

“Show and Tell”

Luke 7:18-23

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I come from a state that raises corn and cotton, cockleburs and Democrats, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me.

Thus spake a Missouri state senator in the Year of Grace 1899. So famous did that statement become that Missouri is now known as the “Show Me” State. We Missourians are an obdurate people, stubborn as the Missouri mule that the state has also made famous.

A familiar Chinese proverb proclaims that a picture is worth a thousand words. God Almighty took a cue from the Chinese. This God, who began talking at creation, who laid down the Decalogue (literally Ten Words), who kept talking through the prophets, finally put all those words—the greatest words from the law

and the prophets—into a person who modeled for us a picture of what God had in mind for the human race. Incarnation. Word-made-flesh, the kind of theology made for people from Missouri who believe none of what they hear and only half of what they see.

Remember Eliza Doolittle’s musical remonstrance with her young suitor: *Words, words, words, I’m so sick of words! Don’t speak to me of love: **show me!*** In Christ, God didn’t just **tell** us how to live and love; God **showed** us. It is a picture now indelibly stamped on our consciousness and our consciences.

That picture snaps into focus in the Church on Epiphany and the Sundays following. Epiphany (in general) means a sudden insight, an “aha!” experience. In the Church it means a divine revelation, a manifestation, a showing forth. The Festival of the Epiphany celebrates the revelation of Jesus’ divinity to the Gentiles, as represented by the Magi, the embodied wisdom of the continents of the then-known world, who

bow before a superior Wisdom. God's wisdom, hidden for ages, is revealed and proclaimed in Jesus. Revelation and proclamation are the primary activities of Epiphany and the weeks following. Epiphany is God's great **show and tell** time, God's great light and sound show. The lights come on in revelation, and Christ is seen for who he is—the Light of the world. And the sound is turned up so our neighbors around the globe can hear the news that Jesus Christ is born!

Every 4-year-old knows about **show and tell**. It is an activity that makes concrete the abstract. Yet the oldest person has not outgrown a need to transmute spirit into matter. Every person needs to be able to turn the intangible into something that can be touched, the invisible into something that can be seen. If faith means hoping for what we cannot yet see, as the Book of Romans asserts, and if we walk by faith not by sight, as the Baptists insist, there nonetheless comes a time when we must see something in order to tell anything.

Thomas, the Doubter mutters, *Unless I see with my own eyes and touch with my own hands, I will not believe*. Jesus manifests himself to Thomas in yet another epiphany, then gently chides the Doubter, *Blessed are those that have not seen, yet believe*. I am with Thomas, though.

I'm with Thomas because I don't want a second-hand faith. I want to see, to touch, to experience for myself. I am from Missouri, and you have got to show me! I learned in Missouri that more than mules and people are stubborn. Facts are stubborn things, and facts don't change, just because the Church calendar says it is time to celebrate the Epiphany. I learned this hard truth in my twelfth year. May I tell you about it?

Sixty-six years ago last Tuesday Patty Masters died: January 21, 1954. It was a Thursday. The weather was raw and sullen. The phone call I had been expecting . . . and dreading . . . came. Patty Masters died of leukemia this morning at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis. She was fifteen. I loved her with a love as pure as

any I have known. Patty had red hair and freckles and a million-dollar smile. She was our pastor's daughter, which was sort of too bad, but she was beautiful, which wasn't bad at all!

Being a Methodist pastor's daughter, she hadn't been in town long. In those days Methodist ministers moved around pretty often. But Patty had been in town long enough to win a lot of hearts, mine included. She and I sang in a church trio with Ruth Ann Hall, who was thirteen. Patty wanted to be a missionary when she grew up, and I thought God surely wanted me to grow up to be one too . . . to be anything I had to be to stay near Patty.

My love had no adequate vocabulary. All I could do to express myself was to say the opposite of what I meant. I said she was ugly. I said she was silly. I said she was just an old girl. How does a boy crowding twelve, whose voice has not yet changed, **show** love, **tell** of love? Patty's death pretty well torpedoed Epiphany 1954! Who gave a rip if Christ was born if he couldn't keep Patty Masters alive, who only lived to serve Him?

There was another one once that Jesus couldn't save. No, I don't mean the thief on the cross. I mean Jesus' own cousin, John the Baptizer. Jesus' ministry was on a roll, but John was cooling his heels in the Clink. You remember the story. John lost his head in the end. But before that, John surveyed his sad, sorry state, which was such a contrast to Jesus' current fame and success up north. John, who earlier had spoken with such conviction about Jesus, now had his doubts. Prison has a way of eroding a person's self-confidence. So John sent one of his inner circle to inquire of Jesus whether he was the real deal or just another upcountry messiah. Jesus' response was classic **show and tell**.

*Go and tell John what you have **seen** and **heard**: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me. (Luke 7:22, 23)*

Three times in the gospels Jesus says "**Go and tell**." The first time is to John's disciple. The

second is one chapter later. Jesus has just healed the Gerasene demoniac. The young man returns to Jesus, fully clothed, sane as a saint, and begging to be allowed to tag along as one of Jesus' retinue. Jesus says . . . no. "**Return** to your home, and **declare** how much God has done for you. (Luke 8:39)

The third time the message from Jesus is indirect, delivered by two angels at the tomb on Easter morning.

Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. (Matthew 28:7)

During the Sundays after Epiphany we are told that the Good News of Jesus is to be broadcast to the far corners of the earth. But every time Jesus says "**go and tell**," he means to tell it to the home folks first: to your mentor, John the Baptist, moldering in a southern jail, to your townspeople and family members, who won't recognize you with your clothes on, to despairing disciples who know the stubborn fact that death is realer than resurrection.

To be sure, the gospel must eventually spread to Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth (how exotic), but the beginning of **show and tell** is right here in Jerusalem (how mundane). Send me to Timbuktu to witness for you, Jesus, but don't send me home! Not to the people I live with and work among, who already have me pre-figured, pegged, and pigeonholed.

I preached twice at Arch Street Methodist Church in my home church in Hannibal. The first time, a sweltering August morning when I was nineteen, too nervous to eat breakfast. I stood to preach on an empty stomach and nearly passed out, knees buckling, managing to hang onto the pulpit until my head stopped swimming, but not before my helicopter mother had rushed to the podium, thoroughly humiliating me by screeching, "Kenny, are you all right? Do you need to sit down?!?!"

The second time, in my early thirties, an experience preacher and a seasoned urban minister in St. Louis, I lost my voice the night before and was reduced to whispering my way

through the message. It is not an exaggeration to say that nobody was saved on either of those less-than-auspicious sermonic outings. **Go and tell, show and tell.** Right. The only comfort I have about those failures, after all these long years, is the comfort of knowing that Jesus didn't fare so well in his inaugural sermon at the Nazareth synagogue either.

I understand that **show and tell** is what we are about here today. Because Sunday comes every week and a preacher is only as good as his last outing. "**Show** us what you've got today, Doc." It works both ways, though. I am saying to you by standing up and speaking out, "**Tell** me what you're about, friends." But let us be clear: **show and tell** does not make epiphany happen. Epiphany makes **show and tell** possible. It is not as if, by magic, we can educe an epiphany from our sharing, but Epiphany may find us along the way.

Legend has it that the Apostle Thomas (the former Doubter) became a missionary to India And was martyred there. Some witness! A witness in a court of law is required to tell the

truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. In court, only first-hand testimony is acceptable. No here-say evidence is admissible. So, also, in the faith, we are asked to tell only the truth we know.

So let us **show and tell** the truth we know and are. Let our testimony be first-hand and without pretense. Let us show our **scars** and **tell** of our wounding and healing in the name of the Wounded Healer, trusting His promise that He is present where two or three are so engaged. If we were to do so, that might yield an epiphany with at least a lowercase *e*, might it not? For if Jesus had not revealed God to us by what he said and did, we wouldn't be here.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.
(Isaiah 53:4,5)

Show and tell follows Epiphany, not the other way around. Historically, the gospel begins at the end of the story, not at the beginning—at Jesus' suffering and death, not his birth. The epiphany of his birth matters only in light of his death and resurrection. That is the real Epiphany, with an uppercase *E*.

The wounding of Christ is the only thing, yet today, that salves my pain over Patty Masters' death. He, too, knew the agony of suffering and the anxiety of dying young. Christ it was who promised a place and a Presence for the likes of Patty and comfort for the likes of me. That realization is an epiphany of sorts—not the one I want, certainly, but it does shine some light into my darkness. Maybe Epiphany means having just enough light to see. It was, after all, a smaller star that guided the Magi, not the larger star we call the sun. It was a nightlight, not daylight.

In my experience, the command to **go and tell** always happens in the midst of the suffering dark; like imprisonment (as with John the Baptist), like rejection (as with the Gerasene

demoniac), like grief (as with Jesus' sorrowing disciples). The epiphany—the revelation, the insight, the “aha”—happens only by acting in the midst of pain, loss, and doubt: the dark night of the soul. “Seeing” happens only in the process of flying blind. Only as we **go and tell** will we have something to **show and tell**, for we go out not knowing (that is to say, in faith), trusting that a light not our own (dare I say a Divine Light?) will meet us on the way and illumine our paths. We cannot manipulate an epiphany, only be guided by it. The Magi could only be guided in darkness.

This understanding has come hard to an obdurate Missouri boy, schooled in stubborn facts, in a state that grows corn and cotton, cockleburs and Democrats, who is neither convinced nor satisfied by frothy eloquence, who continues to argue with the Almighty: “Don't just **tell** me Lord; **show me!**”

