

**October 14, 2018 (Full Inclusion Sunday)**

**TEXT: Hebrews 4:12–16**

**TITLE: Gracefully Telling Our Story**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

I love hearing stories, and I love telling stories. I am quite happy to tell you exotic tales about growing up on a farm, about baling hay in the summer, about the ghost that lived in our barn. I'm happy to tell you about traveling overseas, about standing on the Great Wall of China, being chased by a hippo in Zimbabwe, about living in a dormitory that was the "Sound of Music" Trapp family house in Salzburg. Ideally any story I'd tell will evoke a story from you about your life and travels, or the famous people you've bumped into over the years. Good storytelling sessions are not about "one-upmanship." They should also include some confessions about embarrassing moments, which for me describes my entire Junior High football career. Good stories are honest—they are revelatory in that you come to know the other person better—and they connect people whether through a common memory or a shared laugh.

It is only with lovers, spouses, and very good friends that we share our less flattering or painful stories: The ones that we tell because it hurts too much to keep them inside. The ones where we name the shadows of our life so that by bringing them into the light, their destructive power is weakened. It requires trust to tell these stories—the assurance that you'll hold gently whatever is about to be said. No one likes to admit their shadows, but we all have them.

Capital punishment has been a part of American life from our earliest days. But the largest legal mass execution occurred on December 12, 1862, when a group of 38 Dakota Native Americans were hung for being part of an Indian uprising against frontier settlers in Minnesota. The man who ordered the execution was President Abraham Lincoln, doing so less than two weeks before he would sign the Emancipation Proclamation. Light and shadows can exist very close within the human heart and in all our life stories.

When we hold Inquirers' Classes here for people to learn about becoming members of ELPC, we start those sessions with stories. I'll ask people to tell me what Sunday mornings were like when they were growing up. Did they go to church? If so, where? Was it a good thing or something obligatory? These stories can reveal a lot about why someone is now sitting around a table considering joining a Presbyterian congregation at this point in their life.

We also hold regular spiritual gatherings as part of our church's LGBTQ ministry. Stories are a part of these post-worship events, but only once people know it is a safe place to speak honestly of their shadows, brokenness, abuse or rejection. These stories can cut deeply. They can pierce to the very marrow of who we are, of what we've experienced, and how faith in Christ fits into our personal narrative if at all.

So if the church is going to truly be the church, it has to provide safe places for hard stories. For #metoo stories. For #itgetsbetter stories. For #blacklivesmatter stories. This shouldn't be such a stretch for us, because the first stories about Jesus that were shared were hard stories about his arrest and crucifixion. The earliest gospels weren't just collections of Jesus' sayings and parables: Jesus as the wise, universal teacher. The earliest gospels weren't the Christmas stories of a wondrous birth in Bethlehem: Jesus the miraculous Son of God. The earliest material told and written down about Jesus was most likely the passion story—the tales of betrayal by Judas, the late night raid arresting Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, the mockery of a trial before uncaring bureaucrats and a bloodthirsty mob, the midday crucifixion outside the city walls, and a hasty burial in a borrowed tomb as the sun set. Yes, this hard story was linked with the joyous Easter story—moving from tears of sadness to a resurrection surprise and wonder beyond words. But we can't just skip the earlier hard stuff, because our stories include hard stuff as well. If Christian faith is supposed to be life-sustaining, then it has to go deep, cutting through the surface stuff to that place of light and shadow, joints and marrow, soul and spirit.

So we tell hard stories and important stories. For example, next June will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Stonewall Inn uprising—a riot that broke out after a raid of a gay bar in Greenwich Village. For decades prior to 1969, gays and lesbians were legally harassed. Courts considered any gathering of gays automatically to be “disorderly.” Bars and clubs became places of refuge, despite police raids that roughed up the patrons. Early on June 28, police broke into the Stonewall Inn, which prompted a riot that lasted for over five days and involved thousands of people. It became a touchstone event for the gay rights movement and led to the birth of groups like the Human Rights Campaign and PFLAG. Public marches held the next year in June 1970 to remember the Stonewall riot sparked the tradition of annual Pride parades that continues to this day.

These stories are part of our larger national story and must connect to our contemporary faith story. We carry around within us an index of life's hard stories: Stonewall Inn, Standing Rock, Michael Brown and Ferguson, Missouri, the children of Sandy Hook, the teenagers of Parkland High School; the Women's March in D.C., Occupy Wall Street in New York; stories of a Guatemalan mother clutching her child and fleeing across a border at night; an American mother putting her hands on a plexiglass divider in the prison longing for some contact with her son visible yet locked away for years. We link those stories to scripture, like Psalm 22: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me; why at times do you feel so far from helping us, all of us?

When we can be a safe place for one another's stories—when this church, every church, can be a safe place for hard stories—then we are living into the fullness of the gospel. The writer of the book of Hebrews knew not to mince words. He or she wrote about a story that is like a two-edged sword cutting to the bone. But what is revealed in that pierced place is not our frailty, not our nakedness and woundedness. What is revealed is another one's story—the story of Jesus, this holy intercessor and priest, connector of heaven and earth, who knows us and sympathizes with us. With quiet

conviction, the writer says “This Jesus has in every respect been tested as we are. Yet he persisted. He was without sin. He understands, and he overcame.” Other gospel writers go even further, telling about how in Christ we hear about a love stronger than hate, a life stronger than death, and a resurrection from every shadowy tomb.

I know that scripture has been misused at times and weaponized by some. But I believe its full story is about a safe place where we can bring our stories. Hebrews 4:16 describes it as a sacred place of grace we approach with boldness, where we receive mercy and find grace in times of need. The Christian gospel is a bold story—a challenging, counter-cultural, disruptive story that we insist must be part of the larger narrative going forward. We are not just interested in pushing back against injustice and unrighteousness. We seek changed hearts and minds. Because what you resist still persists. As author Michelle Alexander has written, “There’s a reason marchers in the black freedom struggle sang “We Shall Overcome” rather than chanting “We Shall Resist.” Their goal was to overcome a racial caste system and create a new nation, a Beloved Community. Similarly those who opposed slavery didn’t view themselves as resisters; they were abolitionists.”<sup>1</sup>

If you’re going to faithfully grapple with these hard stories—of Lincoln executing 38 Dakota men, of Cardinal Wuerl resigning as part of the reckoning with the Catholic Church’s legacy of silence amid priestly abuse—you need a safe place to bring your heavy heart, your own stories, confusion, sinfulness and doubts. There is such a place. In Hebrews 4 it’s described as a throne of grace, a seat of mercy in times of need. It is linked to a cross and a tomb, to a teacher and Savior, to a communion table and wash basin of baptism waters. It’s a bold story. But it’s the story we’ve been given.

One more story. Not so long ago in the hard days of South African apartheid, a protest rally was cancelled; so Desmond Tutu led a worship service in St. George’s cathedral. The walls were lined with riot police carrying guns and bayonets, ready to shut it down. Bishop Tutu spoke of the evils of apartheid—how the authorities who propped it up were doomed to fail. He pointed at the police who were there to record his words: “You may be powerful—very powerful—but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost.” Then, in a moment of unbearable tension, Tutu seemed to soften. Coming out from behind the pulpit, he flashed that radiant smile of his and began to bounce up and down with glee. “Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side.” The crowd roared, the police melted away, and the people began to dance.

It’s a great story. It’s part of a larger, wonderful story built around a promise and an invitation. We have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, our hard stories, to whose throne of grace we approach with boldness to receive mercy and help in time of need.

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<sup>1</sup> “We Are Not the Resistance,” Michelle Alexander, *New York Times*, Sept. 23, 2018.