

Stephen Farris. *So, Tell Me A Story: The Art of Storytelling for Preaching and Teaching*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018. 179 pages. \$9.99.

Stephen Farris has put together a wonderful collection of short stories designed to teach, delight, and persuade those who read these stories (4). At the outset, Farris clarifies what this book does not intend to do. It is not an exposition of narrative theology nor a theology of narrative, even though the stories do convey theology. It is not a how-to manual on the techniques of storytelling. Rather, he says, “This is a conversation; sit down with me at an imaginary table, and share stories” (xii). The stories he tells are not like parables or Aesop’s Fables. Nor are they “Chicken Soup for the Soul” stories. Rather, they are personal stories that come from Farris’s experiences, observations, and ministry. They are ordinary stories of life.

As he shares his stories, especially in the first four chapters, Farris devotes some time to the art of storytelling. As he tells them, Farris reflects on issues related to preaching, issues such as the use of self-disclosure. In one of his stories, Farris tells of helping out a stranger but does so discretely without drawing attention to himself or becoming the hero (77). He reflects on unethical ways of telling stories. These include claiming a story happened to you that did not. Or telling only half of a story (the good half) and not telling how later on things did not turn out so well (63-64). He ends by offering a few practical guidelines for ethical storytelling (64).

Throughout these first four chapters, he offers delightful tidbits of advice. He observes that telling stories “that unambiguously set forth examples for us to follow are the most likely to become tedious for listeners.” They easily become moralistic pablums (14). He maintains that interpreting a story must be like “Goldilocks’s porridge, not too little, not too much, but just right” (34). He issues a caution about cluttering a story with too many facts: “Too many details clog the arteries of narrative like cholesterol” (32). By just reading these stories, the reader learns to become a better storyteller.

Farris tells stories that follow the church year (chapter 5), that deal with church life (chapter 7), that highlight stories of grace (chapter 8), that revolve around the sacraments (chapter 9), that are about bicycles (chapter 10), and that are appropriate for civic kinds of occasions (chapter 11). Sometimes he tells stories simply because they are interesting and without assigning to them any particular lesson. Chapter 6, however, is unique to the book. In that chapter, Farris crafts an imaginative and inspiring short story using a framework built around the life of Christ and revolving around a character named Simon. It is a story that traces the life of Simon between the birth and death of Jesus.

Farris stresses the importance of being sensitive in telling certain stories. For example, in Chapter 10, “Bicycle Stories,” he tells how his Dad taught him to ride a bike. But in telling this story, he wanted to be sympathetic to those children and adults who did not have loving fathers who spent time with them. He suggests making sure you know who you are telling the story to. Or, as he suggests, you might just consider saving certain stories for telling your grandchildren (147). Then he concludes with this observation: “However, almost any story powerful enough to touch the heart, and certainly any story that speaks specifically about personal relationships, has the capacity to hurt some listener” (147). Therefore, tell such stories with gentleness.

The stories told in this book cover the gamut of ordinary life. They are about learning to ride a bicycle, taking communion, showing grace and love, suffering and loss, marriage, raising children, and embarrassing moments. They are, if you will, “homemade” in the best sense of that term. These stories come from Farris’s experiences as a youth, a seminary student, a minister, a

professor, a husband and father, etc. Most of the stories take place in his home country of Canada.

This book accomplished its goals: to teach, delight, and persuade. It gave me an even deeper appreciation for the art of storytelling, enabling me to experience the whole array of human life and emotion. And it persuaded me to look closer at the stories in my own life and the stories that are all around me as resources for learning wisdom and for teaching and preaching.

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