

“MY STORY CAN CHANGE THE WORLD”
by Rom A. Pegram (10/27/19)

Today, we’re starting a new worship series that will take us up to the Season of Advent (Christmas). It’s called ‘IGNITE: One Life Can Change the World’ ... and *that life is yours*. I’m convinced of it. In looking to the future, as we began last week, God tells us in Jeremiah 29:11 (NLT): “For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” Do you remember that? So, if this is true (and I do believe so!), then *one life—led by God—can change the world*. Our lives can mean something—not just for this life, but for eternity. In light of all of this, let me begin today with a story...

I grew up in a pastor’s home. My dad was a southern preacher (and my mom, a southern lady) who came north for the Wesleyan Church to plant churches on the frontier of Wisconsin. And if you go to Pardeeville today, as Pastor Kerry has reminded me many times in the past couple of years, the Wesleyan Bible Church that dad planted is right down the street from him and doing well. So, this is the context I grew up in—a P.K. or preacher’s kid—growing up in that kind of home. And, like many P.K.s I’ve heard about, I was just a bit rebellious. Why? Because I had something to prove. I needed to show the world that I was just as normal as everyone else—my life’s goal for several years growing up...

Folks, I didn’t realize it at the time, but my upbringing—regarding my faith—was very much a privileged existence. I grew up going to church, learning the stories of the Bible in Sunday school, learning the songs of the faith in both Sunday school and church. And it was years later that I realized not everyone had this privilege—of living with two Christian parents, both of them committed to Christ and his Church. But I didn’t always see it that way. Why? Because I had something to prove...

It was probably when I was in 7th grade that God began to get my attention. It was during those years that my father began to have health issues (i.e. his first heart attack, etc.). And, as my older brother has said, it was like this cloud that hung over us all through junior high and high school—that we may have to learn to make it without a father. (Dad lived to 81 years old, so we were blessed.) But this is the time that I began, as a young man, to ask some serious questions. What happens if my dad dies? Where will he go? And then, where would I go if I died? I began to remember many things my father had taught me about the Christian faith—reinforcing my thoughts on these things. And I was also a part of a youth group, at the time, with a great youth leader who reinforced what I’d been taught through the years as well...

On one youth group outing, we loaded up our youth leader’s old station wagon, and headed over to Viroqua, WI, to a youth rally at the high school during a week-long crusade by Lowell Lundstrom (Sisseton, SD) and the Lundstrom family (Summer ’72). That evening, when we were there, my life began to change. The music was, of course, a draw for me. As Lowell Lundstrom said, at 100 yards he looked just like Elvis ... and sang a bit like him too. Then he preached ... and challenged all who were there to give their lives to Christ, because we didn’t know what tomorrow would hold. Those sitting around me in the back were openly making fun of his message—including a couple people very close to me. I didn’t care. At the end of his message, Lowell Lundstrom called those forward who desired to give their lives to Christ. And I stood up—the only

one in my group, as far as I remember ... and went forward to publicly give my life to Jesus...

And that, folks, was the beginning of a brand-new life. Has it been perfect? No! Absolutely not. As a friend used to say, it's more like one step forward and two steps back someday. But the decision was made. No more living life totally on my own—not without God's help. I used to worry about death; now I knew that God knew me ... and eternity was mine. I had that *assurance*...

You know, a story is a powerful thing. And if you learn how to tell your story, God can use you in ways you cannot imagine. This series (Ignite) is about how one life can change the world. And, during this series, I want to challenge you to learn to tell your story, tell it well, and allow God to use your story to influence people around you for him. The bottom line is this: *This series is for you to grow deeper in your faith by learning how to ignite the faith of others around you.* We're going to be looking at this over a short period of time this fall; this is a part of the GROW that we promise to do as members & friends of this church. So, let's begin to talk about how your story can change the world by walking through a famous story found in John 9 (1-11, 24-25, 35-38 (NLT)—*the story of the blind man who was healed*. Follow along with me, would you? Here we have a man who was born blind, a beggar inside the walled city, who had a world-changing encounter with Jesus. So here we go, starting at Verse 1...

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. ²“Rabbi,” his disciples asked him, “why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?” ³“It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins,” Jesus answered. “This happened so the power of God could be seen in him. ⁴We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us. The night is coming, and then no one can work. ⁵But while I am here in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶Then he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud over the blind man’s eyes. ⁷He told him, “Go wash yourself in the pool of Siloam” (Siloam means “sent”). So the man went and washed and came back seeing!

⁸His neighbors and others who knew him as a blind beggar asked each other, “Isn’t this the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some said he was, and others said, “No, he just looks like him!” But the beggar kept saying, “Yes, I am the same one!” ¹⁰They asked, “Who healed you? What happened?” ¹¹He told them, “The man they call Jesus made mud and spread it over my eyes and told me, ‘Go to the pool of Siloam and wash yourself.’ So I went and washed, and now I can see!” – John 9:1-11 (NLT)

So for the second time they called in the man who had been blind and told him, “God should get the glory for this, because we know this man Jesus is a sinner.” ²⁵“I don’t know whether he is a sinner,” the man replied. “But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!” – John 9:24-25 (NLT)

When Jesus heard what had happened, he found the man and asked, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶The man answered, “Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him.” ³⁷

“You have seen him,” Jesus said, “and he is speaking to you!”³⁸ “Yes, Lord, I believe!” the man said. And he worshiped Jesus. – John 9:35-38 (NLT)

So, this guy had quite a day. First, he went from being born blind ... to being able to see. Then, when he meets Jesus again ... he seals the deal—makes a true connection with eternity. He believed in and worshiped Jesus. What an incredible story! And *because he'd met Jesus, he had something worth talking about*. Here was someone who was familiar; he was the man born blind who always begged down by the Pool of Siloam. He was a nobody before Jesus came along. Now, suddenly, everyone knew him through this miracle. They knew his life had been changed. He was getting a lot of attention he'd never received before. Also, *his parents are astonished* because of this healing. And the scriptures imply his parents came to be Christ-followers too, because of their son's story...

In the meantime, Jesus went about town and everyone was talking about him. He was on the front page of the newspaper. Then the hostile Pharisees tried to trap him and catch him doing something wrong. But you see ... the blind man was just a simple guy. He didn't have answers to all their theological questions. He just kept repeating what he knew to be true ... over and over again. Others kept asking him about what happened; his response was always 'I don't know why Jesus did what he did—the mud in the eyes and all that. I just know I was blind ... and now I see.' The Pharisees even threatened to expel the man from the city. He simply said, 'Look, here're the facts....' And how could they dispute the facts? The difference was ... *Jesus*; he changed my life...

You see, you don't have to know all the answers to share your faith. You don't need to know everything about the Bible to have your faith IGNITE and spill over onto people around you. You just have to tell 'em how your life has changed. This is how I was; now, this is how I am. The difference is ... *Jesus*. If you're a follower of Jesus, you have a story to tell. And God can use your story to make a difference in the lives of others. Let me give you the first of several IGNITE (biblical) principles we're going to look at in this series:

My testimony is a powerful tool that God will use to lead others to faith in him!

You see, your testimony (story of faith) of how you came to know Jesus and what difference he has made in your life is a powerful tool God will use to lead others to faith in him. When you share your story, God will use it. And God will use your story to IGNITE faith in other people. And, yeah, there're going to be some who have questions. There may be some who are astonished. And there may be a few, like the Pharisees, who want to argue with you about your story. But you know what? IT'S YOUR STORY! It's personal. It's factual. It's true, and when told with all sincerity, God will use it! So, here's my question for you: Are you prepared? Are you ready? Are you ready to share your story with the people God has placed around you—your friends, your co-workers, or your neighbors? Are you ready to share your story? You see, *your story can change the world!* If you've had an encounter with Jesus, you have a testimony (faith-story) to share. But how do you do this? How do you use your story to change the world? First...

CONFIRM MY STORY: I know that I am following Jesus. We have a few simple steps, today, in order to do this—to be ready to tell your story ... and it begins with this one: CONFIRM. Here is where you make sure you have a testimony to share. The reason some people don't share their faith-story (testimony) is because they lack ASSURANCE of salvation; maybe that's you ... as it was John Wesley at one time who asked, "Am I really saved?"

So, do I really know Jesus? And, am I going to heaven? If you've made a decision to follow Jesus, you can rest assured you're going to heaven, that you've been forgiven, and that you have a purpose for living; God doesn't want you to wonder about that; God wants you to KNOW ... and that's called ASSURANCE...

Look at 1 John 5:13 with me: "I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life." I write this to you who what? BELIEVE. So that what? So, you can KNOW. Know what? YOU HAVE ETERNAL LIFE. Study the story of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. He'd been an Anglican Priest for years, but still lacked the ASSURANCE of his salvation he saw in the Moravians (German Christians, where the Brethren came from). But at Aldersgate Street, John went to a Bible study, heard the preface to Luther's commentary on Romans being read aloud, and received his ASSURANCE. And you and I can too...

So, *do you know when you made the decision to give your life to Jesus?* Now, I'm not into the 'spiritual birthday' kind of thing. I don't think we have to know the exact date. I was in 8th grade (my earlier story)—as close as I could tell you. I guess I'm more with Paul who said, 'I die daily.' *The most important thing is that you give your life to Christ TODAY*—in order to have ASSURANCE of your salvation—that you'll spend eternity with God...

This is where it all begins. I need to CONFIRM MY STORY—to know I'm a follower of Jesus, to know I've encountered Jesus personally; then, like the man born blind, I'll have a story to tell. Next, I have to...

COMPLETE MY STORY: I write out and practice my story. And by this, I mean you must take the time to write your story out and practice sharing your story (testimony) with others; you don't have to make anything up; you don't have to become a fiction writer; you just tell the story of your encounter with the living God—Jesus...

In working in this area of discipleship, I've found that people have all different types of experiences. For example, when some folks come to know Jesus personally, it's a *very emotional experience* with tears and so forth. For others, it's exactly the opposite—primarily *an intellectual story*. That's what the great Christian and author C.S. Lewis experienced. He said ... he was out for a walk in the woods one day and contemplated, 'should I believe in Jesus or not?' He went back and forth and finally, at the end of the walk, decided he *should* believe. It was more of an intellectual decision.

A gentleman by the name of Lee Strobel was a legal editor for the Chicago Sun Times. His wife had become a Christian and he then set out to use his investigative skills as an editor to *disprove* Christianity! Well, in the process of trying to disprove the Christian faith ... *he became a Christian!*

For some of you, it may be more of a spiritual story. Something happened in your heart, or in your soul, and you don't really know how to describe it, but it happened. Maybe that's you. That's kind of like John Wesley and his experience. Regardless of how your experience has happened, *I want you to learn to share your story ...* by first writing it out, then practicing it. In your bulletin is an extra insert today that will guide you to doing just that (point out the insert, questions, etc.). Note especially the section that talks about why—why write out your story? Here's the answers...

1. Your friends are interested.
2. Your friends can relate to it.
3. It's hard to argue with.
4. God will use it.

Look at 1 Peter 3:15 with me, would you? “Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it.” We need to first CONFIRM our story, then COMPLETE our story—ready to explain it. But then, in Verse 16a, Peter goes on to say this: “But do this in a gentle and respectful way....” This is HOW to tell our story—always... Our story may never be as polished as some, but it needs to be completed, at least, to the point where we can share our story as God's word instructs us to. And, finally, how do we change the world with *our story*? Here it is...

COMMIT MY STORY: I ask God to use my story. Actually, it's not really your story, is it? It's really God's story anyway ... if your life is his... So, *ask God to use your story, for the sake of others, and for his glory!*

Look at another scripture with me today, would you? This is in the New Testament history book of Acts (20:24), and this is where Paul speaks in this way: “But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.” What's the work we're supposed to be about, as followers of Christ? The work of telling the GOOD NEWS of God's wonderful kindness and love. *Whenever you commit your story to God, God will use it in powerful ways.* Your part is to be open to that, then to put into play what we've been learning today. Let's close with this verse (1 Timothy 1:16—on back of Connection Card):

“But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.”

That's my story ... or rather God's story through me. But, here's the question for you today: *Who could you share your story with this week (i.e. Tuesday night Bible study, etc.)?* I know some of your stories ... especially as they've unfolded in the past 4 years or so. They're too good to keep to yourselves! And, if you've given your life over to Christ, they're not your stories anyway. They're God's stories. So, share them ... all to the glory of God and his kingdom...