

Faith Stories
John 1:29-42; I Corinthians 1:1-9
January 27, 2008

Five years ago I led a retreat for the women of Trinity United Methodist Church of Los Osos. One of my presentations was evening devotions, just before we went to bed. By that time I knew that all of us would be too tired for a full-fledged sermon or heavy theological reflection. I chose to tell the women bedtime stories related to the theme of the weekend, which was “Our Life Quilt.” There are several wonderful children’s books centered around quilts so I selected a few to tell. I was afraid that adult women would think children’s books too childish and simplistic. I will lead a retreat again for those women next month. One of the traditions they have continued in all the retreats since that first one is bedtime stories! They were a big hit and they are excited to hear the stories I bring this time.

Across cultures stories are a vital means whereby we communicate our history, our values, and our identity. We read history to learn valuable lessons for the present. We read biographies and resonate with the struggles of others and find out that we are not alone. Fables and parables teach lessons with images and action that linger in our hearts and minds far longer than a lecture or a sermon.

Elie Wiesel said, “God made humans because God loves stories.”ⁱ Each human life is a story, full of suspense, drama, entertainment, intrigue, mystery, and sometimes, thankfully, plain old boring stuff. What an experience it must be for God to watch millions of life stories being created all at the same time. I believe that God made humans because God wants friends and companions to share life with God. The Bible is the story of God’s search for human beings who seem to want to run away from God and God’s ongoing activity of forgiving and embracing humans after having gone astray. Within that larger Story are specific stories of individuals and their experiences with God. The stories of scripture contain themes and threads which are common to all human lives. As we reflect upon our lives in the light of scripture and faith, we discover how God is at work in our lives.

Our gospel reading from John tells about the first disciples called to follow Jesus. John the Baptist is the forerunner who prepares the way, sets the stage, warms up the audience. As the opening act, he arouses their anticipation of one who will be greater, one who will baptize not simply with water, but with the Holy Spirit. John points people not to himself, but to Jesus. When Jesus comes on the public scene, John begins to introduce him using names and images that would be meaningful to people of faith at the time. He calls Jesus “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” and “Son of God.” He uses images and titles that are familiar to his audience to describe the significance of this man Jesus and to direct people’s attention toward him. John is a preacher and prophet, using theological language to give credibility to Jesus.

Andrew is one of the first to follow Jesus. He spends the day with Jesus, listens to his teaching, and apparently his heart is so moved by this man, that he wants his brother Simon to meet Jesus. He runs to share the good news, “We have found the Messiah, the Anointed One of God.” He invites Simon to meet Jesus and experience this man for himself. I imagine that it took a bit more evidence for Simon to leave his fishing nets and follow his brother who had been AWOL from work all day, leaving the messy business of cleaning the fish and nets to Simon. I

can picture Andrew running to his brother with excitement and enthusiasm that he cannot contain. “You’ll never guess who I met today. John has been telling us that the Messiah would come, but we know that lots of kooks have claimed to be the Messiah, and yet have never done anything with their lives. But this man, Jesus, is so deeply grounded in the faith that it radiates from his every word, even from his very presence. He feels the cruel oppression under which we live. He knows that life is hard under Roman rule. He recognizes injustice and he has the courage to confront it. With compassion he sees deep into the hearts of people and senses their pain. Simon, you’ve got to come meet this man. I believe that he truly is the one we’ve been waiting for. He proclaims the word of God with authority. He has the potential to change the world and to change our lives.”

It is a testimony that Andrew offers his brother. To testify is to make a statement based upon personal knowledge, belief, or experience. Andrew shares his personal experience of Jesus with Simon. He senses something very powerful about Jesus that he wants his brother to know as well.

Frederick Buechner says, “In the last analysis, you cannot pontificate but only point. A Christian is one who points at Christ and says, ‘I can’t prove a thing, but there’s something about his eyes and his voice. There’s something about the way he carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross – the way he carries me.’”ⁱⁱ

The New Testament is a testimony, a record of experiences that early Christians had with the transformative power of God. The early believers recorded their testimonies, their experiences of sharing their testimonies, and the impact of their testimonies on the people around them. This basic structure underlies almost every book in the New Testament—most of which claim to “witness” or “testify” to the love and grace of Jesus Christ. The book of Acts asserts that the church itself began with Peter’s testimony on the day of Pentecost: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses” (Acts 2:32). From then on disciples, converts, and believers spread the good news of the Christian faith across the Roman Empire through their testimony. Their stories of experiencing God were so powerful, so personally transformative, that many were willing to die rather than recant their testimony.

After the emperor Constantine legalized the Christian religion in 313 C.E., the practice of testimony began to wane. Once the faith had achieved a certain level of respectability, people became Christians for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways—sometimes for political or social advancement, or by being born to Christian parents. The need to talk about faith became less urgent, and more pressing needs—like building churches, educating children, and training clergy—took its place. Testimony developed into a practice for the spiritual elite, who recorded their experiences of God in theological memoirs, such as Saint Augustine’s famous *Confessions*. For most of the Christian Middle Ages, testimony was practiced largely by monks and nuns.

As Europe changed and new, more democratic impulses grew during the time of the Reformation, the practice of testimony reemerged. People testified to their embrace of the new Protestant faiths in church gatherings, in town squares, and in print. For some Protestants, testimony served as the portal to the community of faith. Membership and sometimes even baptism depended upon one’s ability to witness to God’s power in one’s life. Testimony shifted the authority to tell the Christian story away from the learned elite, from ordained clergy,

theologians, and magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church, to the people. Testimony emboldened all God's people to speak of faith.

In the seventeenth century, New England Puritans elevated testimony to dramatic democratic expression. They required anyone seeking church membership—a coveted status in New England society—to be able to testify publicly to the works of God in his or her life. Everyday people were discerning the impulses of spiritual awakening in their own souls, and offering evidence of their salvation to the whole congregation. From these humble New England beginnings, testimony became an indelible part of American religion.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, evangelical revivalists picked up the practice. As testimony became widespread in revivalism, however, middle-class Protestants began to shy away from it. Evangelicals maintained the practice. By the middle of the twentieth century, more “respectable” Protestants had all but abandoned their democratic birthright of testimony.ⁱⁱⁱ

Mainline Protestant denominations are experiencing a rebirth of the practice of testimony. As individuals share their faith stories with one another, there is a deeper bonding that unites a congregation. When we dare to be vulnerable and open with one another, relationships move beyond a superficial level into the depths of intimacy. We can resonate with other experiences. We grow to appreciate the growth others have known through painful circumstances in their lives.

Too often in our church life our sharing remains superficial. We may share the joys and sorrows of life, but we are less likely to share our experiences of God's presence. The only rule one pastor gave for testimonies given in the local church she served was, “They must not be Godless.”^{iv} Faith stories speak of God's activity in our lives. In recent years, many of our church meetings have taken on a different tenor when we have started them by sharing how we, as individuals and as a community of faith, have experienced Christ's love. That's part of our mission as a congregation: Experiencing and Expressing Christ's Love. As we are reminded that Christ's Love is present in our midst, the nature of our work shifts from business to ministry in Jesus' name.

The season of Lent will begin in a week and a half. On the Sundays in Lent, I will invite several among us to share their faith stories, to give witness to God's presence in your lives. My hope is that all of us will take time to reflect, even daily, on where we have felt God's presence leading, comforting, challenging us in our everyday lives. As we wake up and become conscious of God's movement in our midst, we will grow in faith. For God is with us always; oftentimes we aren't paying attention.

A process to think about our own faith stories would be to list significant people, events, and experiences in our lives. Search for trends or patterns among them and ask how God was active in these. What is our understanding of our relationship with Christ? What theological concepts have been illumed by our life experience? What commitments have we made as a result of our faith? Has a sense of Christian vocation developed? What has contributed to maturity and growth in our spiritual life?

One of the ongoing themes in my spiritual life has been the movement from grades to grace. For many years my image of God seemed to be a teacher whom I needed to please with good grades. I thought that I had to earn an “A” grade in order to present myself worthy before God. That image may have come from spending 21 years in educational settings, low self-

esteem, rejection by peers and by an ordination committee, and a tendency toward perfection. I felt driven to work hard to earn God's love and set myself right with God. From my seminary training I knew in my head that God operates by grace, not by grades. But it was difficult to allow that knowledge of grace to sink from my head into heartfelt acceptance.

A turning point came about the age of thirty, after I had finally been ordained. I attended a spiritual growth experience called Walk to Emmaus. It is a 72-hour short course in Christianity. It was far more than a learning experience; it was a significant spiritual experience of God's grace. Finally I allowed myself to receive God's free gift of grace in my heart. I claimed that grace for myself and accept God's unconditional love in spite of what I tried to do to earn it or deserve it. For the most part I've shaken the image of God as a teacher for whom I needed "to make the grade." I've tried to claim more nurturing images of God and to relate to God as an encouraging companion. Old patterns are difficult to change, so occasionally I find myself falling back into the mode of proving myself, of doing it right in order to be right with God. Writing a sermon every week can feel a lot like writing a term paper; not only do I grade myself, but I receive the grades of a congregation as well! The joy of fully claiming God's grace will be a lifelong journey.

Martin Buber wrote about a rabbi who told the following story: My grandfather was lame. Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher. He related how the holy Baal Shem used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather rose as he spoke, and he was so swept away by his story that he himself began to hop and dance to show how the master had done. From that hour on he was cured of his lameness. That's the way to tell a story!^v

Telling our faith stories is a life-giving endeavor both for the tellers and for the listeners. In telling our stories, we realize new insights and receive fresh understandings. In hearing one another's faith journeys, we are called to detect God's movement in our own lives.

Everyone loves a good story. God is writing a great story in your life. Our faith stories note the intersection between our life stories and God's presence. Like Andrew, may we rejoice in the opportunity to tell the story of Jesus and his love for us.

ⁱ Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest* (New York: Avon Books, 1967), p. 10.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 32.

ⁱⁱⁱ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), pp. 134-135.

^{iv} Lillian Daniel, *Tell it Like it is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), p. 11.

^v Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim, Early Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), pp. v-vi. Quoted by Sue Monk Kidd, "The Story-Shaped Life," *Weavings*, Vol. IV, No. 1, January/February 1989, p. 22.

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