

## Our Gospel Stories

I Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:40-45

Jennie Ott ☩ First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC ☩ 15 February 2009  
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Stories matter. If you think about it, it's one of the first things we demand as a kid. "Tell me a story, Mom." It's one of the first things we want to know when we meet a new friend or a potential partner. "Tell me something about yourself. Tell me a story about you."

Our stories make us who we are. They remind us where we come from, they help us know who we are, and they shape how we live our lives.

This is true not only in our individual lives but in our communal lives as well...even in our church life.

We are a storied people.

If we stop and think about it, our whole faith is really about stories, as we gather each week to share our stories with one another...to listen to the stories that are in the Bible...to hear about our spiritual ancestors and what they faced, to hear what we might learn from them in our own lives today.

Today we hear the story of a man touched by Jesus, who couldn't keep his story to himself. He received the healing of Jesus, and that experience was so central to who he was, he couldn't keep silent. He had to tell his story.

Paul, the writer of our epistle, couldn't help but tell his story either. Paul, who also had a profound encounter with God, spent years traveling to cities, telling his own story of transformation. He was compelled to preach, compelled to tell his stories, his versions of the gospel truth, which had to do with the love of Jesus and a church that was inclusive to all.

Paul even practiced what he preached. He didn't just say that the church was for everyone. He took the message to everyone, to the Jew, to the Gentile. Today we might say Paul met people where they were, because his story was too good to let it pass anyone by.

It was stories like these ones—like the man telling everyone about his healing, like Paul writing to everyone he knew—that give us a vision of that early church, that help us see how the church grew. And because people told their stories to one another, these stories were handed on from generation to generation, weathering the years and weathering many transitions.

As a church, as First Church, we have our stories. We have stories that remind us who we are, that embody what we are all about. And it's these stories that hold us together, especially in times of transition, in times of rebirth, in times of growth and change.

As the ministers of this church, you are the bearers of these stories. You all who have lived and heard and experienced this community know that they are certain experiences in our history, in the life of this community—think rummage sales or organ screens—where one hears the tales and thinks, "That is so First Church. That is what we are all about."

Today I'm going to invite us to share some of these stories with one another...and for two reasons. One is that it is a new member Sunday, and any of you who have ever joined a family by adoption or partnership, know that one of the first things you do is learn the family stories. The second is that in the

coming year, there will be new staff, and they, too, will come to you looking for stories. It will be up to you to tell them who we are, who you are as a congregation.

What are some of the family stories of First Church? If one of our new members came up to you today and said, "Tell me a story about First Church. Tell me a story that encapsulates who First Church is, what First Church is all about, or what the gospel message of First Church is," what story would you tell them? What stories do they need to know?

There are ushers with microphones, so now I invite you to become the preachers and the teachers and the storytellers of this church. What should these new members know they are getting into?

Let us listen to our stories.

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*Individuals share stories with congregation.*

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Friends, each of us has our own stories that we could tell about this place. And in the coming weeks and months, I invite you to share those stories with one another. The deacons are already starting this with the Lenten series, which will gather us for meals and opportunities to share our stories with one another.

Our stories have meaning, and it is our stories that will continue to guide us and shape us as a community. Let us give thanks for our common stories, for those spoken today and those yet to be shared, by standing and singing together "In Christ there is no East and West."