

What's Your Story?

A Sermon for World Communion Sunday based on Galatians 3:23-29

Preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan at Emory Presbyterian Church – October 5, 2014

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

- Galatians 3:23-29 (NRSV)

I love to “people-watch” at the airport.

I wonder as I watch people walk by ... I look and wonder what their lives are like ... people I'll never know. I wonder what their stories are ... What each person's story is ... What's going on in their lives? What makes them happy? What has hurt them? What are they most proud of? What do they most long for? I look out and I see ...

- An older woman, moving slowly down the concourse, with a look of loss mixed with anticipation ... perhaps she has been a widow for a few years and her daughter in Arizona has finally persuaded her to move out there to be with family. She doesn't really want to – all her friends are here – but she knows that she can't take care of herself like she used to, and she hasn't seen her grandchildren in almost a year.
- A young man with a clean-shaven head and in military fatigues ... Perhaps he's home from a tour in Afghanistan, on a two week leave, ready to see his wife to whom he's been married for a year and a half. Maybe he's about to meet his infant son for the first time.
- A middle-aged man in a suit and tie looking impatient and acting testy with the ticket agent ... Perhaps this is a business trip and he knows that he needs to close the deal this time or he may lose his job, and with it, perhaps a lot more.
- An early 20-something woman holding a sign, “I Love You!” ... Perhaps she's ready to welcome her long-distance beloved to town on his Spring Break, and is totally unaware that he's going to propose tonight.

Sometimes the thought even enters my mind ... I wonder if anybody looks at me and wonders about the same things.

We all have stories to tell ... of everyday pleasures and irritations, of little defeats and victories ... stories of joy and pain ... of abundance and loss ... of long days and short nights ... stories of love, of longing, and of hope.

It's our stories which make us human.

But of course, *sharing* those stories is ... another story. There is both deep desire and deep fear here. There are the stories we are eager to tell, the stories we present to others, the stories we *wish* we could share, and there are stories that we can scarcely tell ourselves. There are sensitive, personal factors which can keep us from deeper relationship. Though we might deny it, most of us really *do* care what others think. We want to be liked. We don't want to be rejected.

But once upon a time, I think it might have been easier to find oneself in places where friendships could arise naturally and those fears could be navigated ... spaces in which our deep need for connection could be nurtured over time. And it used to be that the places and social institutions which facilitated these connections were strong, healthy, and well-supported – churches, clubs, organized service efforts, and the like.

But for several decades, sociologists have noticed the trend in American society towards the decline of voluntary associations, and with this decline, a slow but sure decline in what has been called “social capital” or the quality and depth of our social interaction and civic engagement. *Why* this is the case is hard to pinpoint (there are surely multiple factors in play), but polls and other studies consistently indicate that what we have long sensed was happening, *is* happening. Church membership and involvement is perhaps the most noticeable example, but it's not just about religion. As Harvard professor Robert Putnam noted in his groundbreaking study *Bowling Alone*, we see it in our levels of political participation, and its effects in the coarsening of civil discourse. We see it in declining memberships and involvement in Parent-Teacher Associations, civic and fraternal groups, the Boy and Girl Scouts, and even, per his title, bowling leagues! As he points out, more Americans are bowling today than ever before, but bowling in *organized leagues* has plummeted.

In short, people aren't as likely to put down roots, to be “joiners,” as they used to be. Now it's true that individualism has always been a key aspect of the American character, but there has also always been in American culture a strong *balancing* force, a recognition of duties and obligations which we owe one another and to which we freely consent ... a sense for the common good. To bring it bit more down-to-earth, you could call it “neighborliness.” And yet, today, the world of Mr. Rogers – “Won't you be my neighbor?” – may appear charmingly quaint ... and perhaps a world away.

The wild success of technology, the internet, and 21st century communications to *connect* all us self-reliant individualists may at first seem to belie the trend, but in fact only establishes the point more powerfully – and more poignantly. Starting with television and now with streaming

movies and of course video games for the kids, our entertainment is increasingly individualized, privatized. Our super-connected, networked world bears the saddest of ironies. Never in history have the billions of people on our planet been more “connected,” and yet – you know this is true – never have more people felt more isolated. I recently saw again the cover of a past issue of *The Atlantic*: “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” The answer given by the article is a nuanced yes. Not that it’s doing so directly ... Those who are truly not lonely can use it without becoming so, while those who are lonely will likely remain so ... But it is certainly a powerful form of one-stop entertainment, offering the seductive illusion of actually being connected ... of having a thousand “friends,” of having your flourishes of self-expression be “liked,” all without actually having to meet anyone face-to-face.

This is an unhealthy trend. And unfortunately, it is as true in matters of spirituality as it is in other things. Now first, let’s be fair: living together as a church can be a messy business. And no one knows that better than a pastor! When critics point out the pettiness, the hypocrisy, the insincerity, the dogmatism they experienced in their church adventures (not here!), they often don’t have to make stuff up. And so it’s understandable that many have dropped all this nonsense in favor of a more gentle, more personal path. You’ve heard it before (perhaps you’ve *said* it before!), “Oh, I’m *spiritual*, but not *religious*.” I can sympathize with the sentiment. Organized religion ... the Church ... carries a lot of baggage. “My worship is sitting out on the boat by myself in the middle of the lake and watching the sunrise on Sunday morning,” I was told by a friend who was raised in a fundamentalist church. He just got tired of the dogma, of the judgment. Between *that* or spending Sunday morning on the lake, I’d choose the lake any day. I get it.

But I would gently encourage him to consider that maybe those aren’t the only two options ... doing church with judgmental faith-heads on one hand, or having privately profound Sunday-morning intimations of the Sacred in the middle of a lake, on the other.

I share the spirit and intent of a UCC minister who wrote an admittedly snarky entry on her blog for *The Huffington Post*. Skipping the snarky parts, I noticed these words: “Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn’t interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What *is* interesting is doing this work in *community*, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, *disagree* with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.”

Private spirituality, American-style, presents itself as a liberation, as a solution to the deepest longings of the heart, but I don’t believe that in the end it can deliver on what it promises. For as long as our spirituality makes no real demands, asks nothing substantive of us or perhaps even threatening to us ... as long as it doesn’t call us out into engagement with our neighbors (even the difficult ones!) ... as long as it doesn’t call us into meaningful commitments and root us into something bigger, deeper, than ourselves ... the hunger inside for real communion will grow. The hunger may remain unrecognized for a long time, but it longs to be satisfied – not in the acceptance of the incredible, nor in individualistic epiphanies, but rather in the glory and

pathos of shared stories, shared mission, shared joys and concerns, shared time living in the mystery of laughter, of tears, and of play.

Despite all this, I have hope for this empty space in the American soul. I deeply believe that the tide will turn, and in fact has already begun to turn, and that a new great awakening is upon us. We are beginning to see, really see, that there is no life – “spiritual” or otherwise – apart from community. That’s not an endorsement of just *any* community, but it is a recognition that we need one another. We can’t be what we are and are called to be without each other. We are human beings. And we won’t and can’t walk this human journey before God and to God without each other.

While the social issues cited earlier are not just about “religion,” I do believe that Christians have a God-given, indispensable role in shaping this new consciousness. And out of this, a renewed and transformed Church may be born. Right now, while mainline institutions struggle, much of the action seems to be happening on the edges, out beyond our conventional comfort zones.

A growing number of Christians – both grassroots disciples and pastors – have heard the questions and, seeking to move with the winds of the Spirit, are trying to reform and re-imagine their churches and traditions. They are seeking to birth a new Christianity that is both spiritual *and* religious. They meet in homes, at coffeehouses, in bars – sometimes even in church buildings! They “Run. Pray” and “Walk. Pray”. They sit silently for 20 minutes in the Divine presence. They seek new, creative ways of reaching out to the community, seeking to gather in the countless spiritual refugees out there who, deep down, just long for an honest vision of life that they can believe in, and who are looking to practice community in which they can share their stories without judgment, hear others’ stories too, and through it all, discover that they are rooted in and part of something bigger than themselves ... somehow part of a larger Story ... a Story which is able to embrace and include theirs.

When I was first ordained at the tender young age of 24, I served as an Associate Pastor in a Presbyterian church in New Jersey. My senior pastor’s name was George Chorba. I learned much from him, though in my relative youth, I didn’t necessarily recognize how much I had until later. One thing that left a permanent mark on me was the way he did baptisms – the words he said to the baby as he was holding it right after the sprinkling of the water. He would look into its little eyes and say something like this: “Little one, it was for you that Jesus Christ came into this world. It was for you that he was born in a humble stable. It was for you that he grew up and taught, for you he healed and forgave. It was for you that he was betrayed, and suffered, and died. It was for you that he rose again in glory. And right now, you know nothing of this story, but we the people of God in this place have promised to tell you this story and teach it to you, so that in time, it may one day become the Great Story of your life, as it is of ours.”

And what a Story it is that can truly connect us all whoever we are, that can embrace all our personal stories without in any way diminishing them, but rather, fulfilling them! It’s a Story that makes room at a Table for that older woman moving away to be with her family ... room

for that young soldier coming home ... room for that scared businessman ... room for that young woman in love ... room for people of every race, country, and language! It is the old, old Story of the Love which took on a human face in the person and work of Jesus. It's a story we tell over and over – a story of one who healed the sick, reached out to outcasts, sought out the lost. It's the story of how he took it to the end and stretched out his arms upon a cross and suffered the depths of humiliation, defeat and forsakenness for the people he loved, in a traitor's death. And it's the story of how this death was not the end. In defiance of the powers of this world, we tell with joy a story of ultimate Hope, for we affirm that in truth *God's Love* has the final word, and that nothing can finally separate us from that Love.

That Love invites us to a Table ... bringing together diverse people with different stories to one Table of Fellowship, and calling us into one community. Of course, it can be messy and difficult, but most anything worth having often is.

In celebrating Communion today on this World Communion Sunday, we enact this story of sacrifice and love ... In communion, this story becomes ours. We live it and become a part of it. We abide in the life of Jesus and his life abides in us, and as we grow together, rooted in his life, we can by grace be a community which bears witness – in the midst of a super-connected and yet deeply lonely world – to another way of life, another way of being.

May it be so for us. Amen.