

How to Lead a Biblical Storytelling Workshop, Class or Retreat

The Network of Biblical Storytellers

Revised Nov 2006 by Amelia Cooper

This is an outline for leading a workshop, class or retreat where the members learn to tell a biblical story and apply the meaning to their individual and communal lives. For the sake of simplicity, references here will be to a workshop; adapt to fit your particular circumstances.

I. Preparation

1. Divide the story to be learned into its component episodes and print it on a separate piece of paper.
2. Learn the story by heart. Tell it to another person.
3. Do an exegesis of the passage: use Bible commentaries, dictionaries, atlases, Internet resources, etc.
4. Work out a series of key questions to help the group uncover the central meanings of the story, and its relationship to other parts of the biblical narrative. Include questions that also call for reflection on how the story speaks to our present day lives and faith.
5. Design the format of the workshop in the light of time available and the needs of those who will be present.
6. If you are co-leading, decide who will do each part and practice together.

II. The Workshop

1. Introductions. Getting acquainted or relaxation exercises as needed.
2. A leader tells the biblical story.
3. A leader lists the theme and the goals of the workshop with a brief introduction to the importance of the oral tradition of the Scripture. The learning goal of the session will be for each member to learn the story with 95% content accuracy and 75% verbal accuracy.
4. If this is an introductory session with a new group, leader next gives a brief explanation of memory theory, and some personal example of how one identifies with the fear or resistance to memory work that the members may be experiencing.
5. Next the leader helps group in finding individual memory clues for each episode. Together the group lists repetitions, key words, and notices how each episode begins and ends.
6. Each member is asked to read the story silently, and to visualize as concretely as possible all the events in the story. Each is asked to hear the sounds, smell the smells, feel the texture of the environment. In other words, using all the senses to get involved with the story, even imagining oneself as an active participant in the story.
7. The leader now asks everyone to stand up and walk around reading the story out loud so that one hears one's own voice and begins to put gestures and feeling into the story. The

- leader demonstrates this and explains that this helps get the words into long-term memory, rather than short-term memory where it is quickly forgotten. We sometimes call this the BLAB SCHOOL. It should be fun and help people to overcome the tension and fear of being asked to memorize. If there is any resistance, encourage each to do what is most comfortable. The goal is to learn the story. Different people learn best in different ways. The process of learning should be made as enjoyable as possible with emphasis on the fact that we work in teams to help one another learn with no sense of competition.
8. In pairs, each is asked to tell the story to a partner, without looking at the paper. When one gets stuck, the partner will help until the story is learned. Then the process is reversed.

NOTE: It is also possible to teach a group the story without using papers. This is done by repeating the story, phrase by phrase after the leader, an episode at a time. This is how they learned stories in the rabbinical schools of Jesus' day—actually chanting the stories. Then the same process of sharing in pairs as outlined above. We encourage groups to test out both methods of learning, and the variation of chanting or singing. Music with its rhythm assists the memory process.

9. The leader calls the whole group together and asks for reactions to the learning process and for 2 or 3 volunteers to tell as much of the story as each has been able to learn. This builds group solidarity into the learning process, helps members to quickly share what they have learned, and gives support to one another for further learning.
10. The leader can begin to help the group listen for differences in emphasis, feeling, and characterization as each person tells the story. This will begin to demonstrate that each time a story is told, it is a new story even though the content is the same because the storyteller brings his own personality, voice and feeling to the story, and the audience is in a new place in time and space each time.

III. Difficulties in the Learning Process that May Be Encountered

1. The first is a tendency in some to paraphrase. It is important to gently stress that one should stick to telling the story as it is found in the Bible according to the particular evangelist that is narrating the story, and not to talk about the story or add their own comments or interpretations. This is a particular temptation with the most familiar stories, and particularly with preachers. There is power in these well-honored biblical stories that were told orally for many years before they were written down which is diluted by additions and comments. The challenge is to make them come alive for the audience by helping them to identify with the situations and motivations of the characters in the story by use of inflection, tone of voice, and pauses. Additional meaning will unfold when there is understanding of the purpose of the writer in telling the story in this particular way.
2. The second is the problem of bilingual groups. People who use English as a second language have much more difficulty learning the story. Suggestions:
 - a. Prepare the text in all languages represented in your group. Let each learn the story in the native tongue.
 - b. Have the story told in more than one language.

3. Third is what might be called “ the Holy Bible Syndrome.” Some people have a strong feeling that the Bible is such a “holy” book that a “fun process” of learning Scripture jars them. It seems a bit sacrilegious. This problem needs great sensitivity. No person should be forced to do what the whole group is doing, and their feelings should be verbally recognized and affirmed. However, it may help them to know that in the time of Jesus, all people learned scripture by verbal repetition in the synagogue and early Christian churches.

IV. Developing a Deep Connection with the Story

The process of building character identification with persons in the story. Let us take for example the story of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, and his sick little daughter (Mark 5:21-41). Because this is a relatively long and complicated story, a beginning group may have started by learning the first four verses. If there is sufficient time, this would be a good place for the leader to ask the whole group to get into smaller groups of three or four, and for each person to share in the small groups one occasion when he or she was desperately seeking help for a family member or close friend who was sick or in serious trouble.

After each person has shared, let another member of the small group tell those first four verses, as a story gift to the one who has shared this personal story of deep anxiety or loving concern for another. This step in the process not only develops our empathy for Jarius, and thus, will help each to tell the story with more intuitive feeling, but it begins to allow each person to tap into the power of the story—the healing potential for one’s own life. Another note: the leader should first give a brief example of his or her identification with Jairus in his cry for help, before asking the group members to share in these small groups.

The next step is to “grow the story”, that is to open up its meaning in the context of “first-century” Christianity and the group to which it was addressed, by explaining unfamiliar words and ideas, thereby enhancing understanding of the context by showing its relationship to the political, religious and social events of its time. If there is sufficient time in the workshop, we prefer to use a method called “communal exegesis.” The leader has carefully prepared a series of questions to help the group as a whole unearth the riches of the story by pooling their communal insight and wisdom. Some of the questions will be obviously factual questions to quickly reveal the most important details of the story. Others will be questions that help the group to probe large meanings of the story. To these, there will be no right or wrong answers. It becomes a process like molding a clay pot where each person’s thought adds to the clay of the pot that will then become the container for the meaning of the story. There will also be questions which directly ask the individual to relate the meanings found in the story to his or her own life.

To illustrate this, let us take for example the familiar story of the disciples asking Jesus to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1-4). A few questions that might open the dimensions of this passage are:

- What was the prayer tradition of the disciples?
- What did it mean to them when they asked Jesus, “Teach us to pray”?
- What is the function of the first phrase of the prayer, “Hallowed be thy name”?
- How would you or do you address God?
- What do you hear being asked for in the prayer?
- When does the Kingdom come? Who helps the Kingdom to come and in what ways?

The process in “communal exegesis” is for the leader to share whatever is necessary in the way of scholarly background and research for the group to understand the context of the story, but to put major effort into getting everyone to contribute freely and fully to the process of unfolding the levels of meaning through the skillful use of questions. The Holy Spirit of God speaks through Scripture to us as a group and through one to another in the process of sharing with both heart and mind.

In the study of the Lord’s Prayer, a good way to end this period of communal exegesis would be to ask each person to take 15 or 20 minutes to write the Lord’s Prayer in his or her own words so that the meaning becomes personal and alive for each individual. Coming together again, pray communally in some new way. Walter Wink, for example, commends shouting it as insistently as the neighbor demanding bread for his guest (Luke 11:5-8)!

A biblical storytelling workshop or seminar can be conducted in as short a time as one hour (in this case, “growing the story” will have to be done as a lecture, and not as “communal exegesis”). It is best to plan on a minimum of two or three hours to conduct a workshop on a short passage, and longer for a story that we might have to learn in two sections. If one story is learned and worked with as the theme for a weekend retreat, its healing power can penetrate to much deeper levels. In the longer setting, it is possible to add the following elements which greatly enrich the meaning of the story, and our firm appropriation of it.

A sharing of some part of one’s personal story or need for healing with another. The partner would then give the gift of the whole story—or a significant part—to the one who has shared. Then the process is reversed. Give individual members twenty minutes or so to do one of the following:

- Write a meditative conversation (dialogue) between one of the characters in the story and yourself
- Using clay or paints, allow yourself to freely respond to the theme or an important image in the story
- In a group, each member silently mimes parts of the story as the leader reads it aloud.
- With a musical background, ask each member of the group to find a movement with the body to express the feeling or situation of a character in the story. This can be done sequentially with each character in the story.

Some stories are especially suited for opening the social justice dimensions of the Gospel, and for helping members to look at the meaning of a Christian lifestyle in the contemporary world. The Bible clearly addresses issues of ethnicity, sexism, economic injustice, and social and religious ostracism. Questions for small groups can help members relate the biblical story to current day issues. A small group could rewrite a story in its modern equivalents and then act it out. Stories from the newspaper can be read in conjunction with the telling of the biblical story, and parallels and differences explored. Your own situations will suggest exercises that would be most profitable to help a group probe the social and political implications of the biblical story.

V. The Closing of the Workshop

A workshop or class should end with a final telling of the story, and usually some form of worship in which all can participate. Relate songs of hymns, prayer phrases taken from the story with silences between different sections all are ways of closing.

Gospel storytelling is a form of Christian evangelization in which the good news of Jesus Christ becomes a more real for the person or persons telling the story, and for the audience as well. For this reason, we like to ask those attending the workshop to make a commitment to go out into the world and tell the story they have learned to at least one other person—at home, on the job, in the community, in a hospital—wherever the love and healing power of God that flows through the living Jesus Christ and through us believers as his Body needs to be shared.

Some recognition of the importance of the time spent together working on the story should be expressed and participants thanked for sharing of themselves. It is often fitting to end the workshop with a brief commissioning ceremony, declaring, “You are now biblical storytellers. Tell the story to the world, and let us all respond, ‘With God’s help, I *will* tell it!’”