

## Sharing stories

Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

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Perhaps the most important thing we do when we come together on Sunday mornings is tell stories. Stories about Jesus, stories about Moses, stories about Mary and Miriam and Sarah and Abraham. Stories about what's going on in our lives. Bible stories, stories in the form of prayer, stories over coffee in Pilgrim Hall. Stories about the creation of the world and where it's all going, under the loving and troubled eye of God. "The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them," Barry Lopez wrote.<sup>1</sup> "If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves."

In the next few weeks I'll be coming to the close of my time here. Some of you are just beginning yours. Today I just want to tell some stories, remember some people, refer to some events. For those who were here at the time, being reminded of a story renews a bond. For those who weren't, perhaps these vignettes will give you a fuller sense of who First Church is. For we all inherit the legacy of those who came before us. Like the vineyard laborers, at the end of the day we all get full payment, the full legacy, whether we've been here since the early morning hours or just joined in late in the day. And while the Bible tells us that God is always doing a new thing, the past is ever with us to a greater or lesser degree.

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It's been a long time. How long? I'll tell you how long. The first time I stood here, George Bush was president. George *H.W.* Bush. The first time I stood here, we didn't have email at church, and I wouldn't have known how to use it if we did. (Unlike some who run for high office, I now do.) When I arrived, the church had only one phone line, and staff had to take turns making calls. Why, the first time I stood in this pulpit, it was so long ago that Betty Clark held a key position of leadership in the congregation...

Some things are so good they're worth repeating.

The first time I stood here happened to be Robin's and my 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We've now celebrated 28. It was May 31, 1992, and I was about to preach my candidating sermon. (Not only was I away from home on our anniversary, a few weeks earlier the search committee had brought me out here on Mothers Day weekend for my formal interview. Somehow Robin and I have survived.) When I was here to candidate, a large piece of sheet metal had just blown off the steeple during a storm—just the day before, as I recall. This past July, the week that I announced that I'll be leaving in October, wouldn't you know it: a piece of sheet metal blew off the steeple in a storm. I'm always reluctant to read messages from on high into anything—especially into events so ripe for metaphor and grandiosity as things falling from the sky—so let's chalk that one up to coincidence.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Crow and Weasel*.

The week after we moved here, our son started first grade in what was then the brand-new Marcy Open School building at 4<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>. This past Friday evening he backed out of our driveway and headed for New York, a college graduate leaving home, off to seek his fame and fortune.

One Christmas Eve when Tucker was about nine, the church reenacted the Nativity story with a pageant. When it came time for Herod to hear the news of the Christ child, the drop-away panel between the sanctuary and Pilgrim Hall was pulled down into the floor to great dramatic effect, revealing the evil Herod (that would be me), with two guards dressed in black, ninja-style (Daniel and Michael Heitke-Felbeck), and a cowering round-faced lackey of a boy trembling at Herod's rage. (That would have been my son.) We didn't expect it, but the scene was a hit, so we reprised it the next year. But that time when the panel fell, it revealed a 10-year-old round-faced Herod with a much older bearded lackey trembling at the king's rage. At Tucker's suggestion, he and I had exchanged roles.

It may have been our first Christmas here that our daughter was cast as the demure Mary, peering lovingly at the doll in the orange-crate manger. (The pageant powers-that-were had shrewdly given the new minister's kid a starring role.) Some will recall the other time Isabel played Mary, to Carl Dyar's Joseph just a couple of years ago, when she channeled another Mary (from the old Dick Van Dyke Show) wailing comically when Joseph tells her he's had one more dream and they'll have to pack up and move one more time. She brought down the house. Who knew the Christmas story could be so funny? Who knew a church could laugh so hard?

I've often appreciated that this community can deal with humor. Though I do recall times when we haven't. (A peculiar church growth brochure from the mid-'90s comes to mind.)

Yes, it's been a long time. A lot has happened. Some of it has been happy, some sad. The happier things have included our sesquicentennial celebration, which brought together members and ministers from over a period of decades; an increase of involvement in the neighborhood through tutoring programs at Marcy, Way to Grow, and the Southeast play group; our recent capital campaign that made the building more accessible and open. But sadly, there are ways in which we've also closed ourselves in a bit. Back in the early '90s, we left the church doors unlocked during the day and you didn't have to ring a bell to get in. We felt no need for a security system. There was one notable day when a couple of people from the street got into a fight over a sandwich in Pilgrim Hall. Some of the older ladies of the church happened to be here, and the women who were the Way to Grow staff were meeting in the Parlor at the time. Some were understandably terrified at what they saw unfold. Brad got a back strain trying to break up the fight, and one of the combatants broke the window on his way out, slamming the door behind him. It was a sign to some that times were changing. Personal safety had become an issue to a degree that it never had before. Nowadays we feel the need for more protection, more barriers to insulate ourselves, frankly, from the poverty that's increased over this past decade and a half. It's a hard line for a church to walk. I'm not sure I've done it as well or as gracefully or as forcefully as I should have, personally or as a congregational leader. Perhaps my successor will do better.

We are more open in some ways than we were 16 years ago, more cut off from our neighbors in others. The world around us has changed, too. Marcy Holmes went through a rough patch a few

years ago. Things are much better again now, but some of the problems have simply migrated to other parts of town. Government services have been deeply cut throughout the land, with the blithe and unrealistic assumption that churches would make up the shortfall out of the goodness of their hearts and their wealth of compassion would trump their meager resources. But very few churches are equipped to be social service agencies. We are probably a closer-knit church community than we were 16 years ago. I believe we are more welcoming in most aspects. But this is not as kind and gentle nation as it once was. As a church we grieve that, and we still struggle with what to do.

Throughout the years, we've tried in various ways.

For the first five years I was here, most days you could find Bill Rowe sitting outside the door at the north end of the building in his black leather vest and black jeans, black eyebrows like storm clouds hovering over his glasses, his beard and mustache gray but with an amber stain around the lips from the cigarettes he smoked one after another. Between smokes he was the most dedicated volunteer you'd ever meet (and perhaps the most crotchety). Bill founded Open Arms of Minnesota, which for about five years rented our old kitchen downstairs, rented it for a song until they wore it out and simultaneously outgrew it as the AIDS epidemic swelled and spread. I've always felt that supporting Open Arms was one of the best things we ever did, though frankly we weren't that involved with them. Some of our members did volunteered as drivers or cooks. Some served on their board. As a church, we basically gave them a place to cook and distribute from without charging even enough to cover our own utility and maintenance costs. But when resources and needs match so well, that too is a form of ministry.

In the '90s we helped two Bosnian refugee families find a new home in this strange new city, so far from the horrors of Srebrenica that some of their loved ones had endured. If it's true that in saving one life you save the world, the Lindberg-Stephens and Fate families have a special reward coming, as do all the other people here who helped them.

Many of you were involved in the Interfaith Hospitality Network and Families Moving Forward, which we participated in with University Baptist Church, providing food and shelter to homeless families.

In 1998 and '99 we helped to lead a statewide effort to take some of the self-centered edge off of Jesse Ventura's obsession with giving people back some of the taxes they'd paid, moneys that were supposed to support the common good. We tried to lift up and reclaim that shared commitment. Our Board of Christian Involvement urged us to do it again this year with some portion of the economic stimulus giveaways that came our way in the mail.

Several from this congregation have supported the common good by trying to build bridges with the Muslim community in the Islamophobic context we've all lived in since 9/11. And some have worked to counteract the dreadful general American ignorance of Islam through learning about it themselves.

In our time together we've seen Twin Towers fall, a bridge collapse, and a neighborhood church condemned by the city after a wall fell in. To much of this, we've responded by trying to bridge painful chasms.

A third of us have made friends with Guatemalans through yearly trips to San Lucas Tolimán. Two Confirmation classes have made the trip, 15 kids in their early teens. Who knows whether lives have been changed? I do wonder who will step in to lead those trips after I've gone, or even if they'll continue, but those are your decisions to make, not mine.

We have become a congregation that nurtures young ministers through the Pastoral Residency program that has brought us Jennie and Christina, Dea and Hilary, Alan and Sara. With Dea we broke the color line and welcomed an African American pastor who was both gift and challenge to us. That experience helped us to see how much we have yet to learn and grow. Conversations on race and white privilege will continue this year.

We've celebrated 20 years of being Open and Affirming. Our children have grown up in a community where the question has become not whether homosexuality is OK with God, but quite the opposite: Why is it that some people hate our friends who are gay or lesbian? This change alone makes a huge difference.

I'll always remember the wedding of David Fey and Michael Putman 14 years ago this week. It was probably the first gay wedding I did, though it was not the first one here. (That distinction, I believe, belongs to David Anger and Jim Broberg.) David and Michael's day was a grand celebration. "Give Yourself to Love" and "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" were sung. There was the added visual touch of a fanciful and colorful wooden griffin they'd made, a griffin named Merv. After the service ended, we realized that the janitor's closet at the back of the sanctuary had been standing open the whole time. Celebrations like that bring us all out of the closet a bit at a time. The next day in church, Myron Messenheimer—one of our highly respected longtime members—said he'd never been more proud of his church than he was that day.

As a congregation we witnessed the exceptional grace of Roland Delattre as he moved toward death a little over a year ago. He and Judy and members of their family were with us week after week after Roland received his diagnosis of a terminal brain tumor which he decided not to treat since treatment would only briefly delay the inevitable. Roland was open with us all about what he faced, and he spoke of the peace he had come to know, the joy he had as he lived his final days in the midst of his friends and loved ones. Roland died in Easter season, confident that his life flowed on in endless song.

I could go on. I haven't touched on Mardi Gras Sundays, where Pooh served as scripture and people came dressed in funny hats. I haven't spoken of candles circling the sanctuary on Christmas Eve's silent night. Nor have I said as much as I thought I might about times when the congregation murmured against me like the Israelites in the wilderness. But I do recall them, and you may, too. We have learned from each other, we've adjusted, and we've moved on. Just remember when you have difficulties with the transition to your next Principal Minister, whoever she or he may be, that

there were times when the fleshpots of Egypt weren't as great as they might seem from the perspective of some future wilderness.

I could go on. But one story would just remind me of another, and you each have your own. Each oral history is objective and individual. Each of us would surely highlight different things. The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, writing of the Exodus, says some stories can only be told in certain ways, that sacred stories have no exact parallel. And that may be true. But the story of a local congregation is a kaleidoscope of impressions, people, and memories. The humor, the pain, the times of transcendence and mutual forgiveness—they're all part of our shared story.

We are ever in transition. Even Adam and Eve moved on to a new place, a new way of understanding. Why should we expect it to be different with us? As we move, change, grow, and wander, may our memories sustain us like manna, and may we know our stories—some of them, anyway—as reminders of times when God was with us, and as whispers of hope that we will find our way through whatever lies ahead.

May God be with you, as God has been with us all along.