



Don't Bring Me No Bad News:
A Round Table Conversation on Storytelling
September 16, 2026

Jennifer Watley Maxell: Hello everyone. This is Jennifer Watley Maxell, and I am here with my new friend that I just met, Heather Brown, and my TMC colleagues, Ryan Bonfiglio and Adam Borneman. And we are starting to really talk about something that is becoming more and more core to our work here at TMC, which is Christian storytelling. Heather, you have some really interesting experience with that, and also with curating environments for people to do that. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Heather Brown: Sure. Thanks, Jennifer. Happy to do that. Several years ago, we at my particular church were like, "How can we help congregations know each other better? Like, I see you on the pew, we say, 'Hey' on Sunday or at certain events, but we don't know each other." And so it became this mission to get to know each other personally.

At that point, The Moth was blowing up. And so we thought, "How about some storytelling?" And so the first thing that we had to do was figure out how to help people tell a story in a specific amount of time that didn't lead us all over their entire lives. And so we were able to meet with some folks with NPR and were able to learn how to do that, which was amazing. And then the second thing that we had to do was convince people that it was safe to tell people their stories in front of the congregation, which seems counter-intuitive when you think about it, because church is your safe place.

But we really had to go and make sure that people knew that it was going to be a safety, it was going to be okay, that we were going to be building them up, supporting them no matter what the story was. What we found is that once we had the first round, which we did actually inside the church, people loved it. People were so excited. The people who were telling stories got so many compliments, extra questions, built relationships with other folks that they hadn't even interacted with before. And then it became, "Oh, I have a story I'd like to tell," that kind of thing. Yeah. We were able to do this for several years, and we moved it out into a public space where people were able to experience it in the public. We had a couple hundred people that would come every time.

As far as I know, it was good for everybody. I never got anybody coming back and saying, "You shouldn't do this," or, "I can't believe that story was told," or, "I can't believe that person was willing to share that about their life." So it was a really positive experience all the way around.

Ryan Bonfiglio: So Heather, take us back a little bit to before you launched this initiative. People tell stories all the time. We tell stories at work, we tell stories to our kids. It's part of human DNA, and yet you're observing that in a congregational context, sometimes telling the story of faith and Jesus and our lives is hard. What are some of the barriers that make storytelling in a Christian faith community maybe more difficult than it is in other parts of our lives?

Heather: Yeah. I am born and raised in the South, in Appalachia, so that could skew it some. I don't know. But when you go to church, you're putting on your best self — at least that's how I grew up. And so telling the dirty little secrets, or the difficult things, or the times that you did not walk in faith, can be shameful for a lot of folks. And so that is a big barrier for a lot of people: "I don't want you to know this

about me, because you'll judge me, or you won't think that I'm a child of God, or you'll think that whatever I do in front of the church or for the church is not real, because" fill in the blank.

Ryan: I mean, that makes a lot of sense. It's harder to tell harder stories or...I'm remembering the musical *The Wiz* where at one point Evillene sings, "Don't bring me no good..." What is it? "Don't bring me anything bad..."

Jennifer: "Don't nobody bring me no bad news."

Ryan: That. And so I get that part of it. And I think you're right, this idea of putting on your Sunday best, metaphorically and literally, pervades the culture and prevents authentic, honest storytelling. But I've observed in some faith context, Heather, that it's also even hard for people to tell good stories about their lives, and connect Jesus to it.

Heather: Sure.

Ryan: Have you experienced that? And, what's going on in that dynamic that we're even hesitant to tell the good stories with Jesus connected?

Heather: Yeah, so I think that it's twofold for me. So I grew up extremely evangelical, conservative, very small church, Independent Missionary Baptist. And so telling those stories and praising Jesus for all the good in your life was just a part of church as a testimony to say, "Jesus brought me out of" fill in the blank.

And then when I needed to move away from that, because there was not a church that accepted me and my wife, and I landed in a Presbyterian land, it felt like sharing the good news was a brag. It became, "Oh, Jesus is so good. I have this lovely house, this lovely family, this lovely car, this lovely job." And we can contribute that to Jesus and the good news all the way, but it felt like a brag to do that.

And if you're suffering in a medical situation or something like that, it seems totally okay and appropriate to tell the good news: "I prayed, my doctor...Jesus had his hands on my doctor, I'm healed, I'm well." But all the other stuff becomes a side brag.

Jennifer: So I grew up in the AME church tradition, the Black church tradition, where we have literal testimony services, and literally the whole point is to brag on Jesus for any and everything. So it's really interesting to me, this point you bring up, because it does seem like...do you think this is a Southern thing? Is it a evangelical thing?

Heather: I think, one, it's a Southern thing — probably, just culturally, but that's all that I know. I think also, at least in my area, what we try to do is, I don't want to scare anyone away from church, because we already have this crisis of people moving away. And if I'm bragging about God and Jesus, am I scaring folks away from that before they know me as a human? That could be part of it. I'm not a hundred percent sure.

Adam Borneman: I'm really drawn to this angle about bragging or shame or praise, because I'm thinking a lot about how my own traditions and contexts have shaped my default position towards all of that. And it's complex. I mean, part of it is the part of the country I grew up in, in the South, and all the things you described, Heather, some good, some bad, some ugly, all the above. But as you were talking, I'm

also thinking a lot about my own tradition, which is Presbyterian, but it's from this long Reformed tradition with some Lutheranism sprinkled in along the way. And as you are talking, I'm immediately thinking of this really basic theological distinction that came up in Seminary and other places, that Martin Luther used to talk about the Theology of Glory versus the Theology of the Cross. And I think setting up this idea that real grace and real mercy is experienced through suffering and confession and repentance and the hard times and the sort of existential crisis of receiving God's grace; and the Theology of Glory is a theology of power, prestige and fame and all this sort of things.

And I think, because of that way that it's worked out in my own tradition, I do think we're almost ashamed to claim anything that might look good, or look like a Theology of Glory, even though a lot of us are already experiencing it as you described, very comfortable and content lives. But I point out how it absolutely shapes my default posture towards all of that, my hesitance towards bragging about what the Lord has done for me, because that might sound a little bit about that part of the tradition that I'm trying to neglect.

Heather: I think too, as a solid Gen X-er, I grew up in the time of "Jesus is my boyfriend."

Jennifer: I have no idea what that is.

Heather: So it's this movement of...you're basically in love with Jesus. Everything is so amazing. Jesus is so amazing. So, like, you're on a college campus, you're in a Christian group, all you're doing is singing about how good Jesus is, and how you love Jesus. And all of that, once I moved out of that environment in college, and my friends moved out of that environment from some mega churches, was like, that felt really gross in hindsight, right? And so now, I don't want to sing about how Jesus is my boyfriend. And so, that could be playing a part of it for a lot of people in this 50, 45 year old range there.

Jennifer: To me, I'm wondering if maybe part of it is the object of the story that's problematic. In my tradition, the purpose of the story is to disciple others and evangelize others to Christ. And the object is the person who is either far from their relationship with Christ, or doesn't have one at all. And so you want the story to be compelling and attractional, because you want people to see that Jesus is worth having a relationship with. And the way we communicate that Jesus is worth having a relationship with is, "Yeah, Jesus does make everything better. Yeah, my life is crappy right now, but my relationship with Jesus makes a difference," you know. "Whereas other people are falling into despair, my family has been sustained through joblessness" or whatever. So I'm wondering if maybe that is part of it, that the stories we tell are not for ourselves?

And what I like about the curation that you started talking about is you said that people needed to know each other better; which again, in my mind, takes the story out of the hands of the teller, and gives it to somebody else; that the story is not this thing that we keep to ourselves, but it is meant and crafted to be that thing. It's the party favor that people walk away with after they've had a conversation with us. You get this really great story to hold onto, if you are networking and getting to know each other well. So I'm listening to us tease out: What about Christian storytelling can be challenging or maybe has been challenging? Maybe that's something that we can throw into there as well. Who is the story for, and what is the goal? What is it that we're trying to do? Are we just trying to get to know each other better, or are we, in fact, trying to lead others to Christ in a way that gives them an open door?

Ryan: Yeah, I appreciate that, Jennifer, and I'm feeling a similar push and pull that I think you are in that, Heather, I came through some very conservative evangelical circles in my college years. I dated Jesus

probably from about age 19 to 24. We didn't break up fully, but I'm still with him, but just in a different way. Coming out the other side of that, on the other side of some hurt, some trauma, some misalignment theologically and personally, I have this visceral reaction against the way some communities talked about Jesus. And I think I'm not alone in that. I actually think much of the mainline church is in a similar space. And so I totally get that part of it.

But what I've observed is, in many sort of more progressive, liberal, whatever you call it, mainline circles, people just don't talk about Jesus anymore. So the antidote to "I don't like how they talked about Jesus" is a Jesus-less spirituality. In fact, in most mainline churches, I hear the "j word" used a lot, but that "j word" is "justice". It's almost never Jesus. And look: I am all on board for all of the justice, but my sense of justice is deeply connected to Jesus.

So, there's a lot of thoughts, kind of, running into each other there, but I think for me, it's a question of where the pendulum has swung. Have we over-corrected from what some of us didn't like about how Jesus was talked about, to just not talking about Jesus? And do we think that not talking about Jesus is what actually will draw people to church? Or do we think, like the psalmist, that it is a profound, nuanced public witness to the work of God in the world that is what magnetizes people to worship? That's what I'm left to wrestle with.

Adam: You know, Ryan, you reminded me of a recent experience I had visiting a church nearby, a small to mid-size mainline church, a church that I love in many ways, because there's no attempts to be clever. There are no shiny objects. They just kind of walk through a mostly traditional, but very thoughtful, liturgy every week. You could tell that there's a lot of thought put into it, a lot of care and attention and prayer; stable, consistent preaching.

But what made me nervous one day was some friends of ours visiting, and these are friends who are not bitter about church. They're not rah-rah church. I think they're just looking for somewhere to be with their family on Sunday morning that's church. So there's a lot of things going for them in that respect with this place, but it just still makes me a little uneasy. I wonder what kind of experience they're going to have. And of course, this turned out to be the Sunday where they told everybody in the congregation who owns a guitar that they could play some sort of special music during the service. This has never happened at this congregation before. It was fine, but it was also — I don't know — there were some moments that were kind of cringey, people out of tune, the instrument's not in tune, their voice is off key. It felt a little passé. Like, it just felt like genres from a bygone era.

I'll make a confession to you. After the service, I turned to my friend and made a joke. I said, "I was expecting Michael McDonald to come out and sing a solo."

But what really threw me in a beautiful way was this friend of mine saying, "Actually, I loved all of that because it wasn't too loud. There were no fog machines. The lights were on. It was just kind of gritty, and I could tell that everybody who was up there really wanted to just praise God and sing about God's love for the whole world. There was no veneer of anything else."

And I found that really convicting, maybe along the lines, Ryan, of what you're describing, but also, just, Jennifer, to your point of a story that inherently extends beyond me. Like, it wasn't really about me. It was about a witness to the Gospel that was very unpolished and not shiny at all, the opposite of clever. But for someone who's just looking for authentic expressions of faith that their family can see and witness and latch onto, there was a lot of hope.

Jennifer: Adam, I had a similar experience a couple of months ago. I preached at a church in Maryland, and my oldest daughter (who's 26) and my niece (who's 16) and a friend of my daughter's came. And the church I preached at, they don't have any screens or TVs or monitors or anything. And not only that, they have these amazing stained glass windows that shed this beautiful glow in the sanctuary that really makes it difficult for them to put anything in there.

So afterwards, when they came up to the front, the pastor of the church starts doing this apologetic, and apologizing about the structure of the church, and why the church was the way it was, and why there were no screens, and what she's trying to do, and all of this. And the kids were like, "No, we love it. This is actually what we want. We love the fact the stained glass is so beautiful." And they talked about the warmth of the light that comes in.

And so, I think you're onto something about the power of the story isn't this artfully crafted narrative that we have spent all this time editing and workshopping and AI-ing and brushing out all the flaws. The power of the storytelling is the Spirit of the story, the Holy Spirit in the story, but also the Spirit of the person and what happens when the Holy Spirit gets a hold of us, and what happens when we open up the doors of our hearts, the church, wherever, and let the Holy Spirit come in, and all the crazy messiness that comes, that is transformative and powerful and genuine. And I think people are really looking for something genuine in this day and age.