



I've Seen This, I Believe This, I Wonder This:
A Round Table Conversation on Story
September 9, 2026

Mark Ramsey: Friends, this is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative, again with my colleagues, Beth Daniel and Adam Mixon. We thought we were done with our podcast that you just heard last week, but we kept talking after the recording about how we access faith and what we think that means for churches, and what the story of Jesus means, which I will say, to be fair, we don't want to be flip: careful theological work has been done through the centuries and we all stand on that great work, but it's not enough. And I think that's what we're trying to say. So let's pick up from there.

Adam Mixon: What I've discovered is that all of those things are like tongs used to pick something up, but they are not the thing that we're picking up. They're ways of getting at, or attempting to get a grip of, or a grasp after something. What I find is problematic is that, oftentimes, we grab hold of the tool and lose the treasure. It's a subtle idolatry that, again, puts us in a place where we stop asking questions, which, again, is, I think, harmful to our faith. What is more nebulous, or more mysterious, is our experience with Christ, and learning how to curate that story personally, how to express it in community, and how to encourage others and disciple others to do the same.

Beth Daniel: You know, all of this conversation came talking about whether certainty equaled understanding, when people were asked if they believed in God and on a scale of how much they did. And we discussed last time that not being fully certain, holding conviction strongly but humbly, was not a bad place to be, not just for people outside of the Church, but for people inside of the Church. The implication for the Church, then, is how do we connect with people who, as you say, Mark, come to faith, come to get to know Christ through all different kinds of ways — some very cerebral, some very experiential, some through life circumstances, often tragedy or beauty. And I think where the Church gets into trouble is we say, "Meet people where they are", and we develop programs that then, kind of, try and hit the bill. So if we say, "Oh, young people want an experience", then we'll throw a ton of money at creating some kind of artificial environment where they'll feel hyped up or emotional or something.

I don't think that's the implication for the Church here. I think, like you're saying, Adam, the implication is just be honest. Whether you're sitting in the pew or standing in the pulpit, say, "I've seen this, I believe this, I wonder this." I don't think that is selling out. And I know it makes some people nervous. I don't think it's selling out. I think there's an authenticity that people who are outside of the Church are craving. And what is inauthentic is saying, "This is the right way. It's right. I'm not going to explain it to you, because actually I can't. So believe, or don't."

Adam: Well, I think Mark, you alluded to it in our previous conversation of how, again, our systems and our theology is just not enough. And I would dare say, in some forms, based on the stats that we were talking about earlier, in some forms, it's threadbare. So what do you do when your theology is found lacking because of human suffering, because of crisis or struggle? What do you do when your theology is threadbare? How do you relate to people when your system fails?

Mark: Look, this has been a 2000 year conversation, debate, fight in the Church: those who say, "I've experienced this, so this is normative," And those who say, "But there has to be a foundation and a framework around it that is theologically true."

And it also then intersects with personal experience versus community. I'm one who believes that I can say, "I have a word from the Lord", but if none of my Christian community is going to confirm that, it ain't a word from the Lord. So I want to, again, say a word for careful, rigorous theological work put alongside, in equal measure — and I think there's the rub — in equal measure with "Let me tell you a story about what's happened to me."

Adam: And I would say, in the words of *Cool Hand Luke*, "A man ought to know his limitations." We have to understand the limits of our tools and systems and allow for God to exist outside those bounds. I don't want a God that I can understand. That scares the hell out of me. I'm too boring and too limited to aspire to that.

Mark: If I can fully understand God, this gets back to the, Beth, the word you used early on: mystery. If I can understand God, I have created God in my own image and then under my own control.

Beth: And God ends up looking like us and thinking like us and voting like us.

Adam: And affirming us, yes.

Beth: We've created a God who reflects us, whereas we really should be following God that we are trying to emulate, reflect in some way.

Adam: Yeah. Which to your point, Beth, draws us back to: where do we center ourselves? And when I read the New Testament, at least, I read a series of stories of people talking about their encounters with Jesus. So I have my personal story, which to your point, Mark, is affirmed across the community, because there are others who share that experience. So my personal story becomes a community story, and these community stories, or this collection of community stories, become part of God's story that we're invited into or written into, which is, I think, what is guiding some of the work that we're doing presently here at the Ministry Collaborative on re-centering the importance of storytelling.

Mark: Yeah. I don't want to speak for everyone, but I would be interested in your experiences. I can mark two events in my life: one that changed course toward God, and the other that kept me on a path toward God at a time of great challenge. The first one on a rainy, rainy November evening 50 years ago: a pastor gave me four hours — which I only now understand what a lavish gift that was — gave me four hours to listen to my teenage self wondering about all sorts of things; never scolded me, didn't come in from on high, but just listened and reflected things, and began to give me tools to recast my faith in adult language. And then, probably 30 years or 35 years later, a parishioner who — and you know what it is for a parishioner to draw alongside their pastor and say a hard word that is not critique but concern — who said, "I think you're in a lot of pain, and how can I support you?" Those two stories of people bringing their faith to me in vastly different ways, at vastly different stages in my life, put me on a path toward God, and kept me on a path toward God.

Adam: Wow. And Beth, to your point, that just brings you back to Jesus. Both of the things you mentioned, Mark, speak of being seen and being heard and being spoken to in ways that did not perhaps just lend you certainty, but that instilled a confidence that allowed you to continue on.

Mark: Neither of them were therapy. I've had great therapists, which I also have needed through my life, and I've had great spiritual directors. This was not that. This was one Christian coming along another and saying, "Let me tell you a story."

Beth: I want to thank you for sharing that, Mark. And I also want to share that I was recently at a meeting, a large meeting of community and church leaders, and we were having intellectual, deep conversations. We didn't know each other well, but we were colleagues. We'd met each other several times. And then, at dinner one night, we started sharing stories just like you shared. There is something so powerful about someone just giving a glimpse into their faith walk, because as soon as someone said it — and Mark, they did exactly what you say people do all the time, which is, "I'm hesitant to share this, because you're going to think I'm crazy."

And immediately, the table just said, "Uh, no, you're not crazy. We all have those experiences." And this person shared and immediately someone said, "Oh my gosh, I affirm that, and here's what I experienced." It was the most powerful dinner I have had in a long time, even though we'd had these wonderful, important conversations.

That witnessing and that given time to just things that we don't understand, but we know to be true, cannot be underestimated. And the Church — and by the Church, I don't mean church leaders, I mean people who go to church, too, or Christians who have their own version of Church somewhere else — we have got to understand how powerful that simple witness is, and how you don't need to be qualified to tell it. You just need to be truthful. It's just so important — what you shared, what these people shared — was just so powerful to me, and encouraged everyone at the table of: all of us doubt sometimes. We're not crazy. This thing is real, and it's a lot bigger than I thought or than I realize when my head is just in my own stuff.

Adam: Yeah. Our producer, Marthame Sanders, is offline listening to us, but I credit him for saying something to me probably about three years ago that was a good solid turn for me. I write, but what y'all probably don't know is I also write a lot of poetry. But the word that Marthame said to me was, "It is the personal that becomes the most universal." When we dare to present ourselves vulnerable, we will find, more often than not, that it's not only us, that we're not the only ones, and that while our experiences are unique, they really aren't that special. There are others who share and who resonate with the things that we've often allowed to remain hidden. And I think, again, that's not just for the preacher, to your point, Beth, but I think that is for the Christian, the follower of Jesus. I think we gotta rip back some of the becoming professional storytellers and allow the folks that God gives us to disciple to become curators of their story and to be encouraged to share it.

Beth: To that point, Adam, in terms of my journey, it has been exactly that understanding that it's not a one-time thing. I'm a slow learner, and I have not just gone up on a graph in terms of my discipleship and faithfulness. It has been swirling. I can tell you that, growing up in Wales, in a small chapel that did not have a professional pastor, minister, vicar, it was run by lay people throughout my life. Actually, it hasn't been any pastor that's made a difference to my faith journey, in terms of pulling me back, which is ironic now that I'm a pastor, but I know my place, and it's no more important. It's just a little weirder, but it's no more important. It is the faithful people telling me the story, noticing me when I was struggling, showing up when I told them not to, but they know they needed to be there, reminding me who and whose I was. It wasn't a professional who did that. It was the people of the Church being the Church. And that is carried with me even here. Through Seminary, it was not the professionals who

pulled me back. It was faithful people who were willing to share their faith with me, and remind me of my story.

Adam: Yeah. That's crazy, Beth. And it makes me — and this is not a plug — but it makes me appreciate the work of the Ministry Collaborative all the more, because with our facilitators, we suspend the need to be the expert. Rather than being experts, we become facilitators, creating the spaces where this type of stuff actually can happen.

Mark: I think the question that, I think, we're sharing without naming it specifically, is: How can we help faith communities, congregations, gathering of Christians, feel the permission to do more of this? We are not talking down theologians, we're not talking down pastoral leadership. It's important. But how do we give permission to people to simply come alongside another Christian saying, "I don't have all this figured out, but let me tell you a story of what God is doing in my life." That is so essential and so basic, but in American culture at least — and I suspect it's not just American culture — we are reluctant to do that both for the risk of vulnerability, but also for the risk, again, that people will think we're crazy. What are we doing talking about God?

Beth: And yet, the whole culture is obsessed with the term "my truth". And so, everyone seems to be willing to say crazy things and then say, "You can't talk about it because it's my truth." And I don't want to diss that, because that can be used in ways where people who haven't be heard, all they're doing is trying to get a platform to be heard.

This is actually a really ripe time for us to say, "This is not effectual. This is not about will it make a difference. This is just my story." We are at a time when we can actually tell a story in a culture that is used to individuals telling their own truth. And this is — I wish I had a better term — this is our truth. And this is a time that actually is being welcomed in society.

Mark: Yeah. And it's an intersection of my life story with God's story. That, to me, is the delight, that is the meaning, that is the truth that I'm living my life, and all of a sudden God comes alongside me. Jesus draws close to two people in their grief walking to Emmaus, and lays it all out. So, I agree totally with the "my truth" thing for those whose voices have been suppressed is important. But at the end of all of it, I'm not really interested in my truth or your truth. I'm interested in how that intersects with God's gracious truth.

Adam: Yeah. I think the foil there is my story, the story of the community, God's story, and what motivates the telling. It's not ego, but it's compassion that drives me.