traveling alone on the Jericho road.

Didn't he know how dangerous the journey could be? I certainly did – which is, by the way, another reason I didn't stop to help the man.

What if the thieves and robbers who had beaten this foolish traveler were waiting behind the rocks for another victim? I'd be easy prey for the pickings. It was just too dangerous. I did exactly what fear told me to do. I ran like hell.

Now don't look at me like that as though you would have done anything different. Just then, while still waiting in the anxious crowd outside the temple, my attention shifted again – this time, from the man I had passed by on the road, to the high priest who had returned to the altar in the holy of holies for the third time.

Because I knew that this was the moment when the high priest would lay his hands on a goat and make confession for the people and nation, transferring our sins onto the animal, I bowed my head.

That's when I remembered something a young rabbi had said while teaching in the Court of Women earlier that day.

“Repent and believe in the good news,” he proclaimed. “Repentance,” he continued, “begins when you take responsibility for the wrongs you've committed or the rights you've omitted.

“After all,” the rabbi said, “running away from yesterday's mistakes, fears or poor decisions is like trying to run away from your feet.” Suddenly the crowd pushed forward.

I looked up to see what was happening only to find myself looking directly into the eyes of the man I had passed by on the road. As we stood staring into each other's hearts, I hardly even noticed as the temple priests

processed by with the ritual scapegoat, leading it out into the desert to throw off a cliff.

DANIEL OF EMMAUS

On the third day, two disciples, Cleopas and a companion, were going to Emmaus, a village seven miles from Jerusalem. As they traveled, they talked about the things that had occurred in the city during the previous three days: how Jesus the Nazarene was handed over by the priests and rulers to be crucified, how some had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel, and how others had claimed that he was risen from the dead.

It happened that while they were talking and wondering, Jesus came up and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.

Luke 24:13-32 (Paraphrased)

DANIEL OF EMMAUS

Hello. My name is Daniel of Emmaus, and although I know you've never heard of me, I'm pretty sure you've heard the name of one of my oldest and dearest friends, Cleopas of Emmaus. Let me start from the beginning.

Cleopas and I have known each other all of our lives. In fact, the midwife who brought me into the world birthed Cleopas only a few months later.

We've been practically inseparable ever since. We played together as children, worked in the fields together as boys, stood for each other at our weddings, prayed together in our little village synagogue, and cared for each other's families as if they were our own.

Cleopas and I were friends. We trusted one another. That is precisely why I decided to tag along when Cleopas announced on a rainy spring day that he was going on a Passover pilgrimage to the city of Jerusalem to meet the preacher Jesus of Nazareth and to break bread with the holy man.

Jesus was all Cleopas had talked about for almost two years. He would quote Jesus' parables. He would tell Jesus' miracle stories. Why,

Cleopas even kept a written record of some of the tales he heard about Jesus from pilgrims passing through our village.

I certainly couldn't refuse when Cleopas asked me to accompany him on the half-day journey to the great city so that he could fulfill his dream of seeing and eating with Christ, especially after he had heard rumors that Jesus had recently been paraded through the streets in triumph.

Of course, the crowd of pilgrims that descended on the city for the Passover feast didn't make the search for Jesus very easy. In fact, it seemed that no matter where we searched, whether within or outside the city gates, we were caught in tides of traffic. For example, when we heard that Jesus was going to be teaching in the temple courtyard, we rushed there as fast as we could, only to discover, after fighting our way through the crowds, that Jesus had already moved on.

Even when we stood in a long line of pilgrims waiting to sacrifice our unblemished lamb, thinking that we might catch sight of Jesus doing the same, we were disappointed.

No matter how hard we searched Jesus seemed to stay just one step ahead of us. We missed him in the Court of Women when he preached there. We missed him in the Court of Gentiles during the sacrifice of the lambs. Why, we even missed Jesus' appearance in the Gethsemane garden, and that's after we were given secret information that he could be found praying there immediately after the Passover meal.

Of course, by the time Cleopas and I arrived, Jesus had already been arrested and was on his way to be condemned. Although despairing at the possibility that Jesus would be hung out to dry, Cleopas and I still waited to catch a glimpse. We were there when the soldiers publicly scourged Jesus, dragged him through the city streets and crucified him on Golgatha hill.

Only then did we finally get close enough, just close enough to see Jesus die. After all our expectations and dreams, what we ended up seeing was a godly man die an inhuman death, being taken down from a cross, being wrapped and anointed by his followers and then being laid in a garden tomb.

In the face of such disappointment all Cleopas and I could do was return home to our families, to our work, to our prayers, to our waiting.

Of course, we heard the strange story from a woman we met as we made our way out of the city that Jesus had supposedly risen from the dead. We thought the rumors of his rising were greatly exaggerated. The fantasy did little to raise our spirits.

After all, we had come all the way to Jerusalem to break bread with a living Jesus, not to stare into the face of death. Of course, once on the road returning home to Emmaus Cleopas and I did what lifelong friends tend to do when disappointed by life.

We shared what we felt as we watched Jesus being nailed to a cross, as we watched hope being buried beneath human cruelty. We didn't have to use a lot of words to communicate a lot of feelings. All we had to do was look into each other's eyes to see the confusion and hurt buried there.

Our broken bits of conversation and silence would carry us down the dusty road to the village we knew so well. Suddenly, however, as Cleopas and I took a final turn home, a shadow fell over us. From out of nowhere, the strangest of strangers was walking directly behind us.

Cleopas and I turned quickly around to face the stranger. Cloaked from head to toe, to protect himself from the heat and dust of the day, the stranger startled us again by asking if he could accompany us on our journey.

Aware that the Emmaus road could be dangerous if we traveled alone, we welcomed the man. The company, I thought, might even be a healthy distraction from the sadness of the city, until, of course, the stranger asked Cleopas what we had been discussing along the way.

Cleopas, being an honest soul, immediately began telling the stranger about the crucified teacher. Cleopas even took out his book of quotes, stories, and parables, and for the next few hours, while we wandered at a snail's pace, they argued with so much animation that you'd think Cleopas and the stranger were rewriting the commandments.

Although the journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus was only a half day's walk, I found myself awfully weary when my companions and I finally shuffled into the still village late in the evening.

While I, however, was tired, Cleopas seemed changed by the miles. With a firmness I'd rarely heard in my friend's voice, Cleopas spoke up. "We will share a meal at my home tonight." As Cleopas put a jug of wine and a loaf of bread on the familiar family table, it was my turn to speak up.

"Cleopas," I said, "I'm sorry you weren't able to see the face of the living lord and to share a meal with him." "Oh, but I have," Cleopas answered, "I certainly have. Don't you see Daniel," he said, "that the face of God is the face behind all others." Turning slowly on Cleopas' comment I realized that there were no strangers sitting at the table, only companions breaking bread.

THE WINE STEWARD

Three days later there was a wedding of Cana in Galilee and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus was also invited to the wedding with his disciples. When all the wine provided for the celebration had been served and they had run out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

Jesus replied, "Woman, your thoughts are not mine! My hour has not yet come." However, his mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Nearby were six stone water jars meant for the ritual washing as practiced by the Jews; each jar could hold twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them to the brim. Then Jesus said, "Now draw some out and take it to the steward."

So they did. The steward tasted the water that had become wine, without knowing from where it had come; for only the servants who had drawn the water knew. So, he immediately called the bridegroom to tell him, "Everyone serves the best wine first, and when people have drunk enough, he serves that which is ordinary. You instead have kept the best wine until the end." This miraculous sign was the first, and Jesus performed it at Cana in Galilee. John 2:1-12

THE WINE STEWARD

My name is Samuel of Nazareth, and I'm possessed by the blood of the grape. To put it in more contemporary terms, I'm what you'd call a recovering alcoholic. Now, although I've been sober one day at a time for almost two thousand years, I still get pretty nervous when I'm asked to tell my story, so forgive me if I ramble a bit.

Perhaps it would be helpful if I began by doing a little archeology around my drinking. As a Jew who grew up during the biblical period of history, I was accustomed to drinking wine. It was part of the Jewish lifestyle. When we got sick, we drank wine as medicine.

When we socialized or celebrated, we drank to mark the occasion. And when we were depressed, we drank to escape.

Wine was our cup of joy and sorrow. In fact, we even drank when we worshipped. For example, on every Sabbath as we raised a cup of the grape, we prayed the Kiddush prayer; “The seventh day is consecrated to the Lord our God. With wine, our symbol of joy, we celebrate this day and its holiness.

“We give thanks for all our blessings, for life and health, for work and rest, for home and love and friendship, on the Sabbath, eternal sign of creation. We remember that we are created in the divine image. We, therefore, raise the cup in thanksgiving. Blessed are you, Lord, our God, king of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.”

Now, I know it was rather rare, during biblical times for a Jew to addictively drink to excess, especially since we were weaned on the juice of the fermented grape. I, however, was such a rarity. It was my only claim to fame. I had heard the admonition from the book of Proverbs: “Wine is reckless, liquor rowdy. Unwise is anyone whom it seduces” (Proverbs 20:1). I had heard it preached a million times.

Preaching, however, never stopped me from drinking. In fact, now that I think about it, I can’t remember a time in my life when I wasn’t poisoned by the venom of the grape.

Why, the fermented demon even manipulated me into becoming a wine salesman. Any excuse to be around the juice of the vine was a good enough reason for me.

I even drank with the Romans, the very enemies of my people. They were some of my best customers. I wasn’t a bigot, I drank with everyone. Sad to say but wine was my best friend.

Actually, it would be more accurate to say that wine became my only friend. I knew for the longest time that I was sick. My life had become chaotically unmanageable. I just didn’t know what I could do about it.

Actually, I had no life to speak of, at least not until I stopped drinking. I remember the day I had my last drink. In fact, it was the last time I got drunk. You see, I couldn’t just have one drink.

I was an all-or-nothing kind of guy. If I drank, I got drunk. That is exactly what happened at the wedding banquet of a family friend in Cana of Galilee.

You see, even though I had volunteered to function as the wine steward for the wedding – just to make sure that the wine flowed freely and that everyone had a good time – I still proceeded to get roaring drunk.

In fact, I was so soaked in the grape that most of what happened at the wedding is just a blur. I remember traveling the nine miles from Nazareth to Cana, with my sister Mary, of course, slipping out of sight every now and then to have a quick drink.

I remember arriving at the home of the groom’s parents, leaving Mary to help tend to the food preparations for the banquet and then making my way to the wine market to purchase the many jars of wine needed for the days of wedding celebration.

I remember standing with a fellow wine merchant inspecting some wine, raising a cup, raising a cup, and then... and then... The next thing I remember I was dancing with, of all people, my nephew, Jesus of Nazareth. Now, for the overly pious among you, I don’t mean that Jesus and I were spiritually dancing. We were at a Jewish wedding, and like good Jews, we were dancing up a storm.

Of course, at the slightest hint of a storm, Jesus would stretch out his hands to try and calm it. Certainly a different man, that Jesus! Some even called him strange.

Now, I hadn’t seen Jesus for almost a year before he appeared at the Cana wedding with some of his disciples, but as soon as he arrived at the reception, the whispering started.

“Is he or isn’t he a prophet?” Some asked, while others dared to blaspheme, wondering if Jesus was actually the long-awaited Savior.

He was my nephew. I had seen him wet his diapers. The chances of Jesus being the highest power, the messiah, were about as high as the chances that he could change water into wine, or, even more impossible convince me to stop drinking.

Obviously, I had no idea who he was from the inside out. I must tell you, though, that he was an unusual boy who became an uncommon adult. He never picked up his father's carpentry trade. He spent almost all his time reading the Torah or talking with rabbis.

He was a dreamer, a storyteller, a naïve boy whose head was stuck in the clouds. What was even more embarrassing to the family, however, was that when Jesus moved from Nazareth to the sea town of Capernaum, he took up with the likes of fisherman and tax collectors.

God, the boy had no shame! Now that I think of it though, I do remember my sister Mary introducing me to one of Jesus' followers at the wedding party.

His name was Simon Peter, and from the smell of the man, it wasn't hard to guess his profession. You may not believe it, but this fisherman tried to argue with me, a grape trader, about how long you could store new wine in old skins before they burst. The fisherman had rocks in his head.

Not as big, of course, as the rocks in the head of the groom at the wedding. Now there was a fool. And don't you think I didn't tell him so before I stormed out of the reception.

Imagine, hiding six large jars of the finest wine from your own wine steward and then acting as though nothing had happened. I mean, who was he to save the best wine until last without telling me!

It made me look like an idiot in front of the guests. It made me look as if I couldn't do my job. Of course, I was drunk – so drunk that I had no idea what happened to me after I left the party.

That's when I must have passed out; God, what a drunk! I don't remember being picked up by Jesus and Simon Peter, nor do I recall camping with them for the night along the Capernaum road just outside of Cana.

But that's what must have happened because when I woke up hours later, I found myself only a few yards from a warm fire with Peter's loud voice echoing in my ears.

Well, I just lay there. I just lay there by the fire for the longest time, embarrassed to open my eyes, listening to Peter tell Jesus a story about a gossiping servant.

Now, the way Peter tells it, it seems that a servant at the wedding had started a rumor that after Jesus had learned that I hadn't purchased enough wine for the party, he, as casually as you please, changed one hundred and twenty gallons of purification water into the best tasting wine in all of Cana.

Peter laughed uproariously at the telling of that tale, concluding his story with a strange statement: "Always looking for the magic, these people, while missing the miracle and the meaning." A number of odd thoughts crossed my mind after hearing Peter's tall tale.

First, I wondered if Jesus had been as surprised as everyone else by the magic he had performed at the wedding. And, second, I wanted to learn how to do it. Just imagine, I could be a drunk able to turn water into wine.

To tell you the truth, I felt miserable as I lay there in the dirt. I knew I was a loser, a drunk, possessed, fixated, obsessed, insane for the escape the grape could provide.

However, drinking just wasn't any fun anymore. All drinking did was cause problems. I couldn't even do my job right. I wanted to stop. I just didn't know how.

God, it felt as if I had a God-sized hole in the middle of my head, heart, and spirit, and all I could do was try to fill it with whatever felt good – wine, powdered potions, women, whatever. Lying there with my eyes tightly closed, I wanted to scream.

"If there is a God, show yourself. "God, I surrender. I give up. I'll do anything if you'll just fill up my emptiness." Finally, after lying in the dirt for as long as I could take it, I slowly cracked open my eyes. Sitting directly in front of me was my nephew Jesus.

As the light from the fire danced on his face it slowly dawned on me that perhaps the real miracle of the Cana wedding wasn't so much that Jesus could change water into wine but rather that he could change me.

THE VINEDRESSER

And Jesus continued with this story about a man who had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he came looking for the fruit on it, but found none.

Then he said to the vinedresser: “Look here, for three years now I’ve been looking for figs on this tree and have found none.

“Cut it down! Why should it use up the ground?”

The gardener replied to him: “Leave it one more year, so that I may dig around and put in some fertilizer; and perhaps it will bear fruit from now on. “But if it doesn’t, you can cut it down.” Luke 13: 6-9

THE VINEDRESSER

Did you know that some of the stories Jesus told actually occurred on one of the largest wheat, grape, olive, and fig farms in all of Capernaum, where, by the way, I happened to be the head vinedresser, the master gardener?

The farm was huge, running from the flatlands along the Sea of Galilee, where we planted wheat and barley, right up into the hills, where our vines and fruit trees grew strong. It was a four hundred-acre farm that I lovingly called my backyard.

You see, I was born, grew up and worked on that farm preparing for the day when my father would pass down to me the job of vinedresser, just as his father had handed down the job to him.

(You could say, if you dared such an awful pun, that I became the plant manager.) As my father always said, “next to family and faith, life’s greatest treasure is the land.”

Of course, I know you’re not here to listen to my life story, so let me tell you where I first met Jesus. Actually, our first meeting wasn’t a very dramatic event.

In fact, it was quite ordinary. You see, very early each morning during the seasons of planting and harvesting, I'd go into the city of Capernaum to hire the number of laborers needed to work in the fields or vineyards that day. That's right, I was Jesus' boss.

Of course, little did I know the day I spotted the tall lanky Jew from Nazareth, standing with all the other common day laborers waiting to be hired, that in the next few years Jesus would become my right-hand man on the farm, and then, of all things, he would quit the land, be baptized in the Jordan River, start a healing ministry in and around Capernaum, have followers of his own, and eventually be crucified on a cross.

How Jesus could have gotten himself into so much trouble is beyond me. He never struck me as someone capable of the blasphemy and insurrection that the religious leaders and politicians accused him of.

He certainly was a hard worker, though. I can vouch for that. In fact, I was so impressed with Jesus' spirited energy and his popularity among his fellow workers that after only one season of day work, I hired him to be my full-time assistant.

Of course, I could never promise Jesus the position of vinedresser. I had two sons preparing for that task. Naturally, like my father, I planned on handing down my job to one of my sons.

They really were good boys once you got to know them. And boy, they were strong. Hey, they took after their father right? Of course the boys went through some of those growing stages that every parent likes to complain about.

The worst phase by far, however, was when they would say one thing and then do another. It drove their mother and me crazy. For example, every morning I'd send my sons out into the fields so that they could learn the trade of vinedressing.

Of course, it was common for the older boy to say that he was going out into the fields to work and, then, to stay home, while it was just as common for the younger boy to absolutely refuse to put his hands to the plow or planting and, then, go out and work like a mule anyway.

Jesus, however, was a different story altogether. He was consistent and persistent, a man of his word. However, he was never meant to be a vinedresser. Jesus just had too much of the storyteller in him.

For example, no matter what work we were doing together, Jesus would be in the middle of telling a story, and more often than not, it was a story he had already told me at least ten times. Of course, I didn't have the heart to tell him that he was being repetitious.

I just couldn't take away the obvious enjoyment he felt in the telling of tales. He certainly loved a good story. In fact, I must have heard Jesus say, at least a thousand times, especially when talking to my sons, that the only thing that can live as long as the land is a good story.

And God, could he tell them! For example, when Jesus would spin the tale about his father's death, I felt as if I was right there with him wondering how he was going to support his mother and, then, being surprised when he found a job just outside the village of Nazareth.

As I said, he certainly could go on and on with the tales. For example, Jesus would tell the story about a young man who took his share of his inheritance, left home, was beaten up on the road, was saved by, of all people, a Samaritan, and, then, returned home not only to discover his father's love but also to unearth the treasures of life buried in his own backyard.

No sooner would he finish telling that story than he'd start telling it again, with, of course, a few new twists or turns thrown in for good measure. Jesus was a great storyteller.

I never imagined, though, that he'd eventually story himself onto a cross. I guess he was just too honest for his own good, too generous with his effort. Too trusting. Really, just too naïve. Jesus had faith, though. I've got to give him that. God did have faith.

When, for example, the master of the farm ordered the sowing of seed for the planting, Jesus took him at his word and sowed with such an enthusiastic spirit that I had to step in to make sure that some of the seed actually fell in the plowed field.

And when the master hired day laborers to help in the harvest and then paid them equal wages no matter how many hours they worked that day, Jesus didn't complain like some of the other day workers or threaten to riot like some of the tenant farmers.

Jesus, you see, had faith in the master's judgment – at times, it seems, a good deal more faith than I did, and I was the master's vinedresser. I can't remember a more faithful or hard working man than Jesus.

Why, he even had a small garden of his own that he'd tend late in the day after returning from the fields. It was odd, though, that Jesus sowed only mustard seeds in his own garden.

He said something about trying to solve the mystery of why the smallest of seeds, which when ground to powder made a very potent spice, would grow, when planted, into one of the strongest and largest of trees.

In fact, as a master gardener I can testify that whether cultivated or growing wild mustard trees are almost impossible to kill.

They are like, say, a fig tree – which reminds me of a story about a fig tree that really strained Jesus' faith in the master. "How can the master be so cruel?" Jesus ranted. "Couldn't he give it another chance?" Jesus raved, after I told him that the master wanted us to cut down a diseased fig tree growing on the edge of the orchard before it infected the entire vineyard.

Of course, I told Jesus that for three seasons. I had tried everything I knew to heal the tree, but that didn't stop him from asking for more fertilizer and one more chance.

So I gave him permission to care for it. With that Jesus wasted no time. Jesus picked up his sleeping mat, moved up to the orchard, lit a fire for the night, offered a prayer, and, then, at first light set to work to answer his own prayer. He fertilized with just the right mixture of manure and dirt so as not to shock the tree. He pruned some of the tree's larger branches so that the roots wouldn't have to work so hard, and he told the tree one story after another about other barren trees that had recovered to produce again.

Of course, Jesus knew that there is imperfection and weakness in every vineyard, that there are weeds growing in every wheat field, and that you can't force a tree to produce fruit if it chooses not to or if it's sick beyond repair.

After all, Jesus knew he couldn't cure the tree. All he could do was care for the tree the best way he knew how by giving it the opportunity, the ingredients and the encouragement it needed to cure itself. Sadly, though, after many trying weeks, Jesus finally realized that the fig tree would never rise or recover, that it would never produce fruit again, that it was dead – unlike, of course, the story about the fig tree, which, as you've just heard, still lives on. As does the sacred storyteller.

THE MONEY-CHANGER

As the Passover of the Jews was at hand, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple court he found merchants selling oxen, sheep, and doves, and money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple court, together with the oxen and sheep. He knocked over the tables of the money-changers, scattering the coins, and ordered the people selling doves, "Take all this away and stop turning my Father's house into a marketplace!" John 2: 13-16

THE MONEY CHANGER

Having finally learned that it's better to tell the truth than to own it, that it's better to be honest than merely right, I've decided today to make an uncommonly honest confession. Now, don't throw anything at me when I tell you, but I was a banker in the city of Jerusalem during the reign of Herod and the rise and demise of Jesus of Nazareth.

Not only was I a banker, but I was the temple money-changer who spread the maliciously false story around that Jesus, after preaching a revolutionary sermon in the temple court condemning the corruption and commercialization of the temple grounds, had not only violently lost control of himself but had viciously attacked me and many other good, loyal, and hard-working money-changers, with a whip.

To tell you the truth, my version of the story was a bit exaggerated. Actually I lied. Oh, Jesus did argue with me and a few other merchants and money-changers in the temple court that day, and the table of coins did get knocked over the midst of discussion, but, as far as the rest of the story is concerned, well, Jesus didn't really try to hurt anyone.

Who would have thought that my version of the temple ruckus would make it into print? I mean, how could anyone fall for such a tall tale? Wasn't it obvious, if Jesus had actually tried to start a riot, as I originally claimed, that he would have been arrested by the Roman guards for disturbing the peace?

I never meant to hurt the man. But damn, I was mad – angrier than I had ever been in my life. You see, I just couldn't understand how this

Jesus could march right into the Court of women and preach against those of us who worked for the temple.

Didn't this wild-eyed reformer have any respect for those of us who made an honest living by helping others worship according to prescribed custom? After all, it wasn't my fault that the priests and Pharisees decided that no coins bearing the face of a false God could be used to purchase the required doves or sheep for temple sacrifice, and that only shekels could be used, thus requiring some of us to function as official money-changers, for a small profit, of course.

It wasn't my fault that the temple administrators opened the courts to merchants and bankers alike and then taxed us on our measly profits.

I just couldn't understand why this Jesus was preaching against me. I thought we had an understanding. You see, I knew Jesus. Well, to tell the truth, I really didn't know him that well. Actually, I had one brief conversation with him, in a crowd of pilgrims, just outside the city gates a few days before Passover.

I felt a bit awkward at the time just standing there next to him. Of course, I didn't really know what to say, so I stammered on a bit, and then asked him about... asked him... what did I ask him...? Oh yes, now I remember.

I asked Jesus what I had to do to gain everlasting life. Good question, right? Well, I was a bit taken back when he not only answered my question but then proceeded to challenge me to give what I had to the poor and to follow him.

I smiled at his recommendation, gave him a little donation and moved on. I never expected that Jesus would not only appear in the temple court a few days later but also would go out of his way to embarrass me and my fellow bankers by accusing us of putting money before God and family, comfort before compassion, and compromise before concern for the poor.

God, was I angry, and, as I realized later, a little scared – scared because I knew he was right. I confess, I was a greedy man. I loved money. There, I said it. God, I loved money. For me, shekels not only

counted, they ruled. In fact, no matter how many times my father had told me when I was young that there was a time for everything under heaven – you know – a time for love, a time for war, a time for work, a time for sleep etc., etc., I just couldn't imagine when it wasn't the right time to make money.

Why, I had piled up storehouses of grain, pens of sheep and oxen and treasures of shekels as though it was all manure, which, as you know, may help things grow when spread around, but, when piled high, God, it stinks as though there's no tomorrow.

Now, I know the manure image may be a bit disgusting, but that's exactly how I felt, as if I was covered with sh..shame for being so greedy. Of course, if the manure image is a bit upsetting, think of me as a fat camel weighted down with so much in the way of greed, possessions, desires, and fears that I couldn't fit through the gate of respectability in this life or the next.

I guess the real reason I was angry at Jesus, though, wasn't so much because he did or didn't turn the money-changers' tables upside down – that's almost irrelevant – but rather I was angry because Jesus' preaching turned my heart, my values, right side up again.

You see, for years I had worked like a mule, promoting, protecting, and making a profit from the status quo. In fact, I put so much confidence in the temple institution that I had practically lost my faith in God, myself and others in the bargain.

I spent so much time marching around, proclaiming from the rooftops my great belief in the institution of the family, that I had practically destroyed my relationship with my wife, my children, with the very people I claimed to love. What a hypocrite!

I paid alms tax for the poor, all right, but you can bet that I never went near or touched anyone who was poor. I may have been a successful business and community leader, but I was becoming a lousy human being. I was rich, but, God, was I hungry!

I was wealthy but empty. Of course, I wasn't always so obsessed with filling up my storehouses with grain, my pens with sheep, and my

temple holdings with shekels. There was a time when I knew that no matter how you rationalize, analyze, theologize, politicize or compromise, that no matter how you slice, dice, or price it, that no matter how hard you pretended or how hard you worked to get what you've got, it has never been, it will never be nor is it now right that some people have too much while others don't have enough, that some have luxuries while others lack necessities.

It's simply not right. Now, for those of you still listening, let me give you a warning. This Jesus is a dangerous man. In fact, he's so dangerous that he can turn your life upside down if you're not careful. God, is he dangerous!

In fact, I promise you, if you let this Jesus preach in your churches, synagogues, temples, or meeting houses, there's no telling what might happen. Why, you might even be transformed by his challenging words.

THE PRODIGAL'S FRIEND

The son was still a long way off when his father caught sight of him. His father was so deeply moved with compassion that he ran out to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. The son said: "Father, I have sinned against God and before you. I no longer deserve to be called your son."

But the father turned to his servants: "Quick! Bring out the finest robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fatted calf and kill it. We will celebrate and have a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and is found." And the celebration began. Luke 15:20-24

THE PRODIGAL'S FRIEND

Come! Join the celebration! You're all invited! Come on! Follow me! Everyone's invited! The prodigal son has returned, and his parents are having a welcome – home feast. The fatted calf has been killed. There will be food on the table, and wine in the jugs. There will be music, singing, and dancing.

As a lifelong friend of the family and in the name of the prodigal's mother and father, I invite you to come and celebrate, for their son was lost and is found, was dead and now has come back to life.

You're all invited so come to the feast. Who's going to be at the celebration? You wonder. Well. The widow's going to be there. You know, the crazy old widow from the village who's always either losing her money or giving her last shekel to the temple.

She'll be there. The widow wouldn't have a problem about going to a party to welcome home a prodigal. Of course, that's probably because she can't remember what the boy did wrong, anyway.

She remembers how to have fun, though, so the widow will be there. And the master of the neighboring farm – he'll be there too. You know the landowner I'm talking about – the one who pays equal wages to his day laborers no matter how many hours they worked. He wouldn't miss this feast for the world.

And, of course, the prodigal's father and mother will be there. Now, the father, well, he'll be dancing with joy, sort of making up for all the time he spent out on the road waiting for his son's return, wishing all the while he had been a better father.

It was sad to watch, but on almost every Sabbath, the father would be at synagogue, with his oldest boy on his right and an empty seat on his left. He'd put his head in his hands and he'd pray. Actually, I think, he was crying.

The father wept a lot while he waited. And he wondered if he could have done anything to prevent his younger son from taking and wasting his part of the family's inheritance. Perhaps he should have given his younger son more attention, he thought, or maybe he shouldn't have given him so much freedom. Well, all a father can do is love the best way he knows how.

Of course, while the father danced his son's sins away the boy's mother, with a heart torn by love, had the little prodigal pinned to the wall so she could get a full confession.

She wasn't about to let her younger son practically break his father's heart without hearing the whole sordid story. No beating around the (burning) bush here. As you can see, everybody who isn't anybody will be at the celebration. Of course, there are some neighbors and family members who have already excused themselves from the party, for rather lame reasons, too.

For example, one local farmer said he just bought five oxen and had to stay home to take care of them. And, of course, as for the prodigal's older brother, well, he won't be at the celebration either, so you don't have to worry about him spoiling your fun.

He's still so angry that his father doesn't love him more than he loves his younger brother that he's off pouting somewhere. And, naturally, since the older brother won't be there well, neither will be any of his so-called friends.

It's all for the best, though. At least you won't have to listen to their whining and moaning. "Why should I go to a party for someone who shamed his father?" one said to me. "He should be punished for his sins," another said, "not welcomed home with a feast." "Or," as another complained, "you just watch – that prodigal will do it gain.

"After all, once a disappointment, once a failure, once a loser, once a sinner, once a disgrace, once a thief, liar, addict, always a... well, you know. "You can't change a camel's smell," he concluded. You're in luck, though. Not only won't you have to put up with these self-righteous fools, but there's plenty of room for you at the feast.

Because the father and mother love their son, they've sent me out onto the highways and byways to invite you to come to the feast. It doesn't matter where you've wandered in life, you're still invited. Whether you're poor or rich, more or less broken, crippled, lost, blind, sinful, addicted, or lame, come to the feast. Come and celebrate.

Be a friend of the father by befriending the son. Come and celebrate the kind of friendship that doesn't just overlook faults and failings but rather chooses to look right through them to that something divine that lasts many times longer than any mistakes or sins – hope.

Come and celebrate the kind of family where you spend your time caring for one another rather than trying to change one another. Come and celebrate the kind of friendship that appreciates how far you've come rather than demands to know how far you've got to go to be perfect.

Come and celebrate the kind of family that understands how much courage it takes to make a mistake and admit it, and how much harder it is to return home the longer you've been away.

Come and celebrate with a feast full of friends and family. Come and return home to yourself.

THE CROSSMAKER

Pilate said to the crowd, “And what shall I do with Jesus called the Christ?” All answered, “Crucify him!” Pilate insisted, “What evil has he done?” But they shouted louder, “Crucify him!” Matthew 27:22-23

THE CROSSMAKER

My name isn't important. All you need know is that I was a crossmaker. Along with many other carpenters in the city of Jerusalem, I was pressed into the service of carving the crossbeams used for crucifixion by the brutish Romans.

What could I do? I had to feed my family. I knew how the Romans used these beams, but I couldn't do anything to prevent it. So, almost every morning I'd go into the hills to cut down strong pieces of timber to drag home for the carving. Once chiseled, I'd pile them high in the Roman's courtyard. I despised the job, but the money put food on the table.

After all, how these crossbeams were used was not my concern. My first obligation was to take care of my wife and children, not to ask questions. Oh, when I think back on the days of my apprenticeship, when I first took up the trade of a carpenter, I can recall the joy I felt when carving a table from coarse pieces of heavy wood.

I've always thought myself a skilled carpenter – not the best, perhaps, but one in love with craft. It's an art, you know, to mold and fashion from rough beams a smooth and well-fitted piece of furniture.

It takes an eye of care and hands of compassion. This may sound strange to those of you who do not know the feel of wood, but to be a true carpenter you must respect the grain and bend of each and every beam you cut or it will not fit well.

I sound like a dreamer, and I was, so many years ago. Then reality hit with the cruelty of a world gone mad. My ideals seemed to fall away like the bark of a dying tree. With each problem and setback in life, I became more and more pessimistic. Even the love of my craft seemed to slowly crack into splinters of callous indifference.

My art became a tool of death, my craft a means of suffering, and I didn't seem to care. My friends, it's one thing to say, "I didn't know," when finding fault with your actions. It's another thing entirely to know your actions contribute to the heavy burdens others must carry and to say, "I don't care."

Not knowing is ignorance and can be understood; not caring is the very evil Christ came to overcome. You may wonder why I've come to speak with you today. Well, I, Christ's crossmaker, watched this holy man carry upon his shoulders what I had chiseled with indifference and hewed with fear, and I became sick with shame.

I beg you, therefore, my friends, to watch the suffering Jesus of today's crucifixion walk the steps of the passion as innocent children go hungry and the helpless are oppressed by bureaucratic idiocy. Watch Jesus nailed to the cross of today's violence as the powerless are victimized by weapons of holocaust, built out of fear.

Watch closely as Christ carries his cross today and ask yourself if, by your silent indifference you've helped to carve that cross. If so, put down your chisel of abuse, for I guarantee you, no one carves a cross for another to shoulder without one day having to carry it himself.