HEALING THROUGH STORY: EXPLORING THE USE OF STORYTELLING PREACHING AS A MEANS FOR HEALING A CONGREGATION

by

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ABSTRACT

ROBERT DON COLLINS
HEALING THROUGH STORY: EXPLORING THE USE OF STORYTELLING PREACHING AS A MEANS FOR HEALING A CONGREGATION
Under the direction of Dr. Joel Snider, PH. D

This project explores a preaching approach to healing a congregation that has experienced serious conflict within the church. Through the use of storytelling preaching, this project studies the ability of a story to break through the emotional barriers and deep-seated fears within a congregation. The goal of this project was to guide congregants toward overcoming their fears associated with major church conflict.

This project is a qualitative study that utilized guided group discussions and a six-week sermon series to promote healing across a congregation. The sermon series exclusively and purposefully used a storytelling approach to preaching. Group discussions occurring before and after the sermon series provided data about the amount of church-related fear experienced by the participants and the progress made at the conclusion of the sermon series. This project guided the congregation to engage biblical stories throughout the sermon series that focused on overcoming fear associated with crises, conflict, and change. Hearing these stories helped people remember their own stories and embrace God’s call on their lives and the life of their church.

The results indicate that storytelling preaching is a useful tool for helping a congregation moved beyond their fears and into a season of healing and hope. The
project participants exhibited decreased levels of fear and a healthier understanding of their fear. They also demonstrated a much higher level of hope about their church and its future. Further study is needed to truly understand the full potential of combining group discussions with sermons to create a healing atmosphere and culture throughout the congregation.
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CHAPTER ONE
THE NEED FOR STORY

Everyone wanted the sermon to end, even the pastor. Conflict around the nation had seeped into the church creating new gaps between new friends and widening old gaps between old friends. Unity no longer seemed enough. The country’s power groups cried out for uniformity. Fear hovered in the air, distracting the entire church from the sermon being preached. The sermon’s theology and message were sound and clear, but the weight of recent conflict within the congregation proved too painful to focus on anything else. Then the pastor started to tell a story.

He had traveled to Turkey recently and while there saw an ancient fortress, a place where people built walls in order to protect their world and their values. The next day he saw the famous Bosphorus Bridge, so named because it crosses over the Bosphorus strait. The bridge, he explained, brings together Europe and Asia, connecting the East to the West. The congregation began listening more intently as eyes shifted from phone screens back to the pulpit. The fortress walls built to defend are now a museum but the bridge built to connect is still used every single day. The congregation physically leaned in waiting to hear the story’s conclusion. They listened as the preacher explained how faith built with walls becomes a museum, while faith built as a bridge helps others to
walk from this age to the next. The spirit within the sanctuary began to lighten, hope rose and fear receded, if only for a moment.¹

On that day a story broke through the worries of a congregation to help move them beyond fear to hope and healing. The potential for healing revealed itself in the telling of a story. This project unpacks the healing potential of storytelling when applied to the art and calling of preaching at Locust Grove Baptist Church.

The Ministerial Context of Locust Grove Baptist Church

Locust Grove Baptist Church sits on the rural urban fringe just outside of Huntsville, Alabama. This researcher is the Associate Pastor at Locust Grove Baptist Church where he has served for the past ten years. The congregation is generally made up of Anglo, middle class, white-collar families. The church values its long history of theological diversity within the congregation. This diversity helped create a financially healthy congregation as it appealed to many in the community and provided a unique range of theological understandings.

That diversity, however, also left Locust Grove in a delicate balance between ministry potential and cultural volatility. An intense theological conflict within the church in the middle of 2015 demonstrated that volatility. Locust Grove found itself in the midst a debate about the inclusion of the LGBT community, which included some families that already held membership in the church. The church’s deacon body and leadership committee ultimately chose to embrace the LGBT community; however, serious fallout occurred. Within six months a large number of families left the church. Average worship

attendance dropped by nearly forty percent. The loss of members naturally affected the morale of the remaining congregation. The aftermath of the conflict wounded the congregation leaving many afraid and unsure of the church’s future. Now, two years later, while some have moved past the grief of loss, much of the larger congregation remains afraid that the church will never fully recover. They need to hear the story of others that have overcome similar fears. These biblical stories will remind the church of its own story, of who they are, and where their journey is headed. They need the kind of healing that comes from storytelling preaching.

Purpose of the Project

Statement of the Problem and Project Goals

A church that has experienced crisis needs healing to assist the congregation and staff in moving beyond fear. The use of storytelling preaching provides a strong avenue for congregational healing to take place. This project aims to provide healing through the potent, biblical, and holy remedy of storytelling in order to break through the emotional barriers and deep-seated fears of many in the congregation.

The goal of this project is to promote healing across the congregation through the use of storytelling preaching during a six-week sermon series. This healing seeks to reduce the fear that arose from the 2015 church conflict and guide the project participants toward a greater sense of hope for the church’s future. Group discussions occurring before and after the sermon series provided data about the amount of church-related fear experienced by the participants and the progress made at the conclusion of the sermon series. This project guided the congregation to engage biblical stories throughout the sermon series that focus on overcoming fear associated with crises, conflict, and change.
Hearing these stories helped people remember their own stories and embrace God’s call on their lives and the life of their church.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Project

One limitation of this project recognizes the possibility of healing taking place for reasons other than storytelling preaching. The very act of having group discussions that reflect on personal concerns and worries could serve as a therapeutic experience for the participants. An additional limitation of this project is the risk of stirring up new controversy through discussing fear caused by church conflicts. This risk cannot be controlled or truly avoided by this researcher; however, even that risk may eventually prove itself necessary for genuine healing to take place. Another limitation of this project is that some participants may purposely say things to please their Associate Pastor. They may attempt to give what they perceive as the right responses to the discussion questions.

The group discussion sessions encouraged open and honest conversation by participants both for their sake and for the help this project may provide for other congregations. The truthfulness of their responses ultimately rests on the participants and sits outside the control of this project.

This researcher also recognizes that fear exists for many reasons and in various forms within each person. Both group discussions and sermons possess the potential to unearth unacknowledged fears that contain no relevance to the church or its future, but this project focuses specifically on fear birthed from church conflict and concerns with the church’s wellbeing and future. Another limitation is that the information from the initial group discussion carries the possibility of influencing the sermons throughout the sermon series. The sermons were planned prior to the first group discussion session, but
their final drafts were written after that session, leaving the possibility of unintentionally shifting the direction of a sermon.

Finally this project recognizes that the researcher does not serve as the Senior Pastor and the results could differ slightly if performed by the Senior Pastor. However, the researcher’s tenure and experience with the church should make this difference negligible. The approach for using storytelling as a vehicle for healing, the methodology of the discussion topics and questions, and the group discussions are all elements of this project that are within its control. These delimitations are all chosen by the researcher and carry with them certain assumptions.

Assumptions and Terms

A major assumption of this project was that the participants would be honest about their concerns and feelings. The fear resulting from the church conflict in recent years was easily observable by leadership and the ministerial staff, but the act of admitting fear cannot be forced upon participants. Another important assumption was that participants would be engaged during the sermons. Even with maximum effort from the preacher, this engagement does not guarantee avoidance of distractions that are beyond this project’s control. This project also assumes that healing can occur from the pulpit through the use of storytelling preaching.

Certain terms used in this project need to be defined. These terms are defined with the assumptions of this project in mind. These definitions serve to clarify and understand the expectations of the language used throughout this project.
• *Storytelling* is understood as the act of telling a story within a sermon. Likewise *storytelling preaching* references a style of preaching that uses story as the interpretive lens for the sermon.

• *Storytelling preaching* differs from mere narrative preaching in that it does not use story to solidify or prove a theological point. *Storytelling preaching*, for the purposes of this project, allows the story itself to be the theological point.²

• *Healing* is defined as the emotional action of acknowledging and moving beyond the fear that resulted from church conflict. *Healing* is evidenced in the shift from negative to positive images, terms, and references to the church’s future. *Healing* is also evidenced in the shift from unhealthy forms of fear to healthy forms of fear.

• *Fear* refers to the negative feelings and emotions that occur when experiencing church conflict. *Fear* references the lingering, unresolved concerns of the congregation that the church conflict of 2015 permanently damaged the future of the church. *Fear* can be both healthy and unhealthy.

• *Healthy Fear* is defined as fear that leads one to take competent, capable, edifying, and intelligent actions in response to their fear.³ *Healthy fear* is also a subsection of *fear* for the purposes of this project. When *fear* meets the requirements listed above, it will be refereed to as *healthy fear*.

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- *Unhealthy Fear* is defined as fear that creates anxiety and stress because of church conflict, but is repressed and ignored.\(^4\) The result is a lack of action and an ever-increasing worry that negative change is immanent and unavoidable. *Unhealthy fear* is a subsection of *fear* for the purposes of this project. If *fear* is not referenced as *healthy fear* it is assumed to be *unhealthy fear*.

- *Group Discussions* are recognized as conversations of eight to fifteen project participants. *Group discussions* were designed for the project participants to lead the discussion while the researcher records the conversation for later analysis and comparison. *Group discussions* cover topics from preselected questions.

- *Church conflict*, for the purposes of this project, is understood as a serious disagreement within a church that results in a loss of membership of at least thirty percent of the larger church.

- *Theological Circle* refers to a person’s circle of friends and/or acquaintances that also share a particular theological mindset or worldview.

### Procedures

**The Process**

This ministry project consisted of a six-week sermon series entitled “Be Healed.” The “Be Healed” sermon series focused on healing for the purpose of overcoming fear. The series took place in the summer of 2017 from June twenty-fifth through July thirtieth. Six weeks was an attainable goal for a congregation with members that travel regularly during the summer, as many Locust Grove members do. Each sermon emerged from a scripture passage that focused on a moment of healing where fear was overcome.

These passages followed the model of Jesus’ storytelling practices of utilizing common themes, drawing listeners into the story, and inviting listeners to hear their story again. Storytelling preaching served as the preaching model for both sermon formation and delivery style.

Group Discussions and Data Collection

In order to establish a baseline of participants’ fears for the church and its future prior to the sermon series, each participant participated in a group discussion. The initial group consisted of fourteen project participants. Guided questions encouraged the participants to share their feelings (both positive and negative) about the church and its future.5 After the sermon series concluded, the participants then sat down for a second group discussion using the same questions from the previous discussion to discover any changes in fear or hope as a measurement of healing. The group discussions were recorded with a video camera and an audio recording device as a backup. Transcriptions of those conversations were used to identity themes and changes in the amount of fear (healthy and unhealthy) and hope, as well as positive and negative references toward the church and its future.

Participant Requirements

Participants committed to attending at least four of the six sermons during the “Be Healed” sermon series. Participants had to be at least eighteen years old or older. Participation in the project also required that participants regularly attended Locust Grove since the summer of 2015. These criteria ensured that they experienced the previous season of conflict, making them relevant subjects to study for the purpose of healing.

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5 See Appendix E.
through storytelling preaching as it pertains to this project. Recruitment of project participants took place via a church-wide email, announcements made from the pulpit, and an article in the monthly church newsletter.\textsuperscript{6}

Significance

The potential significance for this project provides a valuable method of ministering to a congregation following a season of church conflict and the loss of members. The data collected from this project will positively influence the way this researcher teaches and preaches for the rest of his ministry. For Locust Grove Baptist Church, the significance of this project has the potential to affect the church for years to come. If the congregation is able to experience a healthy level of healing following this project, the impact should occur across the entire church, given how the presence of unhealthy fear already affects the entire church. From nursery volunteers, to the finance committee, to the support staff and youth group, when the church begins to overcome unhealthy fear through the power of story, a wave of healing will follow.

Finally the implications of this project for the wider church are quite significant. This project can inform other churches that are searching for a path toward healing. It will provide a blueprint for the pastor seeking to help a congregation discover, or rediscover, its identity. The value stretches beyond just typical pastors and churches. Healing through storytelling is a relevant tool for interim pastors, public speakers, church lay leaders, corporate leaders, and all who find themselves speaking to a community that experienced crisis or loss and is struggling with the resulting fear.

\textsuperscript{6} See Appendix C and Appendix D.
CHAPTER TWO
THE POWER OF A STORY

In April 2010, the Deepwater Horizon offshore drilling rig exploded. The explosion resulted in the sinking of the entire rig and left oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico for months. British Petroleum, the owner of that rig, started releasing commercials apologizing and claiming responsibility for one of the worst environmental disasters in United States history. Interestingly, they did so before actually capping the leak and stopping the relentless gush of oil into the gulf. Why the rush to release commercials? Why would they need to speak in this method prior to actually fixing the leak? The truth is these commercials were far more than apologies. They were stories.

British Petroleum needed to tell a new story. They told the story of a company who made a mistake and was now funding the largest environmental response in the history of America to fix it. They tried to shift their role from careless villain to repentant hero. Their story mattered to them, both for the future of their company and for their present financial bottom-line. They tapped into the deep well that is storytelling. How does a church respond when they have gone through their own crisis and experienced their own season of conflict? What role does story have in the healing of a congregation? This chapter seeks to answer those questions as it explores the use of story to promote healing in a church.
Stories can sway and convince. They can effectively change the minds of their hearers. Stories tell us about the past and inform us for our future. Stories warn us to avoid repeating the mistakes of history and motivate us to make a better today. Stories can be heartwarming, funny, or sad; but they can also be spiritual and theological. William Bausch sees the connection between theology and story as inseparable, insisting that all theology taps into story and “all stories are ultimately theological.”\(^7\) This project used the power of storytelling preaching to promote healing in a congregation that has experienced serious conflict and significant loss as a result.

Story serves as a premium tool to accomplish this goal because of its prevalence in modern society. A story around the campfire scares, at a wedding it amuses, beside the hospital bed it gives hope and comfort, near the graveside story brings tears. Stories are the natural form of communication. When the disciples lost Jesus, they likely did the same as anyone does today after a funeral. They sat around and told stories about the one they had lost. Telling stories about the deceased is part of remembering, an essential and natural part of the healing process. They missed Jesus, so they told stories to remember, to comfort, and to heal. It is from these healing moments of retelling that the Christian movement was born. As “the stories began, so did the faith. That’s how the faith got started: in storytelling.”\(^8\)

\(^7\) Bausch, *Storytelling*, 11.

\(^8\) Ibid., 15.
The Storytelling of Jesus

Jesus was a prolific storyteller. His parables changed hearts, taught theology, and unpacked what he referred to as the Kingdom of God. His approach to storytelling presents the model for storytelling preaching used in this project. This section explores the characteristics of Jesus’ storytelling and the implications of using this style of preaching to promote healing in a congregation.

Connections to Rabbinic Storytelling

Jesus was not the first storyteller of God. Jesus swam in the deep waters of the long history of Jewish storytelling. Ancient rabbis believed God dictated the Torah directly to Moses. Despite this belief, they were surprisingly unafraid to “embellish, retell, reimagine, or even radically change” those Torah stories. Those precious stories made up the oral Torah, a collection of stories and teachings that are still revered to this day. The ancient rabbis utilized the power of storytelling to bring about the healing of their disciples and communities. For them to tell a story was as normal as breathing. Their stories penetrated the hearts of their listeners not only because of their wisdom and God’s holy influence, but also because they used universal themes connecting to the worries and joys of the average person. Jesus used this same method to connect with his listeners.

Growing up in first century Capernaum, Jesus would have been surrounded by poverty. There were many large and wealthy Roman cities in the world at this time, but Capernaum was not one of them. While those cities were marked by wealth, Capernaum

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10 Schwartz, Reimagining the Bible, 75.
was marked by scarcity. It did not have huge villas, water systems, or even the paved streets that signified a wealthy city of that age. And yet in a city dominated by scarcity Jesus preached abundance.\textsuperscript{11} He lived in a world that seemed devoid of hope and found a way to tell a new story with old characters. Is it any wonder that his message connected with so many people? Jesus’ stories became beautiful mixtures of liberation, rebellion, grace, and hope. In many ways his stories transitioned into the realm of folklore. Like the fable of the gingerbread bread man outfoxing the fox, the stories of Jesus flipped the world upside-down reversing the roles of power and authority.

Upside-Down Nature and Common Language of Jesus’ Stories

The stories of Jesus created a theological and revelatory reversal for the people, constantly turning their world upside-down. When Jesus tells the parable of an unnamed rich man and a named poor man, in the end it is the poor man who is blessed and the rich man left searching for hope.\textsuperscript{12} The shameful and disrespectful son, in the parable of the two sons, finds himself shockingly forgiven and celebrated by his father, when he and everyone else expected him to be scolded and punished.\textsuperscript{13} Repeatedly Jesus flips the world of his listeners upside-down with his stories.

Just like the Rabbis before him, Jesus drew upon the language and folklores of the people around him to connect his stories to his listeners.\textsuperscript{14} That is why Jesus spoke so often of seeds, farming, plants, merchants, fields, and sheep. These were terms that the


\textsuperscript{13} Luke 15:11-32

\textsuperscript{14} Schwartz, \textit{Reimagining the Bible}, 81.
common people understood; it was their cultural vernacular. When he was not talking about farming, he was tapping into major life events. The birth of a child, the marriage of two lovers, and the death of a loved one are all examples that cause a shift within a story, one easily empathized with by the listener. Stephen Wright identifies several elements that serve as the major concerns of Jesus’ parables; specifically they dealt with the social classes, customs, prejudices, and power dynamics of first century Israel. Many of Jesus’ stories deal with hierarchical structures and address the roles of masters and their servants.

Invitation to a New Worldview

Another major characteristic of Jesus’ storytelling is the way it challenged the known world and how it works. At every turn Jesus chooses to challenge the common assumptions of the culture. For example, Jesus’ stories debate the basic idea that native citizens are trustworthy while foreigners are to be avoided. He rejects the belief that God operates according to some kind of merit badge system. He even debunks the understanding that life is all about safety and financial security. All of these assumptions of life, faith, and God, according to Jesus, were false. So Jesus invited his hearers into a new world, a world true to who God really is. Jesus called this new world the “Kingdom of God.”

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16 Ibid.

Every story he told welcomed the listeners to reimagine God’s kingdom for themselves. The spark of this re-imagination was the upside-down nature of Jesus’ stories. Although the twist, or hook, of the parable shocked the listener, it did more than that. It also pulled them in and introduced them to a new and better worldview. Jesus’ stories, as N.T. Wright puts it, made “the implicit suggestion that the new worldview be tried on for size with a view to permanent purchase.” A new worldview is exactly what a church in crisis needs to try on for size. When everyone around them keeps saying that the church will not survive, the pastor has the opportunity to tell a new story and introduce a new vision – one of hope and healing. That pastor can use the same model of storytelling preaching utilized by Jesus throughout his ministry.

Jesus told stories for a reason. He was not lacking in other forms of teaching or communication. Jesus knew of other approaches to teaching and discipling because he occasionally used them. Yet throughout the majority of his ministry Jesus chose to tell stories. William Bausch correctly states, “virtually nothing Jesus said is recorded in lecture form.” Quite the opposite actually, nearly every instance of his teaching and preaching takes place in narrative form. Over the years, this certainly has had its effect on the use of storytelling within preaching. Jesus’ approach to storytelling presents a useful model for sermon crafting with the purpose of healing a congregation. Disrupting common assumptions, using commonly understood cultural references, and referencing universal life moments in this project’s sermons helped to accomplish that goal.

18 Wright, *Jesus the Storyteller*, 47.


The History and Rise of Storytelling in Preaching

Judging by the sheer dominance of storytelling within Jesus’ ministry it should be no surprise that storytelling has risen in prominence in the preaching world over the last few decades. That is not to say that storytelling was absent from preaching prior to this rise. But it would be unfair to ignore the recent rebirth that storytelling has experienced in the preaching world. Mark Miller sees this rise as a renaissance and rediscovery of “the subtle power and beauty of story.” From the way commercials are produced to the way the news gets reported, story has emerged as the normative form of communication. Just look back to British Petroleum’s choice to use story as their primary form of recovering from a catastrophic mistake. Every company, brand, and church seems to be in the business of storytelling. This is no different in the world of preaching; story matters more than ever.

Early Christian Theology on Storytelling

In the church’s formational years, the Apostle Paul utilized storytelling in his own ministerial and missional work. Following in the footsteps of his Lord, Paul made distinct decisions to tell stories similar to those that rabbis have always told. Like the rabbis before him, Paul’s stories were about God and God’s people and how they connect to the rest of the world. Only now he tells those stories through the Christ-centric lens of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

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22 Wright, *People of God*, 79

23 Ibid.
Despite Paul’s efforts and those of the other New Testament writers, early theologians seem to have cared very little about storytelling. Even when theologians paid close attention to the stories of the New Testament, they often overlooked the importance of the use of story. Such an example is Hermann Samuel Reimarus, who did amazing, groundbreaking work on the inclusion of historical backgrounds in the interpretation of Jesus’ parables. However, Reimarus, for all of his work, wrote little to nothing concerning the importance of narrative in those parables.\(^2^4\) At least Reimarus recognized the narratives of Jesus in his scholarly work. Unfortunately many later theologians went in the opposite direction, going so far as to specifically dismiss the importance of story altogether.\(^2^5\) This under-appreciation of story within early Christian theology has thankfully received course correction in recent years.

Recent Christian Theology on Storytelling

Thomas Long, in *The Witness of Preaching*, points out that homiletical scholars have now identified three major types of preachers: “the herald, the pastor, and the storyteller/poet.”\(^2^6\) While all three are worthy of study, this paper will focus exclusively on the storyteller/poet as exploring all three styles goes beyond the scope of this project.

\(^{2^4}\) Wright, *Jesus the Storyteller*, 10-12.

\(^{2^5}\) Ibid., 17-18.

Long says:

The storyteller/poet image of the preacher gained new prominence in the 1970s as homileticians became fascinated with emerging theories of narrative and with the communicational potential of stories. This was part of a larger movement among theologians generally called “story theology” and narrative approaches to ethics.\(^{27}\)

The rise of the storyteller/poet increased the importance and value of storytelling in the world of preaching. It is important to recognize that the “herald” and “pastor” approaches to preaching do not necessarily dismiss storytelling; in fact they often use stories. But for them story is simply one possible tool for proclaiming the gospel. That is not the case for the storyteller/poet. For the storyteller/poet the use of story to proclaim the gospel is the primary and obvious approach; everything else would be considered a deviation from the norm.\(^{28}\)

This project utilizes many of the characteristics of the storyteller/poet throughout the “Be Healed” sermon series.

The Value of Story in Postmodernity

A final major contributing factor to the recent rise of storytelling within preaching emerged from a cultural shift into postmodernity. The birth of postmodernity, and the many results of that birth, helped to bring about a greater emphasis on story. Part of postmodernity includes a preference for “low” Christology from the more traditional “high” Christology. William Bausch distinguishes between the two theologies by stating, “high Christology tends to stress Jesus’ Divinity and low Christology stresses his

\(^{27}\) Long, The Witness of Preaching, 37.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 42.
humanity.” The reference to high or low Christology is not a reference to superiority, as if high Christology held authority over low Christological views. They are simply two different viewpoints of examining and interpreting Jesus.

The generations of Christians that lived into and during modernity tended to favor a high Christology. With that high Christology came the teaching of doctrine and creeds from the pulpit. Meanwhile Christians with a postmodern worldview tend to favor a low Christology. Low Christology is often accompanied by the stories of the gospel writers rather than theology or doctrine. This preference for storytelling among postmodern Christians has also contributed to the rise of story within preaching. Following the model of Jesus and Paul, implementing the methods of the storyteller/poet, and recognizing the unique strength of story to communicate in a postmodern world all contribute to the goal of this project.

The Strengths of Storytelling Preaching

Storytelling Preaching has risen in use over the past few decades for the many reasons previously discussed, but storytelling is more than a coincidental success. Storytelling preaching inherently possesses strengths that make it a useful tool for promoting healing in a congregation. From cultural, scientific, and psychological perspectives, storytelling is a powerful approach that preachers can use to impact today’s churches.

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30 Ibid.
Stories Breed Trust

Phyllis Tickle discovered that most people with postmodern worldviews carry a deep-seated distrust of meta-narratives that try to explain the entirety of scripture, faith, and God. If someone is claiming to have all of the answers, especially someone behind a pulpit, many individuals immediately exhibit strong distrust toward that person. Interestingly this same group of people exhibits an equally strong trust and appreciation for what she calls micro-narratives. Micro-narratives, unlike meta-narratives, avoid trying to explain every mystery or solve every cultural equation. Quite the opposite, the micro-narrative seeks to embrace mystery and foster dialogue, as this approach values meaningful open-ended conversation over doctrinal closed-ended statements. It is precisely the love of mystery and the importance placed upon dialogue that leads this group of people to embrace story and narrative more willingly than other forms of preaching. Story naturally allows space for mystery to rest and for the listener to wrestle with the ideas they have received.

In her work Tickle discovered that a major defining characteristic of postmodern Christians is that they overwhelmingly value orthopraxy over orthodoxy. This means that a person’s actions always trump their stated set of religious beliefs. Story connects with this characteristic because it allows for freer interpretation and dialogue than other forms of preaching typically allow. Story is a powerful tool because many Christians are “willingly susceptible to the power and truth of story,” and are “categorically suspicious


of propositional truth and especially of doctrinal and/or dogmatic exegesis.”  

The trust that comes with storytelling provides a strong place for storytelling preaching to work toward the healing of a congregation similar to Locust Grove.

The Communicative Process

Another strength of storytelling for the purposes of this project is that it possesses the ability to impact people from different cultural backgrounds, social statuses, and ages. This impact can occur in a number of ways. A story, as N.T. Wright reminds us, actually has the power to “change how people think, feel, and behave, and hence change the way the world actually is.”  

Much of this is possible because of the communicative process. For many years communication was believed to be akin to a one-way street where the communicator encodes a message and the listener decodes that message. Unfortunately, that understanding of the communicative process is far more akin to the way computers and telephones work, but not the way humans communicate.

David Brown expands on this misconception about communication in his thorough text *Transformational Preaching*. Brown explores the major flaw in assuming that the listener is simply receiving information. Listeners, like the members of a congregation, are not passive listeners. Every person sitting in a pew, listening at home, or watching the sermon on a computer has their own life full of complications and unique experiences. They bring their entire life of collected memories into every single conversation. Every hope they have ever had, every dream, fear, and joy, every piece of

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33 Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 165.

34 Wright, *People of God*, 69.

them is there, and all of it contributes to the communicative process.\textsuperscript{36} This means that effective communication is far more difficult than the average preacher may know. Preachers will never communicate perfectly with anyone in their congregation, because the sermon will always be interpreted through individual, subconscious filters. Ultimately, it is the very complexity of the communicative process that gives storytelling so much potential for healing.

The experiences of listeners enable them to naturally connect to a story. When a preacher tells a happy story about their father taking them on a fishing trip, the memories of the listeners are triggered. Whether they actually went on a fishing trip with their dad or not does not technically matter. Their minds will jump to a loosely connected moment with a parent, grandparent, or their own child. At times they will experience the opposite of the intended emotion, such as a deep hurt for missing out on such a moment. Either way, they find themselves being understood by another person. Roy Oswald and Arland Jacobson explain that when someone feels understood by another person, the relationship between them actually drastically improves because of how deeply we desire to be understood at an authentic level.\textsuperscript{37} When a preacher tells a story that the listener connects to, they begin to experience what Brown calls a “shared story.”\textsuperscript{38} Using the natural qualities of storytelling preaching, this project connects the preacher’s stories about healing to the congregation’s own memories and desires. This connection creates the spiritual space needed for healing to begin and for fear to be overcome.

\textsuperscript{36} Brown, \textit{Transformational Preaching}, 79-81.

\textsuperscript{37} Oswald, and Jacobson, \textit{Emotional Intelligence}, 43.

\textsuperscript{38} Brown, \textit{Transformational Preaching}, 82.
Keeping Their Attention

Another major advantage that storytelling brings to the pulpit deals with the average attention span of most people. While it seems to be well known that the average attention span has shortened for people today, science shows that this is far more extreme than most truly know. According to most studies the typical attention span of the average person is around twenty seconds.\(^{39}\) Once twenty seconds goes by, a person’s focus will shift to a new thought whether they want it to or not. Maintaining the attention of a congregation is not simply about being interesting; it is more accurately about being able to pull them in again and again. The preacher needs to grab their attention over and over again, and storytelling preaching offers an efficient vehicle to accomplish this goal.

Keeping one’s attention occurs naturally during a story because humans instinctively think in narrative form.\(^{40}\) When someone remembers a fond memory, they remember it as a story. When recalling information, the tendency is to recall it in story form. Stories are ingrained in the brain’s natural processes from early on because the world uses storytelling so frequently. Whether watching television, reading a book, or sitting in a theater, all of it is coming in the form of story. Thomas Long said it this way:

Not only do we like stories, we live our lives out of them. We remember in stories, dream in stories, shape our values in stories. And we see the world through evocative images. Long after the rest of the sermon is forgotten, many hearers can still recall the stories told and remember the images.\(^{41}\)

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\(^{39}\) Brown, *Transformational Preaching*, 98.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 238.

Story is the common language of the human brain and heart. A story told from the pulpit is so much more than simple entertainment. It is connection to the souls of the congregation, tapping directly into the deep well of their lives. By telling those stories and triggering the memories of the congregation, the journey of healing and overcoming fear can begin.

Bausch references the many times a parishioner will walk up to the preacher after the service to say “it felt like you were speaking directly to me the whole time” and connects this occurrence to story. Something about the sermon connected to that parishioner’s life story. Preachers can help their congregants along the journey of self-discovery using story, and if they do this long enough, Bausch says, it is likely that the congregation will end up discovering God as well.42 People are, after all, image bearers of God. They can only dig so deep within their own souls before they unearth the creative love spark of God inside them. Brown describes people as “living libraries of God’s word,” insisting that ultimately “our stories are God’s stories.”43 The ability to connect to the lives of the congregation gives storytelling preaching the potential needed to grab and maintain their attention.

Oral Versus Written Communication

Another strength of storytelling preaching is in the dynamics of oral communication. When analyzing the use of storytelling from the pulpit it is important to recognize that preaching is oral. While writing is commonly involved in the preparation for preaching, the delivery is primarily an oral function. This may seem like an obvious

42 Bausch, Storytelling, 194.
statement, but the implications are anything but obvious. The science behind oral language teaches that oral communication has distinct characteristics far different from written communication. To begin with, written communication is typically composed using specially chosen words, all of which are “packed together and non-repetitive.” This characteristic of written communication is important to recognize because oral communication works in exactly the opposite way. In the middle of conversation people do not have time to choose larger vocabulary words or to pack their thoughts and ideas neatly together in perfect form. Instead, people think and construct sentences as they speak. They use repetitive phrases. Even the sounds made while thinking, “um,” “mmm,” and “uh” are prime examples of typical sounds made in a conversation. While they look inappropriate and out-of-place on paper, they are essential to effective oral communication. These repetitive phrases provide necessary time for listeners’ brains to process the information they are receiving. When teaching from the pulpit and reading from a manuscript of doctrinal points with clever alliteration, those sounds and repetitive phrases are purposefully trimmed away. This certainly creates a well-written sermon. Unfortunately, it is also harder to follow and understand because “the structure of written language is highly compact and carefully-honed, and trying to listen to it is an unnatural aural process.”

This is a major strength in favor of using storytelling preaching for breaking through the barriers of the congregations’ fears. Telling stories from the pulpit are a

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44 Brown, *Transformational Preaching*, 98.

45 Ibid.
natural approach to preaching because preaching is oral in nature. This means stories are uniquely suited for the delivery of sermons to promote healing. Brown explains that:

People simply cannot ‘hear’ (or appreciate) all that fine-tuned language. It is one reason, also, why the consistent use of stories helps keep the listener’s attention. Stories, when well told, attract and keep attention, and they serve to pull an “escaped thinker” back into the sermon. The studies of communication reveal the many strengths of storytelling preaching. Understanding these strengths and the science behind human communication set a solid foundation for this project. This project uses the strengths of storytelling for preaching to a congregation in need of healing. Those strengths allow the stories to penetrate the hearts and minds of the congregation, providing a pathway for connection, growth, healing, and overcoming fear.

The Healing Potential of Storytelling Preaching

When an expert in the law spoke with Jesus about who qualifies as a neighbor, Jesus answered the loaded question with a story now commonly known as the Good Samaritan. The crux of the parable has an unlikely hero coming to the rescue of an unlikely victim. The conversation ends with the law expert reluctantly acknowledging the moral of the story and Jesus telling him to “go and do likewise.” The hope of Jesus’ words insinuates that a change might occur within the law expert.

Perhaps this man will begin living a life according to this new moral code. Perhaps he will choose to ignore Jesus’ command. The potential for this kind of

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46 Brown, *Transformational Preaching*, 98.

transformation represents the potential for healing. This law expert lived under the influence of the first century shame-honor culture, a culture that sought to control human behavior through the threat of social shame. The presence of a fear based theology and culture allowed Jesus to utilize the power of story to promote healing for his listeners. To accomplish a similar goal this project used approaches and research developed in the areas of story-focused preaching.

Transformation Calls for Action

Preaching aimed at transforming the listener seeks to initiate meaningful, Christ-centered change. There are plenty of forms of preaching that seek to inform. Transformational preaching, as defined by David Brown, seeks to motivate rather than inform.48 Action is the goal, but not random action. Christ-like action is the specific goal of transformational preaching. The purpose of every preacher should be to “persuade, motivate, or inspire listeners to believe or act on biblical truth.”49 Preachers’ concerns need to focus on what the congregation will actually go and do, and how their view of the world might be changed because of the gospel story.

Being an agent of meaningful, holy change is important for the calling of every preacher and the livelihood of every church. The moment a church “fails to engage in powerful storytelling” they begin to lose their influence and relevance to the very people they seek to serve.50 Storytelling preaching uses this same approach, as it is a form of transformational preaching. The stories used in the “Be Healed” sermon series each...

48 Brown, Transformational Preaching, 32.

49 Ibid., 39.

50 Soong-Chan Rah, Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 130.
called the congregation to action, to face their fears, and to allow themselves to be transformed by the story of God in their lives. The call to action is a major requirement in overcoming fear and using healthy fear to better one’s life. Healthy fear calls on the person to respond to their fear with steps to resolve the conflict or crisis causing the fear. These understandings of fear will be expounded upon later in this chapter, but the role that action plays is unmistakably paramount.

Real Life in Every Story

Another characteristic of transformational preaching is that it draws from real life and truth for its stories. Leonora Tisdale, in *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, describes the preacher as part theologian and part folk artist.\(^{51}\) Like a folk artist, the preacher uses the local community as inspiration to formulate compelling metaphor that will connect with their congregation. This is done by “searching for the expressions of local theology through symbols, forms, and movements that are capable of capturing and transforming the imaginations of a particular local community of faith.”\(^{52}\) The preacher absorbs these stories, myths, and cultural themes of the community to utilize them in sermons.

The importance here is that the stories be familiar to the congregation. They need not be the same or experienced in exact detail by every listener, but the stories do need to reflect the real life of the members of the congregation. David Brown explains the importance of relevance:

\(^{51}\) Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 124.

\(^{52}\) Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, 124.
Transformational preaching must be directed toward needs or desires that real people face. Out of that relevance, people will be transformed. Transformation never comes about when the lives, concerns, and the issues real people face are not taken into account.  

This approach can make preachers feel as if sermon stories are too familiar. Often preachers try to disguise familiarity to remedy this. Fred Craddock observes that there seems to be an understanding that “somehow the familiar doesn’t seem powerful.”

Familiar stories actually carry a great deal of power. The familiar is what connects the listener to the preacher. Storytelling preaching uses the power of the shared story to create opportunities for healing by overcoming fear in the lives of the congregation. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, “the best sermons are those that begin with life, telling stories that have the ring of truth and suggesting the ways in which God’s word addresses the often perplexing truths of our lives.”

Truthful, common, shared stories are pivotal to storytelling preaching.

Identity within a Shared Story

For most people their identity is formed by the events, accomplishments, and experiences of their life. These experiences make up a person’s life, that life helps the individual discover his or her own identity. The same is true of congregations. Their past helps to identify their present and inform their future. This shared identity presents both positive and negative potential, as was witnessed at Locust Grove Baptist Church. Fear

53 Brown, Transformational Preaching, 211-212.

54 Fred B. Craddock, Craddock on the Craft of Preaching (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013), 122.

can also become shared. Fear of failure, fear of never recovering from conflict, fear of preparedness for the future; all of these present the potential to stifle or even cripple a congregation. These fears can be overcome though. When the congregation hears its shared story in the light of hope and healing, their unhealthy fears can shift to healthy fears that call on positive actions to combat expected obstacles.

Luke Timothy Johnson explains that through societal studies the vast use of storytelling has been discovered. There is no denying that some stories serve merely an entertainment purpose. But many stories do much more than amuse. Stories are used throughout various cultures all over the world to shape a group and the way it sees the world. When this kind of storytelling takes place, it begins to tap into the realms of individual and group identity. When a preacher tells the congregation its own story, this does more than simply inform them of their identity. That shared story actually starts the process necessary to transform and heal their identity. This project uses that moment of transformation to lead the congregation toward healing.

Hearing one’s story actually provides the opportunity to change the direction of that story. James Hopewell proclaims the danger for churches that allow their identity to be reduced to nothing more than attendance statistics and programming choices. If preachers choose to ignore storytelling, then they are missing out on a primary way that


57 Johnson, Scripture and Discernment, 29.


59 Hopewell, Congregation, 193.
congregations face the reality of their identity and calling. Storytelling preaching uses story to place listeners in a larger setting, allowing them to see that they are actually part of something larger than themselves.\textsuperscript{60} This project aimed at using the connection and positive potential of Locust Grove’s shared story to led it into a season of healing and hope. Once the church sees their story in the larger context of God’s work throughout the world, they are able to reconcile their worries and face the fears that welled up during the past major church conflict.

Healing Results

The gospel accounts are packed with examples of Jesus healing people through miraculous divine power, but there are also examples of people being healed by story. At a well in Samaria Jesus tells a Samaritan woman her own story.\textsuperscript{61} Through that story she encounters the truth of her life and discovers the grace and love of God. That story changed her life. Interestingly, this same method of healing is used in various forms of counseling today.

“Modern psychology uses storytelling to bring healing to people, especially the healing of deep hurts and memories from the past.”\textsuperscript{62} Therapeutic methods such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) utilize story to help people get in touch with the reality of their present life.\textsuperscript{63} The therapist listens to the story of their patient and then they tell the story back to the patient.

\textsuperscript{60} Hopewell, \textit{Congregation}, 194.

\textsuperscript{61} John 4:1-42.

\textsuperscript{62} Bausch, \textit{Storytelling}, 54.

\textsuperscript{63} Josiah Smith, Therapist, interview by author, 6 February 2015, email, Life Strategies Counseling Services, Beckley, West Virginia.
Therapists use these methods to help their patients notice negative thoughts and to teach them to avoid investing too much energy into those destructive thoughts. Josiah Smith, a professional therapist, says that storytelling is used to help those patients move past upsetting memories and explore the questions: who are we, what is our story, what do we value, and what goals help us to achieve those things?64

The previously mentioned folklore elements of the storytelling preacher possess all of the needed potential to help congregants heal through the power of storytelling preaching. When congregants hear a story that connects to them, that connection taps into their humanity and exposes their real lives. They are essentially hearing their own story. Bausch elaborates on this connection by saying; “stories indeed reflect our common humanity and bind us to one another in a common destiny.”65 This shared story creates the space for healing to occur right there in the pews of a sanctuary. Through the power of storytelling the preacher is able to validate the listener as a person created in the image of God, as a person loved deeply by God, and as a person whose story is part of the larger narrative of scripture.

Understanding Fear

Before this project could dive into the work of healing through storytelling preaching, a better understanding of the goal had to be achieved. Chiefly, overcoming fear could only be accomplished if fear is understood in its proper context, role, and purpose. Throughout the 1990’s and 2000’s the phrase and brand “No Fear” became increasingly popular. Its popularity rose in connection with the popularity of extreme

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64 Smith, Therapist, interview by author, 6 February 2015.

sports in the US and across Europe. “No Fear” eventually partnered with extreme sports athletes, produced clothing with the phrase on it, and created their own energy drinks.66 The “No Fear” brand profited from the idea that a fearless life was superior to a life lived with fear. Researchers and experts in the area of fear disagree. They insist that the desire to live without fear simply demonstrates a lack of understanding of the true purposes for one’s fear.

Common Misconceptions about Fear

Karla McLaren explains in her book *The Language of Emotions* that fear has been vastly misunderstood and thus vastly misinterpreted and mislabeled throughout our society. Fear has long been mitigated to the negative realm of our psyche because of this false portrayal. McLaren insists that positive and powerful things such as intuition and self-preserving instinctual actions are too often treated as mysteries or spiritual interventions, when they are really the positive products of fear.67 Our society’s vilification of fear has resulted in this abandonment of fear.

Fear’s true purpose is to provide lifesaving, enhanced intelligence, decision-making, and even reflexes that happen at just the right moment within one’s life.68 Yet most of Western culture seeks to reduce, if not eliminate, the role of fear in their lives. From early ages children are taught to hide their fears. Children are also taught to ignore the fears of others. Fear is presented as a weakness that should be at the least ignored and at the most belittled so that one might be freed of their fears. McLaren refers to the


68 Ibid., 236.
ignoring of fear as “almost a national pastime” in the United States.\textsuperscript{69} This proved true throughout the project as project participants exhibited discomfort when simply using the word “fear” to describe their own emotions, an observation to be explored in greater detail in chapters four and five.

Unhealthy Fear

The ignoring and repression of fear leads to the existence of unhealthy fear. Most of society has learned to ignore, reject, and even disable our fear in a number of different ways.\textsuperscript{70} The typical result of this approach is an increase in unhealthy fear. The proper use of fear keeps a person safe. It allows that person to make difficult, complicated decisions in a split second. If fear is repressed or disabled, then access to that resource cannot be properly retrieved. Fear answers the internal question of “What action should be taken?” with clear answers: “Stand still. Run! Speak out. Remain silent. Duck! Fade into the background. Walk forcefully. Move quickly to the left. Look stupid. Downshift and swerve. Yell!”\textsuperscript{71} All of these actions can be life improving and potentially lifesaving in certain circumstances.

Unhealthy fear impedes this free flow of thought and decision-making, causing one to avoid action and eventually give way to anxiety, frustration, worry, and hopelessness. Within the congregational context unhealthy fear causes the avoidance of taking positive action as a result of fear. Instead the congregation often chooses to internalize their concerns until those concerns taint their view of the church and its future.

\textsuperscript{69} McLaren, \textit{The Language of Emotions}, 242.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 243.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 241.
The goal of this project sought to move listeners from unhealthy fear to healthy fear, as well as toward positive actions in response to that healthy fear.

Healthy Fear

McLaren uses the term “flowing fear” to communicate the actions of healthy fear. She says that “you need to learn to identify fear when it is flowing [because] when fear flows through you, it makes you focused, lucid, and able to respond effectively to your environment.” This understanding of fear provides a sharp contrast to that perpetuated by society. The typical response to fear is to stop it, avoid allowing it move and work at all costs. Unfortunately, this response is counterproductive to healthy and life-giving decisions. When one allows fear to flow freely and healthily, that fear will tap into intelligence allowing the person to take important actions. Much of this project relies on the movement from unhealthy fear to healthy fear. The markers of this movement will be detailed in chapter four.

Conclusion on the Power of Story

Healing through storytelling preaching can be achieved in the sermon to help and guide the church into healing. One way to achieve this healing rests in the ample power of storytelling. Brown takes the time to list fifteen different resources the preacher can use for storytelling to accomplish transformational preaching: Bible stories, humor, poetry, history, culture, geography, biography and testimony, science and nature, local traditions, hobbies, folklore and fables, anecdotes, parables, personal experience or

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73 Ibid., 237.
stories, and object lessons. The list is not exhaustive but it serves as a good reminder that the world of storytelling is broad and rich. The wells to draw from are many, all of them providing the potency of storytelling for the preacher.

Storytelling should not be ignored or relegated to a place lower priority, just to be available when preachers need a good laugh or a sad moment. Hopewell explains that “many churches fail to tell their story” all together. Instead of finding their identity in their shared story with one another and with God, they judge themselves by lesser standards. They base their self-evaluation on the church’s budget, size of membership, and variety of programs. While these are important factors for churches to record and study, they should never be used to determine their identity. If a group of believers truly identify themselves by those standards rather than their shared story, then the congregation will start to enter unhealthy territory. “A healthy congregation, like a healthy family, is one that understands and tells its stories.” The shared story of the congregation, the individual, the preacher, and Jesus Christ is the key to healing through storytelling preaching.

75 Hopewell, *Congregation*, 140.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 193.
CHAPTER THREE
A CHURCH’S STORY

Local farmers founded Locust Grove Baptist Church in 1867 in the small town of Deposit, Alabama. They were all members of New Market Baptist Church but they did not like traveling from the town of Deposit, where they lived, to the town of New Market. It was five miles, which was a pretty long haul back then. New Market Baptist Church commissioned them to start their church as a mission for the Deposit area. The first congregation of Locust Grove met in a small schoolhouse of the same name. “Locust Grove” was the name of an old stagecoach stop that was popular enough and so well known that everything around it took on its name. Eventually the distinction of the town of Deposit faded away and the entire area became known as New Market.

Description of the New Market Community

The New Market area rests between two worlds. One part remains an echo of the past: a few family-owned corner stores, sprawling farmland, gorgeous scenery, and green valley. The other part is a look to the future with restaurants, shopping areas, subdivisions, large businesses, and offices. The local grocery stores serve as the figurative town square. Families interact and converse in the cereal aisle, or they talk outside in the parking lot and catch up with one another.

Churches and schools serve as the societal organization and social connection for most of the community. The Friday Night lights of high school football remain bright and
strong in North Alabama as nearly the entire community will attend one of the local
schools’ games. Throughout the week little league baseball games, swim meets, and
soccer games abound. The major church events throughout the year bring people together
for fall festivals, Easter egg hunts, Vacation Bible Schools, and Christmas concerts.
These events help regularly connect neighbors and community members with one another
throughout the year.

The strong connection to the local churches may provide foreshadowing regarding
the impact of church conflict upon the community. When a church experiences serious
conflict, the ripple effects of anxiety and fear are felt across the local community. The
importance of healing the congregation through storytelling carries consequences for both
the church and the community. The church may even need to retell its story to the
community to alleviate those fears and regain the trust of the community. Doing so can
remove any stigma attached to the church due to the conflict. This idea offers an excellent
possibility for further study; however, it is not explored here as it goes beyond the scope
of this project.

The New Market area rests in Madison County and has a population of around
20,000 residents with a median age of thirty-eight. Of the population, 75% are Caucasian,
17% African American, with the last 8% being a mix of Native American, Asian,
Hispanic, and other ethnicities. There used to be a much larger population of Hispanic
families in our county, but after Alabama passed its harsh anti-immigration bill (HB 56)
in 2011, many of those families fled for fear of detainment and deportation. The resulting
fear and negative impact of these Hispanic communities leaving New Market stretches all
over the community. Many local farms employed these Hispanic men throughout the year and the mass exodus has resulted in the downfall and selling of many large farms.

Only a very small part of the community actually works in the New Market area. Almost everyone travels into the city of Huntsville for his or her employment. The lack of public transpiration available to get someone from New Market to Huntsville means that many of the jobs in the city that might help lower income families are just not accessible. While Madison County is the wealthiest county in the state, with an average family income of $70,000 per year, there are still serious pockets of poverty. Most of these areas contain families that have experienced multiple generations of poverty and rely on the charity of local churches for food and other necessities.

Description of Locust Grove Baptist Church

Despite its rural setting, Locust Grove has a history of being a progressive Baptist church in a community of mostly conservative churches. Locust Grove, while being a majority Caucasian congregation, welcomed African-American church members during the civil rights movement in rural Alabama. They also began ordaining women shortly after becoming one of the first churches in Alabama to join the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The nearby, much larger, city of Huntsville has been booming with economic, business, and population growth for decades. That growth affected Locust Grove over the years in many positive ways. The city expanded and spread to the neighboring town of New Market, turning small farm communities into bustling suburbs. With the subdivisions, immaculate homes, and shopping centers came a wave of new citizens from various cultures. Each new wave of people also meant a new wave of visitors to Locust
Grove Baptist Church. Northerners, scientists, engineers, educators, military officers, and more moved to New Market and a shift began to occur. The population of rural farmers and southern families merged with people from all over the world. This shift benefited Locust Grove because the church was an attractive option for the many who lacked the theological and cultural leanings of most Southern Baptists. As a result, new members ended up joining from different parts of the country, bringing with them their various theological backgrounds. This influx of members led to strong growth during the 1980’s and 1990’s.

Locust Grove Baptist Church Today

Today, Locust Grove Baptist Church averages 210 people in worship on Sunday mornings. The congregation is made up of majority middle-class to upper-middle class members. The large majority of the congregation has at least graduated from high school and most members have received some amount of collegiate education. The congregation is majority Caucasian with a few minority families. The church has a healthy number of young to middle-aged families. The congregation ranges theologically from very conservative to very liberal, with most members settling in-between. Likewise, the church’s support and pastoral staff hold a variety of theological viewpoints also, spanning from conservative to liberal.

As far as theological and practical distinctions in the local church community, Locust Grove Baptist Church honors the baptisms of other denominations (even non-immersion baptisms). Locust Grove welcomes divorced persons to join, volunteer, be ordained, and serve on the ministerial staff. Locust Grove ordains female deacons and allows females to preach and lead in all areas of the church. Locust Grove has openly gay
members and has welcomed openly gay married couples to join as new members of the church, but does not have an official statement of welcome and affirmation for the LGBT community.

Most of the congregation lives within less than seven miles of Locust Grove Baptist Church. Though, there are those that drive from Huntsville and other parts of Alabama, some as far as thirty miles away, to attend worship at Locust Grove. Most of Locust Grove’s youth and children attend schools that feed into one of two major high schools in the area. Locust Grove and the town of New Market both sit on the rural urban fringe. New subdivisions, restaurants, and shopping areas are constantly being built. There is even a new Wal-Mart, a shocking and surprising change to anyone that has lived in the area for the past few decades.

Recent Major Events at Locust Grove Baptist Church

Several major events have happened at Locust Grove over the last ten years. Ten years ago, Locust Grove had just hired a full time youth minister. The church worship attendance averaged three hundred fifty people. Locust Grove had three full time ministers, three full time support staff, a handful of part-time employees, as well as a licensed daycare with its full time employees. In 2012, the church began a three-year capital fundraising campaign aimed at paying off part of the church’s debt (1.2 million dollars at the time) and doing major renovations to the church buildings. The campaign, named Jubilee, raised a committed 1.1 million dollars, which was split down the middle with half going to debt relief and half going to renovation.

In early 2013, Locust Grove began a partnership with a mission organization that works with the indigenous people of Guatemala, who are Mayan descendants. After an
initial exploratory trip, Locust Grove sent a mission team of fifteen people to serve the village of Chuluc in the summer of 2013. Another team went four months later. Eventually the church chose to make a long-term commitment to the people of Chuluc, hoping to help break the poverty cycle in the community. Locust Grove now sends three teams per year, has a sponsorship program to support the local school, partners with the community to build homes for families, and pays for an on-the-ground local pastor.

Conflict Within the Church

Near the end of Jubilee, Locust Grove found itself in the midst of a major church conflict. In 2015, three things simultaneously occurred. First, the Senior Pastor of Locust Grove preached a sermon, now commonly known as the “Two Chairs Sermon,” advocating for people holding different theological views still choosing to serve together in the same church. In this sermon the pastor specifically referenced the inclusion of the LGBT community as one such view. Then shortly thereafter, a federal judge in Alabama overturned the state ban on same-sex marriage. The third event occurred when the Madison Baptist Association announced it would be voting to force out another local church from the association because of its welcoming stance toward the LGBT community. These three events collided at once and created a whirlwind of conflict. When accompanied with the recent major events taking place at Locust Grove, a contentious situation arose.

The combination of intense polarizing conflict, nationwide discord, expensive commitments to an international mission program, and the local feelings about a fellow Cooperative Baptist Church being ousted by the association created a tidal wave of conflict, defensive reactions, and fear. During this conflict the deacons of Locust Grove
boldly voted to continue having open doors, welcoming everyone to join and serve. Their bold act of love, however, could not stem the tide of divisiveness and fear that had seeped into the church. This mixture of events and the resulting church conflict led to the loss of members, as previously mentioned in chapter one. The lingering fear from that church conflict presented the very problem that this project sought to address in the promotion of healing through the overcoming of fear.

The Roles and Responsibilities of the Researcher at Locust Grove

The researcher has served at Locust Grove Baptist Church for ten years. Originally hired as the full time Youth Minister, he transitioned to Associate Pastor with added responsibilities after six years of service. The researcher’s current position of Associate Pastor at Locust Grove encompasses leading the youth ministry, supervising the children’s minister, overseeing all areas of education (including the daycare, small groups, and various small group programs), and providing regular leadership in the day-to-day operations of the church office.

For the purposes of this project the researcher assumed the role of weekly preacher throughout the summer. Over the past decade he has preached regularly each month and covered multiple sabbaticals for the Senior Pastor. This continued and regular presence in the pulpit allows him to preach a sermon series without it being unusual to the congregation. During this project the researcher served as sole researcher, preacher, recruiter of the project participants, as well as the sole transcriber of the recorded group discussions.
The Biggest Challenges at Locust Grove Baptist Church

The New Market area is poised to be the fastest growing area in the fastest growing city in the state of Alabama. Locust Grove should not overlook this opportunity to minister to an ever growing and diversifying community. The growth of the community allows for the potential growth of Locust Grove as well. To do these things well, Locust Grove needs to rebrand itself with a message that is more authentic to its values and heart. Most people that drive by the church see what they believe to be a large Southern Baptist Church, until they visit and realize that is simply not the case. Locust Grove must find a way to make known its true identity and tell its story to the growing and changing community around it.

Locust Grove also needs to continue telling its story to both the congregation and to the community. Part of that story includes the overcoming of conflict and the resulting fear of that conflict. The shared story of Locust Grove needs to continue the work of cultivating healthy approaches to fear, promoting healing, and fostering hope for the church’s future. Only then will the church be able to lean into its self-proclaimed call to be missional, bold, and inclusive.

Explanation of Research

The heart of this project rests in the potential power of storytelling preaching. As this project sought to use storytelling preaching to foster healing in the promotion of healthy responses to fear that had arisen from church conflict, the project required a focused approach to preaching and analysis of its impact. The bulk of this project’s preparation required learning about the impact of stories, understanding the communicative process, and comprehending the roles that information should play while
preaching to a congregation. That research is detailed in the previous chapter. The collection of data required a volunteer group of project participants from throughout the congregation. These project participants needed to commit to attending a majority of the sermons. Through group discussions with the participants and the analysis of those discussions, this project aimed at providing a path toward healing for all congregations that have experienced church conflict.

Research Design and Type of Study

The project goal of using storytelling preaching to promote healing for the congregation connects directly to this project’s methodology. The “Be Healed” sermon series focused on using storytelling to guide a congregation beyond fear into hope. The main scriptures selected for each sermon tell stories about overcoming fear and discovering healing through God. The scriptures used for the “Be Healed” sermon series were the story of Saul being blinded by Jesus, the story of Eve losing her first-born son, the story of Elijah’s conflict with Ahab and Jezebel, the story of Rebekah’s courage, the story of the widow’s offering, and the story about Jesus’ yoke.

The illustrations for each sermon included powerful, relevant stories about overcoming fear and finding a path toward healing. Many of these stories referenced the

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78 Acts 9:4-8.

79 Gen 4:3-5.

80 1 Kgs 17-18.

81 Gen 24.

82 Matt 25:34-40.

83 Matt 11:25-30.
specific history and positive impact of Locust Grove’s ministry throughout its history, recalling the church’s identity. By using stories about the church itself, the congregation was able to remember their identity and reimagine the future of the church in a more hopeful light than that created by fear. The “Be Healed” sermon series utilized the storytelling preaching model established by Jesus throughout his ministry and as described in detail throughout chapter two. The research for this project is qualitative in method. Tim Sensing’s *Qualitative Research*\(^{84}\) and Mary Clark Moschella’s *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*\(^{85}\) both served as resources for this project.

**IRB Process and Data Collection Methods**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Mercer University approved this project on June 6, 2017 for the duration of one year. The IRB approved a six-week sermon series for the purpose of healing a congregation that has experienced fear due to conflict within the church. The IRB also approved the use of recorded group discussions with volunteer project participants and the analysis of those discussions as a means for collecting data to measure the success of the project.

After project participants were identified, they had to sign an Informed Consent Form.\(^{86}\) This form was reviewed and approved by the IRB. Project participants were invited to sit down for a group discussion prior to the sermon series and again after the conclusion of the sermon series. Those discussions were recorded using a video camera.

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\(^{86}\) See Appendix B.
The audio was recorded on a smart phone as a backup incase the video camera or recorded video experienced a technical malfunction.

The discussions were then transcribed with pseudonyms being assigned to each member of the project participant group to maintain their anonymity. The transcribed conversation of the first group discussion was coded noting the use of fear language, hope language, negative comments or feelings, positive comments or feelings, and the use of healthy fear language. The coding only focused on the references directed toward the church and its future or about church conflict. Any references to fear or hope concerning other areas, while interesting for possible further studies, were not necessarily relevant to the goals of this project and therefore not noted in the results.

The transcribed conversation of the second group discussion, after the conclusion of the sermon series, was then coded using the same methodology and parameters as were used for the initial group discussion. After both conversations were coded, the results were tallied for each conversation to give a base for where the group stood prior to the sermon series and where they stood after the sermon series. By comparing the pre-discussion and post-discussion data, this project sought to prove the usefulness of storytelling preaching for the purpose of healing a congregation after conflict.

Who is Participating in this Study?

Project participants were recruited through an announcement during Sunday morning worship services, through the church newsletter, and via a church-wide email. Once all of the announcements were made, a meeting for reviewing the informed consent form and answering any questions concerning the project was held. There were twenty

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87 See Appendices C and D.
church members that attended the informational meeting. The requirements for volunteering as a project participant consisted of the following: they had to be 18 years of age or older, they needed to have attended Locust Grove regularly since 2015, they needed to be able to attend at least four of the six sermons in the “Be Healed” sermon series, and they had to participate in the two group discussions. Of the twenty attendees, sixteen filled out the informed consent form.

The first group discussion had fourteen project participants. One participant dropped out because he did not meet one of the requirements and another could not make it to the group discussion time. Of the fourteen that participated in the first group discussion, ten project participants were able to attend the final group discussion. For the purposes of this project only the comments from project participants that attended both group discussions were used for analysis.

The ten project participants represented a broad spectrum of the congregation. The group consisted of both males and females, ranging in age from the early 20’s to the early 70’s. There were self-proclaimed liberals, conservatives, and everything in between in the discussion group. Some participants had only been attending Locust Grove since 2015, while others had been members for multiple decades. The diversity of the project participants gave a healthy sampling from the congregation and worked to strengthen the results of this project. The entire congregation experienced the sermon series and the project participants gave a strong representation of how the congregation as a whole responds to storytelling preaching as it pertains to overcoming fear.
Approach to Data Analysis

Coding was selected as the most appropriate form of data analysis for this project. The language used by project participants as they responded to the group discussion questions was transcribed and coded. Fear language consisted of references to: issues, concerns, protection, anxiety, worry, and danger. Of course it also included the simple reference to fear itself. Terms of healing were also recorded. Terms that refer to healing included: hope, potential, happy, encouraged, relieved, excited, and being “ok.”

Distinguishing between general fears and those that concern the church and its future was paramount to establishing useful data. Most people have general fears throughout life about a number of issues. This project was only concerned with alleviating the fear that arises from church conflict because its detrimental impact upon a church community. Coding also took place for terms that do not intuitively connect to fear or healing, but are typical warning signs of unacknowledged or even unknown fears. Therefore, both negative and positive terms describing the church and its future were coded as well. Finally, references to healthy fear were coded. These references describe a fear that carries with it a sense of hope. Healthy fear acknowledges a problem or conflict but also seeks to respond to that problem or conflict with actions toward the goal of fixing those issues. The codes from the first discussion were then tallied to gather a baseline for the project participant group prior to the “Be Healed” sermon series.

The same process was then repeated for the second group discussion following the completion of the sermon series. Once the codes for the second group discussion were tallied, the two totals were compared to measure the following changes: amount of negative and positive comments made about the church and its future, amount of
references to fear versus hope for the church and its future, and the amount of healthy responses to fear. The comparison provided data on the percentage of change that the group underwent throughout the “Be Healed” sermon series, which should be representative of the larger congregation as well. The results of the data analysis will be discussed in depth in the following chapters.
CHAPTER FOUR

INTERPRETING THE STORY

The history of Locust Grove Baptist Church is filled with bold moments where the congregation overcame a challenge to accomplish an important task. In addition to those bold moments, the congregation also experienced controversy and conflict. The conflict that impacted Locust Grove in 2015 left a lasting mark and a sense of fear throughout the congregation. Would the church ever truly recover? Who are we now in the wake of so much loss? Will we lose our identity among so much change? All of these questions circled in the minds of the congregation following the church conflict and the resulting loss of membership.

This project sought to guide the congregation toward healing and a culture of hope for the church and its future. Through the use of storytelling preaching, a powerful avenue for healing was discovered that allowed the preacher to break through barriers of unhealthy fear. Each story focused on overcoming fear; this resonated with the congregation providing the potential for healing through storytelling preaching. Over the course of a six-week sermon series, the congregation encountered biblical characters that moved beyond their fear to achieve grand and miraculous things and ultimately found healing and hope in God’s mercy.

The data provided by the group discussions established the potential for legitimate change in the congregation’s fear and outlook for the future of Locust Grove Baptist
Church. These changes manifested themselves in a shift from unhealthy fear to healthy fear, in the general reduction of fear all together, in a shift from negative outlooks to positive outlooks, and in an increase in the amount of hope language used by the group. The goal of this project was to produce significant change in these areas through the use of storytelling preaching as evidence that healing took place throughout the congregation.

Examinations of the Research

A short review of the reasons for choosing storytelling preaching as the best model for accomplishing healing within a congregation reminds us of five major points. First, Jesus modeled the use of storytelling preaching throughout his ministry. Jesus possessed all the tools of teaching and lecture of his time and yet chose to use storytelling as his primary form of communicating to the masses. The sheer amount of stories told by Jesus compared to lectures reveal an obvious leaning toward story over and above all other forms of preaching.

Second, storytelling preaching keeps the hearer’s attention far more effectively than other forms of preaching. This is due to the fact that story is a more natural form of communication. Our minds have been trained to hear and see the world through story, thus story successfully keeps the attention of the congregation. Third, once the attention of the congregation has been captured, stories tend to breed trust between the preacher and the congregation. While many are suspicious of doctrinal based teaching, stories are disarming and natural. They provide a safe place to consider new ideas and encourage bold exploration of one’s own spiritual journey. This trust is necessary for any preacher, but especially for those seeking to address deep-seated fears with the goal of overcoming those fears.
Fourth, a story can actually change the mind of the hearer. It would be incorrect to say that doctrinal or expository focused preaching never accomplishes this goal, but storytelling preaching does so at a far higher rate. This is why a company like British Petroleum will use stories to communicate to the public after a huge mistake. Eventually the story may change the public perception of British Petroleum. Preachers can utilize this same concept to encourage and change the minds their congregations. Using storytelling preaching provides the potential to change someone’s mind about their fear and the hopelessness they feel because of it.

Finally, stories are proven to promote healing in the area of overcoming fear. The use of storytelling in clinical psychology and counseling shows the strong potential for healing through storytelling. Stories are used throughout the world to inspire troops, athletic teams, companies, countries, and even churches to overcome fear and strive toward a common goal. All of these reasons provide the basis for using storytelling preaching to promote healing throughout the congregation of Locust Grove Baptist Church.

A few changes were made to the research throughout the project’s implementation. A minor change occurred with one of the group discussion questions during the first group discussion, which took place prior to the “Be Healed” sermon series. During the first group discussion, the researcher made the decision to slightly adjust the third question. The original question read: “Does living in the church community cause anxiety for you and why do you think that is?” Prior to convening for this first group discussion the researcher added the use of hope language, positive comments, and negative comments to the parameters of study. The researcher felt that
this question provided the opportunity to provide data for these additional areas of focus so the question was changed. The final version was: “Does living in the church community cause anxiety and/or hope for you and why do you think that is?” While only a minor change, the question did change from its original form. The new version was used during the second group discussion as well.

The most notable change to the planned project process was the decision to exclude the data from the project participants that could not attend the second group discussion. While this may seem like an obvious decision, it was not explored in the original project outline. Those project participants provided a good amount of information concerning the fears they experience as a result of church conflict. Unfortunately, including them in the baseline data numbers would only skew the results during data collection because of their absence from the second group discussion. Thus their contributions to the first group discussion had to be omitted in the collection and analysis of the group discussion data.

Report and Analysis of the Data

The data collection, coding, and analysis process took place after the completion of the “Be Healed” sermon series and the last group discussion. The two group discussions were transcribed and then coded, looking for specific topics of conversation from the project participants. Codes were provided when project participants mentioned the following: fear, healthy fear, negative references about the church and its future, positive references about the church and its future, and terms of hope. Once coded the information from the first group discussion was compared to the second group discussion
to assess any changes that occurred throughout the “Be Healed” sermon series. The following sections present those results.

Fear Language

The group showed a significant decrease in their amount of fear for the church and its future. There was a 36 percent decrease in fear language from the first discussion to the second discussion. Project participants mentioned far less fear related themes such as issues, concerns, anxiety, worry, or danger. When discussing the church and its future project participants exhibited a lot more hope in their stories, responses, and language.

Hope Language

The amount of language focused on hope for the church and its future increased by 40 percent from the original group discussion. The increase of hope and the lowering of fear are one the major parameters for measuring whether this project was a success or not. The reduction in fear language and the rise of hope language helps to make that case. Project participants spoke much more about their hopes, the church’s potential, being happy and encouraged, and being excited for the church’s future than they did throughout the first group discussion.

Positive Comments about the Church

The amount of positive comments about the church and its future interestingly only saw a slight increase of 5 percent. This increase is minimal and could be due to a few factors. The first being that having hope and no longer being afraid do not necessarily mean that someone is ready to let go of all of their concerns for the church. Another possible factor is the thin line between coding positive comments about the church and its future and between hope language. While this project aimed at recording
both with the chosen parameters, the possibility for marginal error still exists. It is also possible that the “Be Healed” sermon series simply did not impact the congregation in a way that had immediate influence over such comments. Perhaps reducing one’s fears about their church does not necessarily correlate with increasing their positive comments about that church. Nonetheless the results for positive comments about the church were nearly the same from both group discussions.

Negative Comments about the Church

While positive comments stayed nearly the same, the amount of negative comments about the church and its future decreased by 44 percent from the first to the second group discussion. When asked the same questions from the first group discussion, the group chose to make significantly less negative comments about the church. Instead of making negative comments about the church, project participants chose to speak in a more optimistic tone and move beyond their fears. This large decrease of negative comments provides some solid ground to show that negativity, and the fear associated with that negativity, decreased throughout the project.

Healthy Fear

The final area measured showed some of the most promising and interesting results. While the group showed a significant decrease in the amount of fear they were experiencing after the “Be Healed” sermon series, when they did express fear it often was in a much healthier form than before. As a group, they spoke of healthy fear 67 percent more than before the sermon series. As noted in previous chapters, healthy fear calls on the person to take action to resolve the fear or solve the problem before them. An
increase in healthy fear language combined with a decrease of unhealthy fear language shows noteworthy movement toward healing.

Further Examination of Specific Fears

The meaningful increases of healthy fear language and hope language as well as the decreases of unhealthy fear language and negative comments about the church merit an examination of the specific fears mentioned by project participants. While the list of specific fears varied greatly, their shared characteristics with one another allow them to be grouped into four major categories. Those categories of fear are identity, theological circles or church community, change, and survival. This section will focus on these specific categories of fear and how the project participants changed their outlook on those fears throughout the sermon series.

Church Identity

After experiencing the church conflict in 2015, the congregation was left with many questions concerning identity. The loss of membership drastically affected the youth program at Locust Grove as most of the families that left the church had youth-aged children. For many years Locust Grove members identified their church as one with a strong, vibrant, and large youth program. When those numbers dwindled after the 2015 church conflict, this created a lot of anxiety among the congregation. Many of the project participants mentioned the smaller youth program as a concern or fear they had for the future of the church.⁸⁸

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⁸⁸ Project Participants, Members of Locust Grove Baptist Church, interview by author, 14 June 2017, video recording (transcript), Locust Grove Baptist Church, New Market, Alabama.
Another area of identity concerns the future retirement of the Senior Pastor. The Senior Pastor has been leading Locust Grove for over thirty-two years and will likely retire within the next five years. Much of this concern stems from assumptions about the enormous stress experienced while leading the church through a season of conflict. The project participants recognize this stress and naturally begin thinking about the impact it has had on their Senior Pastor.\textsuperscript{89} For many of them he is the only pastor they have ever known at Locust Grove and they cannot even imagine what the church might look like without him. This familiarity leads them to associate the identity of the church with the Senior Pastor. They worry about the identity of the church after the Senior Pastor retires.

The majority of the project participants referenced either the future retirement of the Senior Pastor or the health of the youth program as their utmost concern for the church and its future. While it may seem that these two items are unrelated, they actually share the common theme of identity. If the church does not have a large, influential youth group, then what does the church have? If Pastor White is not the pastor of Locust Grove, then who is the church? These questions came up again and again. The power of storytelling preaching comes out in the way that project participants changed their language concerning these fears.

In the first group discussion, references to the Senior Pastor’s retirement and the youth program’s decline were met with awkward silence. No solutions were offered and no glimmers of hope were expressed. In the second group discussion, however, project participants used much more hope language. They not only labeled the problem, they now spoke of ways to be proactive. Their fear no longer crippled them; instead it called

\textsuperscript{89} Project Participants, interview by author, 14 June 2017.
them to action. Instead of speaking of the “declining” youth program, they now used words like “reinvigorate” and “strengthen” to describe the needed actions they felt compelled to undertake. These are clear markers for healthy fear.

Theological Circles and Church Community

Another category of fear deals with the ideas of theological circles and community. Many project participants expressed fear about their particular theological circle, or their theological viewpoints. They worried that their personal understanding of theology and scripture would become underrepresented throughout the church body. The loss of church members and the significant changes that will occur over time because of their absence presents a potential moment for theological circles to be influenced or even reduced. Anytime someone feels like his or her viewpoint is underrepresented this fear can arise.

Connected to this worry about theology is also the concern for community. The concerns about the community element of the church appeared far more frequently with the older project participants, especially so for those that had attended Locust Grove the longest. Many of the project participants lost friends during the church conflict. Some of them discovered an ugly side of humanity - betrayal. In the first group discussion, one project participant in particular spoke hopelessly about their inner turmoil after watching their church community fall apart. Yet by the end of the project, that same person spoke

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90 Project Participants, Members of Locust Grove Baptist Church, interview by author, 6 August 2017, video recording (transcript), Locust Grove Baptist Church, New Market, Alabama.

91 Project Participants, interview by author, 14 June 2017.

92 Ibid.
with hopeful terms and the language of healthy fear. No longer was the project participant simply shocked by the fracture of the church community. The participant spoke with confession about the difficulties of living in community. They also said that community gives one hope in the joy of the shared experience, the kind of experience that only community can provide.\textsuperscript{93} The worries of theological circles seem to have diminished and the outlook on the church’s future had brightened.

\textbf{Change Within the Church}

There should be no surprise that change creates plenty of fear among those that are facing it. Whenever change is experienced, fear automatically activates in response to that change.\textsuperscript{94} How people react and deal with that fear matters greatly. Throughout the first group discussion one project participant spoke several times about the effects of all the change at Locust Grove. When that person referenced their worries about the change, it was done so without a call to action. In fact, the project participant actually said they worried the church would become stagnant.\textsuperscript{95}

After the “Be Healed” sermon series during the second group discussion, those references about change took on new light for this particular project participant. Instead of retreating from fear, this project participant expressed interest in becoming an active part of the church community.\textsuperscript{96} This simple call to action shows that this project participant is moving from fear to healthy fear. This transition is an important one.

\textsuperscript{93} Project Participant, interview by author, 6 August 2017

\textsuperscript{94} McLaren, \textit{The Language of Emotions}, 240.

\textsuperscript{95} Project Participant, interview by author, 14 June 2017

\textsuperscript{96} Project Participant, interview by author, 6 August 2017
McLaren says that “when your fear asks you to slow down and prepare yourself for some sort of change” you must listen carefully. ⁹⁷ Fear is not there to hurt you; it lets you know when true change is happening. ⁹⁸ This project participant was doing just that. No longer crippled with fear, the project participant spoke boldly about entering the fray and serving and working to improve and heal the church community. The participant had also mentioned concerns about their theological circle being underrepresented because of the major changes that occurred in the church. Interestingly, this participant did not even mention those worries the second time around. What seemed so pressing and important no longer carried such weight. The project participant overcame enough of that fear throughout the sermon series that he or she had either progressed toward healing or at least no longer felt the need to mention this fear any longer.

Survival of the Church

The fear for the survival of the church deals directly with the church’s future. Church conflict creates a serious amount of anxiety about the church’s ability to survive and flourish in the future. Concerns about the survival of Locust Grove were a major part of the conversation throughout both group discussions. One project participant mentioned how “scary” facing the future for Locust Grove will be. ⁹⁹ The participant mentioned that the church had finally paid off its long-standing debt, and yet fear hung over the congregation’s head about whether Locust Grove would ever truly flourish again. This project participant in the second group discussion referenced the same fear again, only

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⁹⁷ McLaren, *The Language of Emotions*, 244.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 243.

⁹⁹ Project Participant, interview by author, 14 June 2017.
this time the participant referred to the fear as a “good kind of anxiety” because it calls upon the church to act.\(^{100}\) This response was very encouraging because it epitomizes the definition of healthy fear as the participant recognizes the positive aspects of their fear and how it calls upon them to act in response rather than repress the fear.

A different project participant expressed a similar shift in their survival-based fears for the church. This participant spoke about their fear that the church might become stagnant after going through so much conflict.\(^ {101}\) The mention of becoming stagnant insinuates that more of the congregation may be experiencing the same fear as the participant. At least the participant assumed this to be the case. The natural responses to costly church conflicts agree with this assumption as well. After a conflict many decisions are often made out of a place of fear, which will naturally lead to unwillingness to make decisions that embrace important changes. This presents a problem because allowing fear to hold the future of the church hostage will only ensure that the church becomes stagnant.

At the end of the sermon series this project participant used entirely new, healthier, and more positive language to describe this same fear. Instead of simply stating the concern of the church becoming stagnant, the participant now offered up solutions for ensuring the church’s survival. The participant spoke about the need for relevance, building up programs, focusing on authenticity, and doing the hard work of reaching a broad spectrum of people in the church and community.\(^ {102}\) The sheer amount of thought

\(^{100}\) Project Participant, interview by author, 6 August 2017.

\(^{101}\) Project Participant, interview by author, 14 June 2017.

\(^{102}\) Project Participant, interview by author, 6 August 2017.
and reflection brought to the exact same fear was remarkable. It seemed as if the participant had injected hope and courage into the heart of his or her fears. This did not kill the fear, but it did allow the process of moving beyond fear into the realm of hope and healing to begin.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Methodology

While the results are very encouraging, a careful assessment of strengths and weaknesses of the methodology can help advance the impact of this project. This examination can offer improvements to the storytelling preaching model, in hopes of further success in promoting healing throughout the congregation. Likewise, this evaluation will help preachers to avoid mistakes at a higher rate when walking a similar path of healing after major church conflict.

Losing Participants

As mentioned previously in this chapter, some project participants were unable to attend the final group discussion. Ultimately, their contributions to the first group discussion were not used to calculate the results of the project. Their contributions to the first group discussion, however, were interesting, valid, and important to understanding the current mindset of the larger congregation. Not having a mechanism in place to utilize those contributions aside from the final results was a weakness of this methodology. Future projects should include a plan on how to use these contributions when some participants are unable to attend the final discussion or interview.

Group Therapy

It should be noted that both group discussions possessed the atmosphere of a support group or group therapy. This raises the possibility that some of the healing and
movement from unhealthy to healthy fear could have been influenced by the group discussions. The healing that took place, as a direct result of group participation, was positive and cannot be overlooked. Nonetheless, the group therapy atmosphere of these group discussions likely added to the healing process.

Despite this possible influence, the group discussions were completely necessary to collect data and to measure the effectiveness of the “Be Healed” sermon series. How much of that healing resulted from group discussion and how much resulted from storytelling preaching is difficult to distinguish. Aside from the direct question asked only at the end of the final discussion, there are no easy ways to examine the breakdown of influence at work in this healing process.

Repetitive Questions

The repetitive nature of the questions used for each group discussion carried with it both weaknesses and strengths. The negative aspect of this approach recognizes that some participants may have chosen not to voice fears they had already mentioned in the first group discussion. All project participants were encouraged to be completely honest about their answers, even if they knew the answer was the same one they voiced previously. Still the possibility remains that they were unintentionally influenced by the use of the same questions for both discussions.

This possible negative influence does not negate the necessity of using the same questions, however, as this method allowed for an effective means to analyze the changes occurring throughout the group concerning their fears. Through the use of the same questions for both group discussions, the project was able provide strong data showing the changes to the ways participants responded to specific questions. Without using the
same questions this data would have carried the weakness of being only partially connected to both group discussions. The use of the same questions allowed for the examination of the specific changes to fear, negativity, positivity, hope, and healthy fear.

Fear Unrelated to the Church

A final weakness of the project methodology arose due to the group discussion questions’ vagueness concerning church conflict. For example when bringing up the topic of church conflict, some participants immediately associated themselves with those unexplained references to conflict. Since the researcher never named the specific conflict from 2015, their imaginations were left to fill in that blank on its own. As this occurred, some participants would then assume that the reference to conflict within the church was specifically about them or something they were involved with. This led to times where they would mention and discuss fears that were not related to the church or its future. As the moderator, the researcher was able to move the group back on topic eventually, but only after considerable time had been spent discussing the current topic. These off-topic fears covered a variety of areas: concerns about no longer being accepted in the church, struggles with personal relationships, difficulties finding a place within the church, and revising programs within the church for non-fear related reasons.\textsuperscript{103}

These off-topic discussions were anything but fruitless. The conversations around these topics were profound in many ways and quite insightful for all involved. They allowed the group to encourage and edify one another while also addressing issues within the church community that had gone unacknowledged and unresolved for quite some time.

\textsuperscript{103} Project Participant, interview by author, 14 Jun 2017.
time. These particular conversations did not contribute to the project’s specific goal, but they did help to create an honest, safe, and healing space for the entire group.

Strength of Diversity

A strength of the project methodology rests in the diverse group of church members gathered for the group discussions. The group of project participants included men, women, millennials, senior adults, middle aged adults, conservatives, liberals, long time members, new members, people from different fields of employment, those plugged into multiple areas of ministry throughout the church, and those that only attend worship on Sundays. This diversity provided for not only amazing discussion but also created a solid sampling from throughout the congregation. Without this diversity the comparison to the larger congregation would have been difficult to make. Thanks to this diversity the healing that took place within the group of project participants likely took place for others in the congregation as well.

Strength of Group Discussions

It has already been admitted that the nature of group discussions allowed for some tangent topics to arise occasionally, but the positives far outweighed the negatives. The structure of a group discussion created an honest and safe environment for conversations to take place. If, for example, a simple questionnaire or an individual interview had been used instead, then participants may have been reluctant to honestly discuss their fears. The group dynamic of hearing a few people open up about their fears created a willingness for all the participants to discuss their fears honestly.
Strength of Focusing on Fear

The simple decision to discuss fear directly and openly also proved to be a strong part of the project’s methodology. The original intent of the researcher was to use veiled language in an attempt to discuss fear in an indirect way. This original approach assumed that project participants would be unwilling to discuss their fears on a level that would be useful for the overall project. Through the approval process, however, it was recommended to do the opposite. The final project required that participants discuss their fear directly, openly, and honestly. This approach faired far better than expected. First, it allowed for the study of healthy fear versus unhealthy fear. Without specifically mentioning fear and talking directly about it, such distinctions simply could not have been made.

Second, speaking directly about fear created an atmosphere of trust for many of the participants. Several of them admitted to previously having issues with just using the word fear, much less talking about their fears with others.\(^{104}\) If a more subtle approach had been applied, the researcher would have had to moderate the conversation much more to keep the group on topic. The vagueness of the discussion questions would have leant themselves to broader, less focused conversations. By choosing a direct focus on the topic of fear, the project participants spent much more time actually discussing fear.

Finally, focusing directly on fear allowed for profound conversation. Vague questions may have led to random, unrelated topics. Specific questions dealing with fear pushed the group conversation to go deep into people’s fears, concerns, issues, and worries about the church and its future. All kinds of fears, as previously discussed in this

\(^{104}\) Project Participant, interview by author, 14 June 2017.
chapter, came up in conversation, many of them completely unexpected by the researcher. Focusing on fear tapped into the deep well of the inner feelings of the congregation.

Strength of Stories

The final strength of the project’s methodology involves the use of stories. Obviously using storytelling preaching is the central theme and idea of this entire project, but the impact of story moved beyond the sanctuary carrying through into the group discussions. The project participants remembered the stories from the sermons. They recalled them in the second group discussion; they referenced them when talking about fear. They even used some of them to defend their reasoning for having less fear about the church and its future.¹⁰⁵

By the end of the second group discussion the project participants were answering questions with stories instead of statements. Even their language for dealing with fear shifted to story form. Through the use of story, participants found a much healthier way to discuss and confront their fears. The weekly encounters with storytelling preaching created spiritual “handles” that the project participants could use to pick up their fears, to carry them, and to respond to them with actions and honest self-evaluation.

Conclusion of the Data

Overall, the entire group of project participants was able to verbalize their fears in a much healthier way after the “Be Healed” sermon series. Their amount of fear related to church conflict decreased while their sense of hope for the church and its future increased. The project methodology provided a powerful way to discover and respond to

¹⁰⁵ Project Participants, interview by author, 6 August 2017.
the deep-seated fears that existed within the congregation of Locust Grove Baptist
Church. The group discussions helped to pull those fears to the surface so that the project
participants could face them. Storytelling preaching reminded them that God has always
helped humanity overcome fear and that they are just as equipped as all of those biblical
characters to overcome their fears as well.
CHAPTER FIVE
EMBRACING THE STORY

Stories have the capability to explore more than one purpose. Comedians tell stories to make people laugh but also to critique. Reporters tell stories to inform but also to influence. Teachers tell stories to educate but also to inspire. Writers tell stories to entertain but also to evoke. Preachers tell stories for a host of reasons, chief among them to introduce Jesus and the Kingdom of God to the listener, but the preacher can also tell stories to heal.

Locust Grove Baptist Church has its own story, but that story is not independent of the larger world or the gospel message. It is one story among many. The story of Locust Grove Baptist Church is also much more than the conflict from 2015. That chapter may define the church for a season, but that chapter too will pass as long as the larger story continues to be told. The congregation of Locust Grove experienced turmoil, loss, stress, and conflict in 2015. The wounds inflicted by these negative experiences do not easily heal. Healing occurs over time. It also comes from the support of the church community and the blessing of serving beside one another. God’s healing Spirit works in the lives of the congregation. All of these factors are at work in the healing process, but preachers have their role as well. Preachers stand to tell a story every week and that story has enormous implications for the healing of their congregation.
This project shows that storytelling preaching provides a valuable tool to help pastors accomplish the goal of healing. The stories of biblical characters healing after their own conflict inspired the members of Locust Grove Baptist Church to start down their own path toward healing. Each sermon introduced the congregation to a new story with a shared theme: overcoming fear and discovering hope. The delivery device of storytelling allowed the listeners to engage and enter into the original biblical event in order to experience it for themselves. It is through recreating the biblical event that the true power of storytelling preaching was unleashed.

Impact of Storytelling Preaching

The “Be Healed” sermon series provided a healing catalyst for the congregation throughout this project. During this sermon series six major biblical stories served as the models for overcoming fear. Through the use of these stories, the congregation immersed themselves into the narrative and journeyed along side the biblical characters. Eve, Rebekah, Jesus, the widow with an offering, Elijah, and Saul each presented an opportunity for the congregation to see how these biblical characters faced fear, overcame it, and continued with life after the most difficult of days.

Eve and the Fear from Loss

In the story of Eve, after Adam and she are banished to a harsh new land, Eve raised two boys. She got up at night with them, she nursed them, and she protected them. She played with them, taught them to walk and talk. She cared for them, she helped them to grow and learn. One day her sons, adults now and all grown up, presented offerings to God and God showed favor to Abel’s offering but was displeased with Cain’s. Then Eve experienced a night of tragic loss when she learned that one son had died and the other
was banished. But her story did not end on that night. Somehow she continued on. Somehow she found a way to raise more children and continue the story of God and humanity. Eve, the mother of all humanity, the briner of the knowledge of good and evil, experienced them both - the good of having children to love and the pain of losing them.\footnote{Gen 3:20 - 4:5.}

The story of Eve demonstrated to the congregation that one could overcome the fear and pain of loss. Those that had experienced loss knew just how much that fear could negatively affect one’s life. Eve inspired them to believe that freedom from that fear was more than possible; it was the actual hope and heart of God. Project participants testified that this story “touched them” and gave them a whole new way to see their own story.\footnote{Project Participants, interview by author, 6 August 2017.}

Rebekah and the Fear of a Journey

Rebekah had her entire life interrupted by a stranger with a mission from his master. She was chosen to be the bride of Isaac. Ultimately the choice was up to her, and she chose to go on the adventure before her. Rebekah faced the journey that God had brought her with bravery and courage. Once she realized this was the divine calling on her life, she could not be stopped. Rebekah and her maids climbed atop camels and made the long, dangerous journey to Canaan. Over mountains, across deserts, through valleys they traveled until finally they arrived at the home of Abraham and Sarah and their son Isaac, her betrothed.\footnote{Gen 24.}
When encountering the story of Rebekah the congregation found the courage to face their own journeys, but especially the journey that had been set before Locust Grove Baptist Church. Project participants said they realized they needed to address their fears about the church and they needed to take action. They realized that they should not ignore their fears. Instead they need to act, respond, and look forward to the future of the church.\(^{109}\) Rebekah’s story spoke directly into this need for action.

Jesus and the Fear of Weariness

In Matthew, Jesus calls out to the people to come to him and find rest, to cast off their burdens and carry his yoke instead.\(^{110}\) He spoke these words to people that carried immense burden. They were under the oppression of Rome, a foreign power that taxed, enslaved, and killed them at will. Rome stripped away their rights and made them second-class citizens in their own country. During the “Be Healed” sermon series, the story of Jesus speaking these incredible words affected the congregation. Project participants said they felt afterward that it was “easy to relate to” and it “opened their hearts.”\(^{111}\)

They related to this story because through its retelling they felt like Jesus was speaking to them, too. They believed that Jesus was speaking to those sitting in the pews of Locust Grove just as much as to the original listeners. In the original event, it was the labor worker, the impoverished, the powerless, women, children, immigrants, and slaves that yearned for his message of hope and freedom. They carried the enormous burden of

\(^{109}\) Project Participants, interview by author, 6 August 2017.

\(^{110}\) Matt 11:28-30.

\(^{111}\) Project Participants, interview by author, 6 August 2017.
religious restrictions, economic servitude, and a vicious cycle of poverty. The elite had placed a yoke on the shoulders of the people, cracked the whip, and forced them to plow the soil for the betterment of only those at the top.

Through the retelling of this story the congregation was able to engage the biblical text and look through the eyes of the original hearers. Even if though they did not share their poverty, they could understand it. The congregation lives in a connected world, where poverty and despair are readily available to be seen via television and the web. The project participants talked about how they now realized that the grace and mercy of God is for everyone, not just themselves.\textsuperscript{112} The fear that results from weariness is real for people in all walks of life. The world can seem impossible to fix at times, even for the wealthy or elite. For those struggling to flourish through difficult times it feels even bleaker. Storytelling preaching helped the project participants move beyond that fear and instill a spark of freedom and rest for the weary.

The Widow and the Fear of Showing Fear

On the day that the widow walked to the temple she did so with nothing in her pockets, except two small copper coins. All around her stood the grand mixture of Jerusalem, from the wealthy and elite to the poor and lowly. She would have seen wealthy citizens toss small fortunes into the offering box before her. Nonetheless her hand slipped into the fold of her clothes and scooped up the two small coins. She extended her hand and freed them, allowing them to fall into the box.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{\textbf{112}} Project Participants, interview by author, 6 August 2017.

\textsuperscript{\textbf{113}} Matt 25:34-40
It was Jesus that pointed out this widow. She stood as a testament to gratefulness, charity, and sacrifice. An unlikely choice to be sure, but she was the chosen model for the message of Jesus. The widow had no choice as to whether she would appear helpless, afraid, or poor. She was who she was. Her status was known and yet she rose above it. All the while many today struggle with simply admitting their fears. Afraid they will seem weak for doing so, they internalize and ignore those fears, as if appearing strong and fearless will achieve a special status. Jesus makes it clear that the inside of a person is what bears the truth of who they really are.

After the “Be Healed” sermon series, project participants discussed this idea. Some talked about how the honesty and vulnerability of this story resonated with them. Other participants discussed how the story revealed prejudices they might have. The story taught them “to be open to people” and to not “prejudge” them. Other participants discussed the fear they have of showing fear. They talked with one another about their desire to avoid admitting their fears because people want to “look like we have it all together, but we do not.” The story of the widow gave them the courage to talk about those fears and bring them into the light.

Elijah and the Fear of Hopelessness

The fear that grows out of hopelessness is at the core of what this project sought to lessen throughout the congregation. When a church goes through conflict and experiences loss, hope can be hard to hold on to. After the sermon series, one project

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114 Project Participants, interview by author, 6 August 2017.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
participant said that the series “solidified my positive feelings about the church.” Part of that process involved telling the story of Elijah.

The story of Elijah is a long, detailed journey. It is full of conflict, sacrifice, and turmoil. Elijah paid an enormous price on his search of hope. He essentially lost everything. After finally coming home, after defeating the worshippers of Ba’al, he climbed up the mountain of God to speak with God, to pray to God for one more miracle. His servant followed him up the mountain and watched as Elijah prayed for rain. This moment was powerful and full of built up anticipation. It was important to place the congregation directly in this moment, on that mountain, with all the backstory to go with it. Project participants said they could feel the yearning and desire that Elijah must have felt in that moment just before he saw the rain clouds coming.

Elijah’s story has both tragic moments and serious loss. It is an honest story lacking in perfect endings and costless feuds, just like real life. That connection to real life is what makes the story resonate so well with the listeners. Their lives are full of real problems, imperfect endings, and costly feuds. One participant talked about how the series did not actually take away the participant’s fears, but it did make the participant feel “incredibly hopeful.” This too is a real response to a real life problem. Not all stories are perfect, just as Elijah’s was not perfect. God worked in that story and God is working in the story of Locust Grove as well.

117 Project Participants, interview by author, 6 August 2017.

118 1 Kgs 17-18.

119 Project Participants, interview by author, 6 August 2017.
Saul and the Fears of Failure and Regret

The final story of the sermon series focused on the story of Saul and his enlightening encounter with Jesus along the road to Damascus. Saul traveled with a letter in his pocket giving him the authority to arrest the disciples of Jesus and lead them back to Jerusalem in chains. That is the kind of person Saul was at that time. It is important to see all of him to appreciate the choice Jesus made when he called Saul to follow. Saul was not just a sinner that just needed Jesus. He was not a mean person that made a choice to be nicer to others. Saul was a murdering, paranoid, ruthless, zealot until the day the light of Jesus Christ exploded around him.

When discussing this story, one project participant said “I felt myself moving from darkness to light, from trouble to healing.” The other participants described being on the journey with Saul as they faced their own demons, their own past and the consequences of those decisions. They understood the shock that Saul experienced. Everything that Saul thought was true and good was wrong. His entire world turned upside-down.

Saul realized that he was not doing the work of God. He was actually just killing people. He was essentially ruining the lives of the people of God. When Saul experienced the light of Jesus’ revelation, it threw him from his horse onto the ground. He fell. His life was jarred and broken. That which he thought was holy had been redefined. When it was time for him to go, he couldn’t even get up by himself. Those traveling with him had to pick him up from the ground.\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{120} Project Participants, interview by author, 6 August 2017.

\textsuperscript{121} Acts 8-9.
Painting this picture mattered for the congregation. They needed to walk this road with Paul and reflect on their own lives and on their own pasts. Through recreating this biblical event, they could connect to the feelings of the biblical character. The project participants discussed the empathy they felt for Saul throughout this story. They specified that this connection happened because they were pulled into the story. It is only through the process of pulling the congregation into this story that they could face their own fears of failure and regret as it pertained to the church. Those fears connected strongly to past church conflict and needed to be addressed for healing to occur.

What Locust Grove’s Story Has Revealed

There are many conclusions to draw from this research into the use of storytelling preaching for the purpose of healing a congregation. Storytelling preaching proved to be a potent tool for a pastor to use when guiding his or her congregation out of a season of fear and into a season of hope. The project participants showed healthy growth in multiple areas concerning fear, hope, and healing. The following conclusions are drawn from those findings and present the various things that storytelling preaching can accomplish when utilized to its full potential.

Recreating the Original Biblical Event

One of the greatest of strengths of storytelling is its ability to immerse the listener in the tale, allowing them to get lost among the characters. Recreating the biblical event in the mind of the congregants is essential for them to truly experience the message of the preacher. Storytelling allows for this immersion to happen naturally and with the least amount of mental distractions. Telling the story of Eve, her family, and her life allows the

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122 Project Participants, interview by author, 6 August 2017.
congregation to see, feel, and experience those moments as they unfold. Hearing the story of Saul’s conversion invites listeners to be blinded by the light and imagine themselves wrestling with inner turmoil, just like Paul. The recreation that occurs in storytelling preaching is a powerful, efficient method for breaking through the barriers of fear.

When the project participants discussed their emotions associated with the individual stories, they used terms of immersion, empathy, and reflection. Through the recreation of the biblical event they found themselves moved and affected by that event in new and shocking ways. They thought deeper thoughts. They grappled with hidden fears. They acknowledged forgotten hurts. They forgave broken relationships. All of these elements are the markers of healing. Each one represents part of the process of overcoming fear and walking toward a path of healing.

Immersing themselves in the biblical stories also provided perspective. The struggles of Locust Grove were still real; they were not gone or solved. Those struggles were, however, placed in perspective of the larger history of the Christian faith and even that of Locust Gove Baptist Church. Putting those struggles up against this larger history of the Christian story provided a sense of relief and the room to believe that Locust Grove would thrive again.

Causing Reflection and Contemplation

When the congregation encounters story during the sermon they often connect that story to memories from their own life. For example, a story about children playing pretend might evoke an early memory of their own when they did the same thing with their childhood friends. Tapping into listeners’ memories brings them along with the story. They find it easier to empathize with the biblical character and even with the
storyteller, in this case the preacher. Using this method allows preachers to guide the congregation into a biblical story so that they can see it as their story as well. This connection allows for trust to be formed, which is vastly important for preachers to accomplish their goals during sermons.

This reflection also brings about a collective, shared memory throughout the congregation. A congregation shares the memories of their faith community because they have lived together and served beside one another. Stories have been passed down from one generation to the next. They experience the spectacular moments together, as well as the difficult trials of church conflict. This shared history presents a powerful opportunity for preachers. When a story can trigger a shared memory of the majority of the congregation, then that story possesses the potential to inspire and challenge the majority of the congregation. Reminding the congregation that they have always stood up for the forgotten and oppressed in their community helps them to heal from the recent consequences of church conflict. They are given the chance to remember that they walk in the deep waters of a rich, holy, and inclusive church history. They are reminded that others have paid a cost before them to continue and pass on the mission of Christ, and that they have been called to continue that mission. When they are reminded of their connection to this beautiful tradition, they are comforted in their grief.

Triggering these moments of remembering naturally leads to contemplation. When the congregation begins contemplating the implications of their memories and how they connect to the biblical story, they are able to wrestle with issues they may have internalized. This is certainly true for deep-seated fears that people have been conditioned to ignore. When they start to contemplate and think about their fears, the healing process
is able to begin. Without facing those fears, healing will never truly happen. Storytelling preaching sparks those memories allowing for contemplation to begin. Once that contemplation has started, the movement toward healing soon follows.

Acknowledge and Overcome Fear

A congregation must acknowledge their fears to overcome those fears. If allowed to go unchecked, fear will taint the decisions and direction of the church for years to come. Church committees will base their work on that fear. Church leaders and staff members will avoid risk and the bold callings of the gospel because of that fear. Ministers will retreat and at times give up with the weight of that fear bearing down on them. Addressing, acknowledging, and eventually overcoming the fear that results from church conflict is paramount to the future health of any congregation. All of this was true for Locust Grove Baptist Church as well. Storytelling preaching provided a powerful pathway for the congregation to safely and healthily encounter their fears.

Each of the project participants spoke about their fears and the changes this sermon series caused within them. Admittedly, a few felt that they did not have a lot of fear for the church prior to the series. They had already wrestled with and dealt with that fear whenever it first arrived. They did, however, confess that the sermon series reinforced their sense of hope and strengthened their resolve to see Locust Grove move into a healthy and strong season of ministry once again. For the majority of the group, they admitted to various fears all stemming from the aftermath of the church conflict in 2015. By the time the second group discussion took place they expressed less fear and far more hope than before the “Be Healed” sermon series. They also experienced an increase in positive feelings about the church and its future as well as a significant decrease in
their negative comments about the church. All of these factors are signs of decreased fears associated with the church and its future.

Moving from Unhealthy Fear to Healthy Fear

For those that did not necessarily overcome their fear, they did show growth in the area of healthy fear. Since healthy fear plays an important role in protecting humans throughout their lives, increases in healthy fear may ultimately be a significant accomplishment for many in the congregation. The project participants that talked about not actually overcoming their fears used terminology and fear language that exhibits a much healthier view of their fear. They talked about actions they felt called to in response to their fear. They also used terms of hope in overcoming that fear and even discussed how their fear would help them make wiser decisions in the future for themselves and for the church.

Storytelling preaching helped to guide the congregation from unhealthy fear to healthy fear. The biblical stories told throughout the “Be Healed” sermon series portrayed characters that faced their fear and allowed it call them to action. They did not hide their fear or run from it. From one to the other, they responded to their fear and made positive progress in their lives from those responses. The biblical stories inspired the congregation to face their own fears and to contemplate the actions they were being called to in response to those fears. The combination of a decrease in overall fear and an increase in healthy fear set up the congregation of Locust Grove Baptist Church to walk boldly into their future.
Implications for Further Study

The use of storytelling preaching for the purpose of healing a congregation carries many possibilities for further study. The possible influence of group therapy upon this project is one potential area. It has already been discussed that the feeling of group therapy associated with the group discussions could have contributed to the healing experienced by the participants. Further study should be done into the long-term effects of combining group therapy discussions with the potent power of storytelling preaching. The combination of these two elements could present an even stronger avenue toward healing for churches that have experienced serious conflict.

Another area of possible further study includes the act of retelling stories. There is an element of therapy in retelling one’s story. If an entire congregation were to retell the church’s story it could be a valid method of healing for the entire church. Having the congregants move beyond simply hearing the church’s story to retelling that story to each other and even to those outside of the church provides an interesting avenue to be explored. This retelling would do more than offer healing for the congregants; it would also repaint the image of the church to the community.

Another intriguing area of further study would be to conduct this project at multiple churches using different styles of preaching to see the varying results. While the scope of this project focused only on storytelling preaching for the purpose of healing, another direction could compare the results of different types of preaching. Using different types of preaching to accomplish the same goal of healing in a church that has experienced conflict, the researcher could identify the strengths and weakness of each style in accomplishing that goal. All of these areas of further study would benefit the
larger Christian church and pastors as they seek to guide their congregations into a season of healing after major church conflict.

Impact Upon My Ministry

Discovering and understanding the potential of storytelling preaching to promote healing throughout a congregation will hopefully influence my ministry for years to come. I plan on using the results from this project to accomplish similar goals of healing in all the churches I serve throughout my ministry. There are many lessons that can be learned from this project, but perhaps that greatest one is that stories matter. The way one describes other people, faith, God, and the church matters. The project participants were asked in both group discussions to describe the story of Locust Grove using only a singular word. During the first group discussion the participants described Locust Grove with the following words: grace, accepting, love, bold, missional, inclusive, Christian, committed, resilient, authentic, story, faith, and home. These words matter because they tell a story that began long before this generation, a story passed down over the years. They also tell the story of each participant’s experience at Locust Grove. When they say the church is about grace, it is because they have felt that grace. When they speak of authenticity, it is because they see that authenticity lived out in the congregation.

The words shared during the second group discussion did not differ to an extreme degree. Those were words were: bold, missional, inclusive, Christian, Christ, resilient, honest, open, caring, non-judgmental, engaged, fearless, passionate, simple, helpful. Again these are powerful words, each telling its own story about the congregation at

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123 Project Participants, interview by author, 14 June 2017.

124 Project Participants, interview by author, 6 August 2017.
Locust Grove Baptist Church. Interestingly, there were specific words chosen to describe the church that were not used during the first discussion. After the “Be Healed” sermon series the project participants chose to describe the church as caring, engaged, fearless, helpful, honest, open, and passionate. Some of these terms are directly related to overcoming fear and the positive movement from unhealthy fear to healthy fear.

The power of story did more than transform the congregation; it transformed the preacher as well. The shared story of Locust Grove Baptist Church and its connection with the biblical story created a divine, healing balm that penetrated fear and offered hope in abundance. Witnessing the transformation that took place for many in the congregation throughout the “Be Healed” sermon series not only inspired me, it encouraged me to continue down this path. Storytelling preaching allowed me to do more than simply tell stories. Storytelling preaching invited my entire church into the biblical story, calling everyone to walk down the difficult path of facing fear so that we could journey toward healing together.
REFERENCES


Project Participants. Members of Locust Grove Baptist Church. Interview by author, 14 June 2017. Video recording (Transcript). Locust Grove Baptist Church, New Market, Alabama.


APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER
Tuesday, June 6, 2017

Mr. Robert Don Collins
3001 Mercer University Dr. Other
Atlanta, GA 30341

RE: Healing Through Story: Exploring the Use of Storytelling Preaching as a Means for Healing a Congregation (H1705156)

Dear Mr. Collins:

On behalf of Mercer University’s Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, your application submitted on 30-May-2017 for the above referenced protocol was reviewed in accordance with Federal Regulations 21 CFR 56.110(b) and 45 CFR 46.110(b) (for expedited review) and was approved under category(ies) 6, 7 per 63 FR 60364.

Your application was approved for one year of study on 06-Jun-2017. The protocol expires on 05-Jun-2018. If the study continues beyond one year, it must be re-evaluated by the IRB Committee.

Item(s) Approved:
The purpose of this study is to research the use of storytelling in preaching to promote healing within the congregation of a church. Use of video/audio recordings.

NOTE: Please report to the committee when the protocol is initiated. Report to the Committee immediately any changes in the protocol or consent form and ALL accidents, injuries, and serious or unexpected adverse events that occur to your subjects as a result of this study.

We at the IRB and the Office of Research Compliance are dedicated to providing the best service to our research community. As one of our investigators, we value your feedback and ask that you please take a moment to complete our Satisfaction Survey and help us to improve the quality of our service.

It has been a pleasure working with you and we wish you much success with your project! If you need any further assistance, please feel free to contact our office.

Respectfully,

Ava Chambliss-Richardson, Ph.D., CIP, CIM.
Associate Director of Human Research Protection Programs (HRPP)
Member
Institutional Review Board

“Mercer University has adopted and agrees to conduct its clinical research studies in accordance with the International Conference on Harmonization’s (ICH) Guidelines for Good Clinical Practice.”

Mercer University IRB & Office of Research Compliance
Phone: 478-301-4101 | Email: ORC_Mercer@Mercer.Edu | Fax: 478-301-2329
1501 Mercer University Drive, Macon, Georgia 31207-0001
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Informed Consent
Healing Through Story

By participating in this project you are being asked to participate in a study that involves research. Before agreeing to participate in this study you should read all of the information that follows. You should also ask any questions you have so that you completely understand everything that is being asked of you as a participant in this study.

Purpose of the Research
The purpose of this study is to research the use of storytelling in preaching to promote healing within the congregation of a church.

Procedures and Expectations
If you participate in this study you will be asked to attend two group discussions that take place at the beginning and end of a sermon series. You will also be asked to attend at least four of the designated six Sunday worship services for the sermon series of this project. The group discussions will be between 60 and 90 minutes. Each group discussion will have guided questions focused on topics such as: concerns about the church, the struggles and blessings of church community, overcoming fear caused by conflict, and hope for the future of the church.
Names in the research will use assigned letters, i.e., Participant A, to provide anonymity. Your name will not be used in print or research. There will be between 8 and 15 participants in this study.

Recording of Group Discussions
The Group Discussion conversations will be recorded via audio recorder and video recorder for the purpose of studying participant responses. Those recordings will be transcribed by the researcher. The transcript and recordings will be stored in a locked cabinet and in a locked office for up to two years following the group discussions.

Mercer University IRB
Approval Date: 06/06/2017
Protocol Expiration Date: 06/05/2018
Potential Risks or Discomforts
Participants may feel discomfort discussing negative aspects of their church experiences, however, all precautions will be taken to ensure a safe, anonymous environment for discussion. There are no foreseeable long-term risks associated with this study.

Potential Benefits
The benefits of this study include healing through storytelling and the potential for developing a new approach to promoting healing through storytelling in preaching for the entire church.

Participation, Withdrawal, and Refusal
Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. Furthermore you are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you choose not to participate there will be no negative response or consequence of any kind. You are free to withdrawal from this study at anytime and if you do your discussion responses will not be included in the study.

Questions Concerning this Research Study
The investigator for this study is Robert Don Collins, M.Div. Rev. Collins is the Associate Pastor at Locust Grove Baptist Church in New Market, AL and a student in the Doctor of Ministry Program at the James & Carolyn McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University. If you have questions about this study and its research feel free to contact Rev. Collins at 817-688-3499 or robertdoncollins@icloud.com. You may also contact his Faculty Supervisor, Dr. Joel Snider at joelsnider52@gmail.com.

Possible Reasons for Exclusion
This research study has been approved only for participant volunteers 18 years of age or older. This project has been revised and approved by Mercer University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you believe there is any infringement on your personal rights as a result of or during this research study you may contact the Mercer IRB at (478) 301-4101.

The opportunity to ask questions and receive answers has been provided to your complete satisfaction. Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study.

___________________________________________  ______________________________________
Signature of Research Participant                      Date

___________________________________________  ______________________________________
Research Participant Name (Please Print)                      Date

___________________________________________  ______________________________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent                      Date

Mercer University IRB
Approval Date: 06/06/2017
Protocol Expiration Date: 06/05/2018
APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT EMAIL AND NEWSLETTER
Dear Locust Grove,

As many of you know I have been studying for my Doctorate of Ministry at McAfee School of Theology for the past three years. I am now in the stage of preparing for my final thesis project. In order to complete this project I am recruiting volunteers to take part in an eight-week study over the summer. The study includes two group discussions and a six-week sermon series.

Participation in the study requires the following:

- Participate in a group discussion session with 7-14 other church members. This listening session will consist of guided questions and group discussion. The discussion will be recorded via audio and video. All responses will be recorded with pseudonyms for the purpose of anonymity in the thesis paper.
- Attend at least four of the six weeks of worship services for this study. The sermons begin June 25 and end July 30.
- Participate in a second group discussion session with the same 7-14 other church members. This group discussion will consist of guided questions for you to discuss. The discussion will be recorded via audio and video. All responses will be recorded with pseudonyms for the purpose of anonymity in the thesis paper.

Participation is completely voluntary and you may drop from the study at any point.

If you are interested and willing to participate in this study please contact me via email, Facebook, or through the church office.

Blessings,

Rob Collins
Associate Pastor
Locust Grove Baptist Church
Good Morning Church,

As many of you know I have been studying for my Doctorate of Ministry at McAfee School of Theology for the past three years. I am now, finally, in the last stage and I am getting ready for my thesis project. In order to complete this project I am recruiting volunteers to take part in an eight-week study over the summer. The study includes two group discussions, one at the beginning and one at the end. It also includes being present for at least four of the six sermons from my sermon series this summer. Participation is completely voluntary and you can quit at any time. If you are interested in receiving more information about participating in my study, please just let me know.
APPENDIX E

GROUP DISCUSSION INTRODUCTIONS AND QUESTIONS
Introduction for Group Discussion One

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this project. The goal of today’s listening session is to have an honest and safe conversation about the church and its future. Part of this conversation covers positive aspects of the church, and others parts cover negative feelings you might have about the church. The goal here is to be honest, to hear one another, and to respect one another. We can all acknowledge that there have been hard times in the past three years. We have had disagreements, conflict, and we’ve lost members, but we’re all still here. We all care about this church and one another. My hope is that you will dialogue with one another as I lead us through the chosen discussion topics and questions. With that being said, let us dive in.

Introduction for Group Discussion Two

Thank you again for participating in this project. Now that we have completed the sermon series on healing, we’re gathering together one last time to talk about the church and its future. You’ll notice that the topics and questions are the same ones from our previous conversation. Please feel free to share similar responses or different ones, I simply ask that you be honest, receptive to one another, and respectful. Again my hope is that you will dialogue with one another as I lead us through the chosen discussion topics and questions. With that, let’s get started.

Questions for Group Discussions One and Two

- If Locust Grove were a story, what kind of story would it be? Describe that story.
- What current concerns or issues worry you about Locust Grove?
- Does living in the church community cause anxiety or hope and freedom for you and why do you think that is?
- What do you believe is the church’s greatest challenge going forward?
- What are you afraid of for the future of Locust Grove? If you’re not afraid, were you ever fearful for the church’s future and how did you overcome that fear?
- What kind of actions do your fears call on us to take?
- What words, single words or phrases, would you use to best describe who Locust Grove is at its core identity?
- How has the sermon series shifted your views about fear? (This question will be used for the second listening session only)