

## Praise for *Your Untold Story*

"Bishop Owensby is one of the finest thinkers and writers on today's scene, religious or secular. I read everything he publishes, and I learn something, think deeply, and am moved every time I do. This book is no different. You'll learn, think, be moved, and live a bit differently."

—The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry, 27th Presiding  
Bishop and Primate of The Episcopal Church

"Drawing on his tremendous gift as a storyteller, Owensby uses his experiences as a guide to connect us to the deep truths that are held in our own stories. We are invited to look at the truths about ourselves that are revealed in our stories of struggle and brokenness, as well as in our stories of joy. From that holy place, we can begin to see with new eyes the places in our lives where God's forgiveness and love have been present. Connecting our stories to God's story, we are invited to grow in our understanding of what it means to be God's beloved."

—The Rt. Rev. Laura J. Ahrens, Bishop Suffragan  
of The Episcopal Church in Connecticut

"With unmatched charm and disarming clarity, Bishop Jake Owensby invites us to be vulnerable to ourselves, to one another, and to our God. Be warned: your life will never be the same after encountering Jesus in the stories told by Jake."

—The Rt. Rev. Todd Ousley, Bishop for the  
Office of Pastoral Development

"'We are all in the middle of our story . . . and what has happened to us is still unfolding.' So begins this noteworthy narrative that unlocks memories, explores faith as one who has been 'in the trenches,' and consistently points to the way of Jesus as a guide for the reader toward the extraordinary love that God has for each human being on this planet. The consistent invitation to think about and tell one's own

story in light of each chapter's theme is a particular strength and lends itself to strong discussion material for book groups. I recommend this book to you if you have a life story with which you struggle or one in which you wonder where God went. You will find a kind, compassionate, and humble pastor in Bishop Owensby—one who has 'been there' and will help you discover a transforming path for yourself."

—The Rev. Carole Wageman, author of *The Light Shines Through: Our Stories Are God's Story*, [www.carolewageman.com](http://www.carolewageman.com)

"*Your Untold Story* is an invitation to sift through the libraries of our own spiritual narratives and see the hand of God at work in us—plying us, shaping us, loving us—into becoming our own manifestations of the Body of Christ. Bishop Owensby's book affirms that each of us is called us to reconciliation and restoration. One path to this wholeness is to connect our stories with the eternal, healing story of God. It is a path well worth taking."

—The Rt. Rev. Dr. Audrey Scanlan, Episcopal  
Diocese of Central Pennsylvania

"Bishop Jake Owensby is a consummate storyteller. In *Your Untold Story* he recounts wonderful stories and arresting encounters in his own experience and then, in sometimes quite surprising ways, ties them to stories in the Scriptures. In so doing he not only deepens our appreciation of the biblical narratives that shape us, but he invites us to be tellers of our own stories, especially those still untold that need to be shared. An inspiring and fun read!"

—The Rt. Rev. J. Neil Alexander,  
Vice President and Dean of the School of Theology  
at University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee

# Your Untold Story



*Tales of a Child of God*

**Jake Owensby**



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To Patrick, Meredith, and Andrew

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*My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours. . . . It is precisely through these stories in all their particularity, as I have long believed and often said, that God makes himself known to each of us more powerfully and personally. If this is true, it means that to lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished not only humanly but also spiritually.*

—Frederick Buechner, *Telling Stories*

*Tell all the truth but tell it slant.*

—Emily Dickinson



## Part One

# Reimagining Jesus



*Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity; Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.*

—Richard Rohr, "Incarnation Instead of Atonement,"  
Daily Meditation, February 12, 2016

*I have never said that I am a good Christian. I just know that Jesus adores me and is only as far away as His name. I say, "Hi, Lord," and He says, "Hello, darling." He loves me so much He keeps a photo of me in His wallet.*

—Anne Lamott, "Like a Puppy in a Christmas Stocking,"  
interview with *World Magazine*, September 20, 2003

## Chapter 1

# All They're Going to Get Is You

*Read Luke 17:5–10.*

Don Armentrout stood tall enough to ride the big rollercoasters at Six Flags. His balding head formed a kind of natural tonsure, and he peered through eyewear that resembled twin magnifying glasses. When I was a seminarian at the School of Theology in Sewanee, Tennessee, Don delivered his Church History lectures at a torrid clip, frequently hiking his sagging khakis back up to his waist as he said, “You know what I mean?” We all struggled to keep pace with him in our notes and breathed a sigh of relief whenever he started in on one of his brief asides. One day, he said something like this: “When you get out there in your churches, people are going to come looking for Jesus. And all they’re going to get is you. You better think about that.”

I’m still thinking about that. And now I’m asking you to think about that. All sorts of people are looking for God. God took up flesh and moved into the neighborhood. God comes to meet us in Jesus. And here’s the catch: since the Ascension and the descent of the Spirit, we are the only Body that Jesus has. People will come looking for Jesus, and they’re only going to get us. And that’s exactly how God designed it. To borrow from Sting’s song “Every Breath We Take,” every move we make, every breath we take represents Jesus to the world. God

expects us to represent Jesus in the way he deserves. God's mission of reconciliation and restoration hinges on it.

All sorts of people felt welcome around Jesus. The handicapped, the contagious, and foreigners approached him without hesitation. His regular dinner companions included notorious crooks and women of ill repute. Jesus brought healing and sanity. He fed the hungry and forgave the people who wounded him. If you were down and out, flat on your back, or on everybody's scumbag list, Jesus was on your side.

People are looking for Jesus today. And all they're going to get is us.

Jesus as much as told his disciples the same thing. For instance, after wrestling with the condescending, judgmental religious leaders of his day, he took the disciples aside and gave them a mini-lesson in how to look like Jesus.<sup>1</sup> To paraphrase he said, "Don't be a stumbling block to anybody else. Your thoughts, words, and deeds have a ripple effect. Whether you realize it or not, you can knock somebody else out of the boat. Hurt people hurt people. Jerks make jerks. You'd be better off having an anchor tied around your neck and being thrown into the bayou. Heal and nurture instead. Oh, and while you're at it, forgive. And keep forgiving. If the same boneheads have to apologize seven times a day every single day, forgive them. Sure, you'll start to think that their remorse is insincere. God will sort that out. Forgive them."

Squirring at what they were hearing, they said, "Increase our faith!" We're doing the same, I suspect. These expectations are too high. Nobody can live up to them. So give us the faith to accomplish what you ask!

You might think that Jesus would break out the gold stars for this response. But instead of a hearty pat on the back, Jesus gives them a verbal smack on the back of the head. He tells the disciples—and he's telling us—that we've completely missed the boat about faith. Faith is not something we have that makes us capable of remarkable things. Having a stronger faith has nothing to do with holding more tenaciously to our ideas about God.

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1. Luke 17:1–10.

Faith is a relationship. Jesus initiates and sustains that relationship by being faithful to us. He sticks by us and gives himself to us. Our faith is a response. It happens—and its contours change—one day at a time, and those days have a cumulative effect.

The various saints on our liturgical calendar show us that a faithful life amounts to a Jesus-saturated life. A faithful life is one in which Jesus does uncanny, unexpected, holy things. Saints don't accomplish things so much as Jesus makes things happen in and through them. Saints show us what it means to be the Body of Christ.

Plenty of saints never make it onto the Church's calendar. History will not record most of their names. But we recognize them when we see them. They are representing Jesus in a way that makes us say, "Oh! Right! That's it!"

For instance, about ten years ago we saw Jesus in the Amish community. Charlie Roberts walked into a one-room schoolhouse near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and opened fire. He killed five children and wounded five others. Then he took his own life.

Charlie's mother, Terri, will never forget that day. Her husband said, "I will never face my Amish neighbors again."<sup>2</sup> A few days later, the Robertses buried their son in a small, private ceremony. As they came to the gravesite, they saw forty members of the Amish community approaching. The Amish enfolded the Roberts family in a semi-circle, extending forgiveness and sharing grief. In their sorrow, shame, and loneliness, the Robertses came looking for Jesus that day, whether they knew it or not. All they got was the Amish. And on that day, a small, wounded group of Amish were the real Jesus.

That's who we want to be for the addict and the parolee, for the lonely teenager and the disabled vet, for the cynical banker and the calloused farmer, for the streetwalker and the street cleaner. We want

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2. "A Decade after Amish School Shooting, Gunman's Mother Talks of Forgiveness," *NPR Morning Edition*, September 30, 2016, [http://www.npr.org/2016/09/30/495905609/a-decade-after-amish-school-shooting-gunman-s-mother-talks-of-forgiveness?utm\\_campaign=storyshare&utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_medium=social](http://www.npr.org/2016/09/30/495905609/a-decade-after-amish-school-shooting-gunman-s-mother-talks-of-forgiveness?utm_campaign=storyshare&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social).

to bring healing and compassion and peace to overscheduled families and exhausted night-shift workers. To blue lives and black lives. To bow-tied professionals and professional slackers. We want to be Jesus to whomever we meet.

It saddens me when what some Christians say or do misrepresent Jesus as condescending and exclusionary. For instance, famous preachers have condemned Muslims for being, well, Muslim. Christian business owners have insisted on the right to refuse service to same-sex couples as an expression of religious freedom. Their words and actions portray Jesus as focused solely on a single moral or political agenda. As quarrelsome and scornful. As resentful and morally smug. We know, or at least we are supposed to know, that Jesus came not to condemn but to save. And yet all too often we forget how to embody the inclusive graciousness that is the sacred heart of Jesus.

God realizes that these infinite standards are too high for us injured, timid, fractious humans to meet. That's why God became one of us and lived in our midst and dwells in our hearts. We are not in this alone. We are the Body of Christ. People are looking for Jesus. And all they're going to get is us. Let's keep thinking about that.

## Reflection Questions

1. What word, phrase, image, or idea in this chapter stood out to you? What ideas, stories, images, or questions did it suggest to you?
2. Does this chapter confirm, challenge, or enlarge your image of Jesus? Talk about how this is so for you.
3. Have you ever experienced a moment when you said, "Oh! Right! That's it!" Talk about a time when you learned something new about Jesus or came to know Jesus at a greater depth in the actions, words, or attitudes of another person.
4. Can you recall or imagine a time that someone else might have encountered Jesus in you? What do you think they learned about him?