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As some of you know, I graduated from Seattle Pacific University with an English degree with a concentration in creative writing and an emphasis in poetry. Now, what that really means is I read a lot, wrote a lot, and now have a job in banking. However, some of those books really stuck with me. One of my favorites was Milton's *Paradise Lost*. No joke, I loved the flow of Milton's words, the way he portrayed Adam and Eve, and that some things in it really challenged my faith. In fact, I loved it so much I decided to re-read it a few years after I graduated. Much to my shock, however, I just couldn't get into it and eventually stopped reading. I realized it wasn't the same because I missed my classmates. My memories, emotions, and excitement were tied to the people around me adding energy to the text. I remembered my professor speaking of how it portrayed God as an old laid-back grandfather, lounging in his chair by the beach, sipping on a martini, and not giving a care in the world to what was going on down here with us mortals. That image was so poignant that it stuck with me, but in re-reading the text, it just wasn't the same. It just wasn't the same without hearing the laughter of my classmates as my professor acted out Milton's interpretation of God or with the lively debate over whether it was an accurate portrayal of God and why that mattered to us. Those people made that book come alive for me.

This need for connection surrounding literature is why events such as book clubs, library seminars, Bible studies, and comic conventions exist. To prepare for this sermon, I did a little bit of research into the origins of book clubs. Many historians trace their origins back to women's clubs in the mid 19th-century. These "culture clubs" were formed, in general, for women to do three things: increase female education, give women more of a voice in the political world, and develop what was referred to as "self-culture." According to an article by scholar Pamela Burger, "self-culture" is the idea that it is important to cultivate your intellectual side through careful practice. Reading literature was considered a means of doing that. She says book clubs were so popular for this because "they offer a social space in which individuals learn and grow through collective intellectual engagement." Now, that's all well and good to say about some people working through the next big hit on the New York Times bestseller list, but what if I said the Church should also be described as this. "A social space in which individuals learn and grow through collective intellectual engagement."

Now, if you've been in a church before, I'm sure you've heard of growing in Christ and working in a collective manner to help our community engagement. This is valuable and this is good, and I in no way wish to devalue this, but when was the last time someone asked what you learned in church today? Wouldn't that be something? We ask our kids how their day was at school and what they learned at school. What if we also asked them what they learned in church, or ask your spouse what they learned in church, or even more challenging, ask yourself what you learned? Now, learning comes in all different forms; it might be you memorize a new Bible verse or hear one for the first time, it might be finding out about your neighbor's sick daughter and sharing that moment of vulnerable connection, or it might be simply realizing you're stronger than you ever thought you could be because, by golly, you made it out of bed today, drove to church, and are sitting in that seat despite everything going on. And, if that's any of you, let me just take a moment to applaud your strength.

Since childhood, think about how you have learned and been taught. If your childhood looked anything remotely similar to mine, we were taught lessons through stories and still are. It might have been a fairy tale, a fable, a personal memory from your parents which you may or may not have listened to, or watching your siblings create a story as they learn a lesson. Stories have always been integral to our development. One of my favorite memories from childhood was playing a computer game called *Myst* with my parents. It was a single-player game, consisting of complicated puzzles and intricate worlds. We would each take turns playing as the character and working on the puzzles. It was really amazing, because one of us would give up on a level because we were so stuck and give the computer mouse to someone else. Normally, within 15 minutes of leaving, the new player found some new area or solved some puzzle. We each saw different things in the game because we had different skill sets and unique ways of looking at the game. Without each other, there was no way we could have completed that game on our own.

It's absolutely astonishing to think of the energy created by people huddled around a computer screen, all working on some puzzle together. Likewise, the palpable energy built up in an intense discussion or a seminar filled with passionate people is absolutely indescribable. I would even go so far as to say life happens when people are in circles. Those circles might be made up of friends enjoying some drinks and watching the big game, or maybe it's a Bible study group struggling through a passage together. We are naturally energized by being in these circles of other people; when we are surrounded by community.

So, how do we create an environment that cultivates collective intellectual engagement through circles? Well, I think it starts with one of the most difficult portions of our faith to understand: the Bible. We have spent the last month or so learning about its challenges, and I think it's safe to say at this point, it's a really difficult collection of stories. And yet, despite all of its intricacies, we are supposed to live with it. In the passage we just heard, Jesus promises us great things, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you." But, how can we do that if we don't understand what his words, what the Bible is trying to say? The beauty is in the fact we don't have to have the answers. Jesus wants his words to live in us. Going back to my story of my experience with *Paradise Lost*, that story lived in me when I was engaging with the text among other people. On my own, it dragged and was hard to get through, but with people it came alive and those experiences remain in me. It was the community of people that made the words thrive in me. "A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine." While this quote clearly emphasizes our need to live and work together, let's dive into the imagery of the vine a little further. Each and every branch still moves along with the general direction of the vine, but it takes its own course. It has its own arrangements of leaves, its own curves, bends, and spikes. Each branch is unique within the vine, much like the people in this very congregation. We each have our own stories and our own unique visions. As Jenny said in the very first week of this series, we each have a lens we view the Bible through. We will each see something different in the passage, and the discussion around these different stories is what is truly valuable and continues to engage us with this Holy book. We struggle together, we rejoice together, we cry together, and we read the Bible together. It is really all about a collection of stories that each of us brings with us.

It's a little bit like Oprah: you have a story and you have a story and you have a story. We each have something to contribute to the vine, to the church as a whole, because of our own story we have learned and sculpted throughout our lives. So, what does it look like to be a church that embraces every branch in the vine? I think it happens within the circles of our small groups here at church. If you're not already involved with a small group, I highly recommend reaching out and finding out more. We have senior groups, young adult groups, Monday night Bible studies, and many many more. And, if you are already involved in a small group, I challenge you to invite someone new to join you. I know it's hard to take the initiative and join a group without an invitation, so please make it easier for someone that might need to be plugged into a circle.

I want to be part of a community that embraces all of these stories, in addition to the stories of the Bible and wrestles with all of it. I see a community where we all have some different baggage and that's ok, and in fact, it's radically beautiful. Throughout this series, we have taken the Bible, with its inconsistencies, its challenges, and its flaws, and we accept it because we see ourselves within it. We see our own inconsistencies, our own challenges, and our own blessed flaws.

So, today, let's celebrate our different stories, just as God celebrates each branch of the vine. "Tell me a story" was what we chose to call this series. We chose this title for so many reasons: the imagery of children, asking for their parents to read a bedtime story to them, the multitude of parables Jesus tells his disciples, or even viewing it as a prayer you might say to God. Tell me a story, tell each other a story, and tell your story. Every story is worth sharing, and that is something to be so thankful for. Amen.