

Telling Our Faith Stories
Exodus 13:3-10, 14
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
July 14, 2019
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

Many of my childhood memories include listening to my grandpa tell stories of his childhood. In addition to the story of how he met my grandma, there are two stories that I particularly remember, having heard them over and over again.

The first is a tale of a young boy growing up on a farm in Iowa. This young boy, also known as my grandfather, experienced the freedom that was usual for children of the 1930's. And so, on a day not so different from most others, he set out to explore. That day, as far as he was concerned, was created for tree climbing. And climb he did. Until he fell only to find himself in a burrowed out space in the trunk of a tree where two small bear cubs were sleeping. Fascinated, as a young boy would be, he was delighted with his find. Delighted until he saw a shadow come over the hole and realized that a momma bear was making her descent. Thinking quickly, he pulled his pocket knife out – after all, what good Iowa boy of his era didn't have a pocket knife? – opened up the blade and stuck the momma in her rear end. With that she screamed and jumped out of the tree, pulling my young grandfather behind her.

Now, I suspect more than one of you is questioning the truth, as in factuality, of this story. While I never questioned it as a child, I certainly have wondered more than once in my adult life. And yet, what I realize is that my grandpa's story is about more than a factual recounting of childhood – it is, more importantly, about the adventure and joy that filled his days and that shaped his humanity.

The second story my grandfather often told, which I *have* fact checked with his brothers, is a story of three brothers, a cold day, and a metal pole. As you can imagine, a dreadful

combination. Let's just say this story starts with a dare and ends up with one brother bleeding from the tongue and lips.

Ah, the joys of childhood.

When I think of these stories, what I realize is that the thing made a difference wasn't so much the details of the stories, but it was the simple and yet meaningful act of sharing stories. The importance of storytelling was, and still is, not only about the way it keeps our imaginations alive as we walk with someone else in another time and place, but the way stories keep our identity alive, the way our stories not only tell about who we were but shape who we become.

Today's reading comes from the book of Exodus. It falls just after the plagues have visited Egypt seemingly as a punishment for their refusal to let the people of Israel go, just after the people of Israel have prepared – as they were instructed – in order to be ready to leave Egypt. And so, we read this 13th chapter of Exodus where the people are told that these are not instructions only for that day or that week or that year, but where they are told that this is to be a commemoration, a yearly remembrance of God's faithfulness. In addition to the details about how they will prepare the meal and with whom they will eat and where they will eat, we hear this important reminder that this story is to be told again and again.

In many ways, the most important sentence of today's reading for us as people of faith – whether we are Jewish, Christian, or another religion – is that which we hear in verse 14, “When in the future your child asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall answer, ‘By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery.’”¹

The Seder meal, a meal that involves all the generations, begins with a little one asking, “Why is this night different from all other nights?”² And this gives the opening for the telling of

¹ Exodus 13:14, NRSV.

² Chabad.org

the story. In the case of the Passover meal, the “moral” of the story, if you will, is about God’s faithfulness.

And this doesn’t just happen at the Passover meal, but really so often we are retelling the stories of our faith. We tell our stories to remind ourselves and let others know the important elements of our identity. We tell our stories, as a people of faith, so that we don’t forget to celebrate the saving acts of God in our lives. And we tell our stories not just for ourselves, but so that future generations will know them and be shaped by them.

How important it is that we tell our stories.

Here at First Christian we tell the story of a rural congregation begun in the 1850s by Jesse Higbee, who had been trained by Disciples founder Alexander Campbell; a congregation that would, in 1863, birth a new church in the center of Iowa City, the church we now know as First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).³

Here at First Christian we tell stories of the impact of Sally Smith who was hired in 1955 as the Minister of Education and Student Work. Sally, whose impact lasted well beyond her years on church staff, who played an important role as part of this congregation for fifty years. Sally, whose name still comes up routinely as we think about what shaped our identity.⁴

Here at First Christian we tell the story of the building of a new building – not this one, but the new sanctuary built in the 1960s at our Iowa Avenue location. When considering what this space should be like, our congregation issued a letter to the architect that read, “We are planning to build an edifice which will facilitate the corporate and worship life of the First Christian Church, Iowa City, Iowa. It is our hope that this building will help to communicate our

³ David Hudson, *A Diverse Community of Believers and Seekers* (Coralville, IA, Printed in USA by First Christian Church, Iowa City/Coralville, 2013), chapter 2.

⁴ Hudson, chapters 11 and 12.

faith to all who pass by and to all who enter. Our building should take into account the distinctive nature of our community. It should say, ‘there is a church, all are welcome.’ It is our hope that our building will be as fresh, profound, surprising, mysterious, revealing, relevant, edifying, uplifting, accusing, forgiving, disturbing and healing as the Gospel itself.”⁵

Here at First Christian we tell the story of 1969 when Nita Adamson was elected as the first woman elder, “a journey which had begun before 1900 when women were first elected to the Board – [a journey toward] full equality in the church for women.”⁶

Here at First Christian we tell the story of our relationship with Rabbi Jay Holstein who gave an annual lecture series on the Old Testament at our church which helped develop our commitment to interfaith work and relationships.⁷

Here at First Christian we tell, and retell each December, the story of the fire on December 22, 1986 that burned through the communion table and the concrete floor, badly damaged the pulpit and organ, but left two living Christmas trees filled with paper doves unscathed.⁸

Here at First Christian we tell the story of how Bob Welsh’s passion for housing for low-income persons intersected with George and Beatrice Petsel’s gift of seed money which resulted in the development “of an elderly housing facility, sponsored by the religious community in Iowa City” which today still stands on Washington St. and is known as Ecumenical Towers.⁹

Here at First Christian we tell the story of how, in 1969, the Board distributed a letter to other Protestant congregations in Iowa City inviting them to explore the idea of “shared

⁵ Hudson, 172.

⁶ Hudson, 122.

⁷ Hudson, 125.

⁸ Hudson, 127.

⁹ Hudson, 132-134.

programming, shared facilities, shared staff and shared ministry and/or possible merger.”¹⁰ A story that reminds us of our roots as a movement for unity.

Here at First Christian we tell the story of how “in the early 1980s, a woman came in to the church office to see Bob Welsh. ‘God told me to come talk to you,’ she announced. After this startling and rather alarming introduction, she went on to talk about the need that many persons had for shoes and clothing. ‘God told me you could help these persons,’ she concluded.”¹¹ To this First Christian and other congregations in the Ecumenical Consultation responded and “the church building was soon overflowing with coats, hats, gloves, warm sweaters, and myriads of other clothing so essential to an Iowa winter.”¹²

Here at First Christian we tell the story of the early 2000s when the number of people who were experiencing homelessness in Iowa City was increasing and shelter space wasn’t available, at which time John McKinstry led the charge to plan for overflow shelters with First Christian being the first to approve use of its space.¹³

Here at First Christian we tell the stories of how we have extended wider and wider welcome to persons who were too often left out of congregational life, stories of welcome to people of all races and abilities, people of various family configurations and life situations. We tell the stories of how First Christian became a place of welcome and radical inclusion of persons who identify as LGBTQ+ in a time before it was becoming the norm.

And these, and so many other stories, are important. They are important, not only because they tell from where we have come. But they are important because they have shaped us

¹⁰ Hudson, 141.

¹¹ Hudson, 134-135.

¹² Hudson, 135.

¹³ Hudson, 162.

and shape us still as we continue a journey of becoming, as we continue our journey of being “a church which has never ceased to struggle to understand and obey the will of God.”¹⁴

And so, we will tell our stories of faith...stories of struggle and success, stories of openness to new ways and intentional connection with the community and world around us, stories that led us claim that “by the grace of God, First Christian Church is a diverse community of believers and seekers, united in following and sharing the way of Christ with all persons through daily practices of devotion, justice, and love”¹⁵, stories that continue to shape us as we work again and again, in new and old ways, to be a church where all are welcome. We will tell our stories of faith – not only of our faith, but of God’s faithfulness, of the saving acts of God throughout history, of the ways we have come to know the heart of God through the person of Jesus. We will tell and retell these stories that remind us of the ever-widening embrace of God and that shape us to proclaim that there is room at the table for everyone.

¹⁴ Hudson, viii.

¹⁵ First Christian Church Mission Statement.