

March 19, 2017 Journey

Text: John 4:1–10, 39–42

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I've always liked stories. I like learning new things and visiting new places, but mostly I like hearing stories. Recently I had the honor of preaching at a colleague's installation service as she was being installed as the pastor for Stone Presbyterian Church in Watertown, NY. To learn about her new city, I did what everyone does. I read about it online: Watertown, NY—70 mi. north of Syracuse; population 26,705; settled around 1800 on the banks of the mighty Black River. Home to many noteworthy businesses and special events from the paper mills dating back to 1808 to the annual agricultural fair whose bicentennial happens next year. It was there that F. W. Woolworth first came up with the idea of a 5 & 10 store; it was there that saw the invention of the safety pin and Little Trees air fresheners. Now, while all those facts are interesting, by themselves they didn't really tell me much about Watertown, New York.

The same thing was true of her new congregation: Stone Presbyterian Church—formerly known as Stone St. Presbyterian Church since it was located on Stone St. until an arsonist burnt their previous church shortly after they celebrated their 150th anniversary leading the congregation to end up rebuilding their church in a new location on Chestnut St. I'm sure there are a lot of stories they could tell me—about the fire, about the decision to re-build and move, about their hopes for the future with their new pastor.

Now whenever I travel to some church event outside of Pittsburgh and I tell people that I'm pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church, some folks smile and know nothing about this place. Others though know ELPC—and they'll get this gleam in their eye and say "Isn't that the big tall one near the seminary?" And invariably out of that group, some will continue by saying, "Well, you know what they call that church, don't you?" as if I may have missed out on a juicy bit of gossip. So I usually beat them to the punch and say, "You mean, Mellon's fire escape?" To which they love to repeat the phrase, "Yes, Mellon's fire escape."

Can I tell you how sick I am of hearing that phrase associated with our church? I have no idea who first coined the phrase, but it was meant to be cynical and derogatory. Our church sits on property that can be traced back to the Winebiddle and Negley family. Then, Sarah Jane Negley married Thomas Mellon and the Mellon's became associated with this church. Thomas and Sarah Jane had eight children, of which five survived to adulthood. One son, Andrew, became Secretary of the Treasury and was criticized for not doing more to stimulate the U.S. economy during the Depression. Another son, Richard, gave generously to help Pittsburgh—underwriting some of the costs for the Cathedral of Learning, the Mellon Institute (which later became part of CMU), and financing the erection of this cathedral. He died before the church was finished, and both he and his wife (as most of you know) are buried in the crypt off the sanctuary.

In those days, Pittsburgh people with money built things. Carnegie funded his libraries. Heinz built the concert hall. Henry Clay Frick spent \$6 million on the William Penn Hotel. Do we call any of those places “fire escapes”? Was their philanthropy solely done to avoid the fiery pits of hell? If I can keep my wits about me, the next time someone leans in and says, “Do you know what that church is called?” my answer will be, “Yes, it’s called ELPC, the Cathedral of Hope, a diverse, multicultural, progressive congregation committed to inclusion, justice and vibrant spiritual growth.”

Stories are important parts of our lives – whether told about our hometowns or home churches or personal histories. They are also an important part of the Christian faith. The four gospels are full of stories, like the one we just heard from John 4. The story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan Woman at the Well is much more than simple facts found on Wikipedia. For centuries there had been tension between the people of Judea and the people of Samaria—so much so that if you were a Jew passing through that region, you weren’t supposed to have any dealings with the local folks at all. Yet here is Jesus resting by a well and then striking up a conversation with a woman (which was unheard of) and asking for a drink from her bucket (which was highly unusual) and then telling her about her life along with the amazing news that the coming Messiah, the one called Christ—that that was who he was.

As far as we can tell, this Samaritan woman was most likely a woman forced to live on the margins of life. She had been the wife of a handful of men, which suggests that she had been abused, handed down, and treated poorly for years, basically doing what she had to simply to survive in a male-dominated world. She had no positive social status, as was evident by her coming alone to the well in the heat of the day—no friends were around her. Yet she runs back into town and tells the story of her encounter with Jesus. Suddenly she has a message to share that gives her a voice again—that gives her substance and worth—that moved her to risk breaking her silence with her neighbors at last.

Because of the Samaritan woman’s storytelling, when the villagers come out to the well and ask Jesus to remain with them for a while, he and his disciples do just that. They stay in that village—they are guests in former enemies’ homes—they eat at table together—they drink from cups and eat from plates, even though just moments before such ideas were unthinkable. And they told their own stories—stories about how this Jesus opened blind eyes and pointed them to signs about how the kingdom of God is in their midst. Finally a new story takes shape; a new progression of faith is described: vs. 39—Many Samaritans believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony; Jesus stays with them and then vs. 41—Many more believed because of his word—and vs. 42, the people said “We believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

In the end, Christian faith is not about doing everything right. It is not about checklists and tallying up each day the things you did well and the things you did poorly. Elie Wiesel tells the story about an old rabbi named Levi-Yitzhak, who every night before falling asleep would review his day. Then he would look to heaven and as he remembered his sins, he would say: "Levi-Yitzhak promises not to do it again. What? I made the same resolution yesterday? Yes, but tonight I really mean it." Faith is not about doing everything right. Faith is about story-telling. It is about breaking the silence and risking vulnerability and saying to someone else, "This Jesus—because of him I see my life differently and the world differently—do you think he could be the One, the Messiah?"

I've learned over the years that the relationship between pastors and congregations is basically one of mutual storytelling. Heather, Patrice, Sharron and I preach from this pulpit. Part of what we do is tell you stories—stories from our own experiences, from our lives in Homestead or Indianapolis or Kansas, of being a parent, a grandparent, an almost parent; of committee meetings and Presbytery meetings, of learning how to rely on Christ and open up our hearts in prayer, especially when things were hard. Many of these things we'll talk about on Sundays—but sometimes we share these stories on other days of the week, when we visit you at home, when we are beside you in hospital waiting rooms, when we help you navigate the death of a loved one or the wedding of a child or some other important event in your life.

And in the same way, you entrust to us some of your stories—about what it means to live in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. You'll tell us about your families and we'll talk about cancer and divorces, about new jobs and new grandchildren, about how the bible and prayer and being Presbyterian-followers of Christ in this corner of the kingdom gives you strength for today and hope for tomorrow.

And hopefully all of us find time to talk and tell stories that are critical for today. We need to talk about what it means to be men and women of faith in America today—what it means to be a Republican or Democrat in a divided society—what it means to be people affected by changing immigration policies—what it means to have adequate health care or be at risk of losing it, to have enough to retire on or nowhere near enough, to wonder about how God is caring for people in lands like Syria, Iraq, and North Korea even as American soldiers are still being stationed in foreign lands in harm's way. These conversations need to happen in the places where we work and at the diners where we eat and in the hallways and pews of this very building.

And that's precisely as it should be. Jesus asked for a simple drink of water and from that started a conversation that changed the lives of scores of people, radiating out from a marginalized woman through Jewish disciples and Samaritan villagers and on to us today. Something in the process of telling stories moves people from doubt to faith, so that they can say "We believe now. We have heard it for ourselves. We know that this Jesus is truly the Savior of the world."

So be storytellers. There's a lot to talk about. And when you risk breaking the silence to share a faith story or offer a prayer, something wonderful happens. You get a glimpse of a good news and a heavenly love that is as old as the ages yet new to us each day. For God's story, thanks to Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, is now your story—our story. You've heard it for yourself. Now go and tell the world.

AMEN