

Telling Stories of Faith
2 Timothy 1:1-5
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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What are the stories that we tell?

What stories - and maybe we even begin thinking of our family stories - what stories did you grow up hearing? Did you hear stories of youthful adventure, like the stories that I heard from my grandfather? Did you hear stories of the ornery moments of youth, like the stories my own children have heard from their father? Did you hear stories of love and sacrifice? Did you hear stories of hard times or of joyous celebrations?

What are the stories that we tell? *Why* do we tell the stories that we tell? Why do we tell them *the way* we tell them?

These are questions worth considering within our own family lives and circles. They are also questions worth considering within our own faith.

Because our faith is a faith filled with stories.

And that begins with the Bible. We are a people of the book. Throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition, in what we identify as the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, we hear stories. They are stories meant to explain things...stories meant to answer questions...stories meant to pass on the faith, to keep in our memories people and events of old...they are stories of celebration and of sorrow, stories of faithfulness and of sin.

And throughout the Bible we also hear the reminder that we are to keep telling the stories and in doing so to pass our faith on to the next generations.

In fact, in our reading today, we hear the author celebrating the faith that Timothy has. It is not celebrated as something credited to Timothy alone. Rather that passage ended saying, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you" (2 Timothy 1:5, NRSVUE).

The stories we tell matter. They matter, not only because they shape who we are and how we see the world, but they also matter because they shape the generations that come next. The stories we tell have power and even if not explicitly, in our stories we communicate values and beliefs, we share what matters to us and what we hope matters to others.

Just this last week, I was in a conversation where someone said that we are to "behave as we believe or we will believe as we behave."

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I think storytelling is like that, too. The stories that we tell - not only what we tell but how we talk about it - the stories matter. These stories help shape our reality, our expectations, and our experiences. Stories help give us a worldview through which to experience life.

So, what are the stories of faith that you heard growing up? These might have been Bible stories. These might have been stories of people's personal faith or experience with God.

The stories of faith that I heard were stories of God's constant companionship, no matter what. The stories of faith that I heard were stories of the generosity of people, not for the purpose of celebrating themselves, but because they understood that God was generous. The stories of faith that I heard were stories of a love that is so big, you can never escape it.

And I have been shaped by these stories. I have been shaped by them in my personal faith, in the way I strive to live, in the way I strive to lead. These stories have created a lens through which I see and experience the world.

But there *are* other stories. And we, as people of faith, have to be honest enough to recognize the Bible and the Christian tradition are full of so many different stories, even different stories about the same event, and different stories that set forth different priorities. The reality is that you can support anything you want to with a sentence or story from the Bible.

So, how do we decide what stories we tell? How do we choose the way that we tell them?

As people of faith it is important that we are intentional with the stories that we tell. But what does that mean?

I've heard several pieces of guidance on this.

Tiff, our former Associate Regional Minister, recently posted a quote she was happy to hear her child repeat. It was this, "The Bible is a library not a book; it is a tool not a weapon." That simple statement can shape so much of how we choose which stories we tell and how we tell them. For example, if we remember that it is a library, then we will also stop to think about the types of literature and how we read, for instance, a list of laws differently than a song for worship and that differently than a story of a person of faith. If we remember that it is a library, then we will remember to ask questions about authorship and context and purpose, and these answers will shape how we tell the stories.

My friend Gene, a pastor I first met when I was just beginning my career, always said that as a follower of Jesus, he measured everything through the lens of Jesus. If what a

story said about how we were to live or treat others did not fit with the life and teaching of Jesus, then he was cautious with it or sometimes simply considered it a story for another time and experience.

Another piece of guidance that I have found helpful is to consider who I understand and experience God to be and then to read and tell stories through that framework. If I understand God to be on the side of all people, then I don't get to tell stories where my enemies become God's enemies. Instead, I get to ask myself and those stories what motivates the desire to create categories of "us" and "them", to push some people out while always centering myself or people like me among those who are "in".

Some of you participated in the summer study of Leslie Weatherhead's book *The Will of God*. While there are a number of things we would consider outdated about this 1944 book, which originated as a sermon series, Weatherhead's approach to the conversation about God's will is timeless.

Weatherhead begins by talking about how we've come to use the phrase "the will of God" so loosely as to attach it to most anything that happens. He begins with this story writing, "I have a good friend whose dearly loved wife recently died. When she was dead, he said, 'Well, I must just accept it. It is the will of God.' But he is himself a doctor, and for weeks he had been fighting for her life. He had called in the best specialists in London. He had used all the devices of modern science, all the inventive apparatus by which the energies of nature can be used to fight disease. Was he all that time fighting *against* the will of God? If she had recovered, would he not have called her recovery the will of God? Yes surely we cannot have it both ways. The woman's recovery and the woman's death cannot equally be the will of God in the sense of being [God's] intention" (Weatherhead, *The Will of God*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, Copyright 1944/Copyright renewal 1972, 9-10).

So, what are the stories we tell?

If we believe in a God whose will is for good...then let's tell the stories of God's goodness and let's credit all good things to God without placing the burden of worshiping a God who works for our harm on one another.

If we believe in a God whose love is for all people, who welcomes all to the table...then let's tell stories of the wideness of God's mercy, of a God whose love reaches everyone rather than telling stories of a God who salivates at the thought of casting people out.

Ours is a God of welcome, of abundance, of integrity, of connection, of generosity. Ours is a God of love. Ours is a God of hope. These are the stories of faith we are called to tell. These are the stories we are to embrace, to live, and to share. May it be so.