For those of you who have attended a Christmas Eve service that I have led you may remember that I was taught to tell stories by a man who was taught to tell stories by a traditional African village story teller – M’Butu. M’Butu said that when you take a story from the inside and you tell it on the outside you need to make a special place and so using a piece of cloth, I make a special place. M’Butu also said that when you take a story from the inside and tell it on the outside you need to light a fire because you hope that your story will find its way, will burn its way, into your listeners hearts. And so, I light a fire.

Jesus once told this parable, “a sower went out to sow. And as they sowed some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

Another time a lawyer stood up to test Jesus, “Teacher”, he said, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there” The lawyer answered, “You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” And Jesus said to him. “ You have given the right answer; do this and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself the lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbour.”

Jesus replied with a story. “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road: and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So, likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the inn keeper, and said,” Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend”. Jesus then asked, “Which of these three, do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Once, when the prophet Nathan was given the task of confronting King David with an enormous wrong the King had done that involved the murder of Uriah rather than confronting the King directly, Nathan the King a story of two men, a rich man and a poor man. The rich man had many goats and sheep. The poor man has but one lamb that he fed from his table, held in his arms against his chest and that was like a daughter to him. The rich man had a visitor who came to see him and the rich man not wanting to slaughter a lamb from his own flock to meet his hospitality obligation to provide for the visitor, took the lamb from the poor man and slaughtered it leaving the poor man broken hearted. King David upon hearing this story is outraged and wants to know who the man is, so that he might have him punished. Nathan tells David that it is he, the King, who is that man. David confronted by the wrong he has done, knows that want he thought was done in secret is in fact know. He stands convicted by his own judgement and he repents, suffering the consequences of his actions.

It is my opinion that Jesus was a masterful story teller. When I read or hear the parable of the sower, I see the seeds falling on the path and hear the birds calling to eachother and competing with eachother as they attempt to gobble the seeds up, much as our hens used to compete with eachother for the potato peels that were cooked and added to their midday feed. I see the seeds that landed on the rocks sprouting and shriveling up in the scorching sun, I see the plants being chocked by the weeds and thorns and I see the grain lying in piles on the ground or safely in the bin.

Somewhere along my journey in ministry I have acknowledged that I struggle to remain aware that the story of the good Samaritan is a story that Jesus told is a story and not a report of an actual event. Because as I read and hear that story, I hear the blows and cries for help of the man set upon by thieves. I smell the blood and the fear, and in my imagination, I see him lying by the side of the road. I sense the hope arising in his heart as with eyes swollen shut, he hears the approaching footsteps and sense his despair as the sound of the feet passing by fade away. I see the gentleness with which the oil and wine and bandages are applied and the relief that is felt as he lays upon the bed in the inn. I see the coins offered and the inn keeper offering care.

I believe the stories that Jesus told and the stories that are told about him and others are important stories that need to told and retold as often as there is opportunity. I believe that stories and storytelling are an essential part of our lives and our living. We use stories to convey information, to build understanding, to shape identity, to create meaning and in countless other ways. We use stories to help the children who are part of our lives see … and feel … and be. And not just the children.

Ralph Milton, one of the movers and shakers behind Wood Lakes Publishing was and perhaps still is a well known story teller within the United Church. Many years ago, now, he wrote a pamphlet to promote the support of the Mission and Service fund in which he told the story of a young girl and her two younger brothers lining up to receive food in a refugee camp. When they get to the front of the line all that is left is a small banana which she gratefully accepts. She and her brothers then move to a space where they can sit down. There she divides the banana in two giving one half to each of her brothers and licking the peel herself. Ralph speaks of the actions of that child, as sacrificial love embodied, an epiphany of God’s great love manifest, made real.

May we this day and every day share the stories that Jesus told and the stories that were and are told about him. May we tell and listen to other stories of scripture. May we tell our own stories and the stories of our families, stories of the generations that have passed before us, stories of our children and as we tell and listen to the stories may we find meaning and purpose, love and hope. May we see … and feel …. and be.

And M’Butu said that when you finish telling the story that you have taken from the inside and told on the outside you put the fire out and you trust that the story you have shared has found its way into your listeners hearts.