

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Telling”
The Resurrection Community, series.
Pentecost Sunday
Acts 2, 22:1-21
May 15, 2016

You might say the book of Acts is a story telling book. Someone, somewhere in the early church thought, “we need to tell our story.” And so they picked up parchment and pen and started writing.

And the story they wrote down is largely a story about *the church telling* its story. In other words, Acts is telling us the story of all the story telling that was happening in the early church...

You’re not confused already, are you?

It happens at Pentecost. The Spirit comes on the disciples and on Peter and a dramatic shift takes place. Rather than hiding in the upper room, Peter goes out to the crowd of pilgrims that have come to Jerusalem that weekend and starts telling them the story of Jesus...

of who he was and what happened to him...
and how God has raised him up,
and how Christ has now given them the Holy Spirit.

Peter is not just telling some story about Jesus, he’s telling them the story of what he himself has seen and heard... of what he has lived through and experienced and seen in just the last few months of his life.

So, Acts chapter 2 is telling us the story of Peter telling what he’s encountered in Jesus.

But that’s just the beginning of this story telling. Page after page, another story is told, and often it’s a story about someone telling their story. And it keeps happening throughout the book so that by the time we get to Acts 22, we hear the story of Paul telling his story.

Just to set this up, Paul is about to be lynched by a mob. By this time he’s been all over the world telling the story of the Jesus that he’s encountered. And now, with his life on the line, he’s telling the restless crowd his own story. He tells them about his upbringing... where he was raised... what he studied and learned along the way.

And then he tells them about his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, and the story of what has happened to him after that... and about how Christ has guided his life since then.

And here the thing worth noticing: This story that Paul tells in Acts 22... is very different from the story that Peter tells in Acts 2.

Peter, who walked with Jesus,
who was there at the feeding of the 5,000,
and there at the Last Supper,
and there at the Crucifixion,
and there at the Resurrection appearance... is telling the crowd what he
saw happen to Jesus... what he experienced. **"We are witnesses to this,"** he tells the
crowd. *He's telling them about his own experience.*

But Paul never met Jesus, he only has the mystical experience of Christ on the
road to Damascus. And so, of course, when Paul is telling the crowd his story, it's a very
different kind of story. But he's doing the same thing.

He's just telling his own story.

He's giving his *testimony*.

Now if you grew up in Baptist life, or in evangelical Christianity of any kind, the
word testimony probably has some baggage for you. It does for me. You see, in the
church-world I grew up in, your "testimony" had a very specific formula to it:

1. I was evil. Bad. I was raisin' hell and going to hell.
2. Someone told me about Jesus. I pray and ask Jesus into my heart.
3. My life is changed and I'm going to heaven. The end.

One way or another, that was what a testimony was supposed to be. But, I didn't
really know what to do with that formula *because it didn't ring true for me.*

I grew up in the church. Never really was all that rebellious.

I'd prayed to ask Jesus into my heart...??... more than once as a child... you know
just to make sure I was still going to heaven. But there wasn't much change before or
after. Truth was, I was so young, I don't remember the before.

This became a real liability for me along the way. My junior year of high school I
went on a mission trip to **Jamaica during spring break**. We went there because we're
going to get those people "saved."

We drove all over the place, from one street corner to the next. We'd set up and
perform a short drama we'd learned. But before we began, our leaders would ask us the
dreaded question: Who is going to share their testimony this time?

I hated that question. One the one hand, I felt like I should volunteer, because I
wanted to be helpful. After all, I'd come all the way here for this. On the other hand, I
didn't know what to say. Truth was, none of us did.

So, whenever the question was asked, you bet I was looking at my shoelaces.
There's no way I was going to make eye contact with our leaders. There's no way I'm
getting up there.

And so, the silence would build.

The pressure would build.

Someone was going to crack, but it wasn't going to be me. When it comes to self-preservation, I'm can be pretty darn stubborn. And I held out every time.

Then I would listen to what my peers would say when they got up there. They didn't know what to do, so they just repeated the formula. I was bad. I got saved. I'm going to heaven and life is good.

And every time I heard it, something in me felt unsettled... For one thing, I knew what some of them were like when they weren't up at the mic. I wasn't sure they had made it past Step 1. It would have been more honest to just get up there and sing Michel Jackson's "I'm Bad." and leave it at that.

But it was really more than that. There was something about these "testimonies" their "story telling" that just didn't ring true with me. In fact, the whole thing kind of felt like a farce... but I wasn't sure why.

I mean, testimony was obviously part of what was happening in Acts. It's always been part of the church... so why the disconnect?

That was about 20 years ago now... and let's just say I've learned a few things since then. In fact, if you'll bear with me for just a minute, let me give you a short history lesson.

Testimony... telling our story... has had a varied life in the history of the church. By the time we get to the Puritans in New England, it was a requirement for Church Membership – a coveted status for New England society. It was a way of proving God's presence in your life and professing the central points of doctrine.

Then during the Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries it became part of the Evangelical Revivalist practice... as a way to tell exciting stories, and get people to walk the isle... That of course, is the roots of what I was experiencing as a high school student.

But that kind of testimony is rooted in a ***spirituality of perfectionism and conformity***. It's a way of saying, "Here's where you are, but there is where you need to be."

But there's a different kind of story telling that's taking place in the church now... a kind of story telling that's much more personal.

***It's the honest truth telling of your own particular story,
with all it's quirks, oddities, and present dynamics.***

Just as Peter is talking about his experience and Paul is telling his own journey... it's letting go of the formulas to simply tell our own story.

It's what someone like Anne Lamotte is does in her books. And what Nadia Boltz-Webber does in her books. They are just telling little stories from their lives... honest stories... from their messy lives. And they are looking deep enough into those stories to discover God's surprising presence in the ordinary, messy, up and down, stumbling journey of their lives.

And this kind of story telling is **bubbling up in churches too...** especially mainline churches. It's not just for authors. It's for us all. The Holy Spirit is stirring a new kind of vulnerability and openness and boldness in the pews of our churches... where people are learning and experiencing the beautiful gift of telling our stories and healing one another's stories.

Testimony has become: *the simple telling of who we are, and who we are becoming*, instead of glamorous formulaic stories that don't ring all that true... or stories of conformity to one pattern of encountering God.

Dianna Butler Bass has studied this phenomenon in our churches and she says that these stories are more about **"finding meaning, finding our unique selves, and finding God in a confusing and chaotic world."**¹

And these stories aren't just told in small groups, although that's one setting for them. These stories are being told communally, as part of worship. In worship it becomes this act of bringing their stories before God... and one another.

Sometimes these stories are from what happened to them in their last week. Sometimes from the last year. Sometime from their past.

But always, they are telling *their own story...*
not somebody else's, but their own story.

Part of what is so uniquely different from the testimonies I grew up hearing is that these stories **aren't** rooted in a **spirituality of perfection.**

These aren't rooted in a spirituality of *arrival*,
of *certainty* of securing eternal life.

They are pilgrimage stories, rooted in the **"spirituality of imperfection"...** These stories are rooted in **"a spirituality of not having all the answers."**²

And they are being told in churches much in the same way an AA groups tell their stories. It's about simply telling the truth about your life in a community where **"honesty is valued over image... a community where grace triumphs over judgment."**³

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, 138.

² Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*, quoted in Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, 141.

³ Rachel Held Evens, *Searching for Sunday*.

Of course, it still requires great courage... the kind of courage that the church in Acts prayed for over and over again... so that they would have the boldness to tell and share their story.

It takes that same kind of courage and boldness in our churches today. But ordinary people are finding it.

And they are taking the risk... trusting that their church knows ***we are all fellow pilgrims in this messy thing we call the human condition. We are all in a wondering digressing sort of journey that doesn't take us where we expected to go.***

And as these stories are being told, the church is experiencing resurrection again. The church is coming alive again. The Holy Spirit is blowing like a fresh wind through the community of faith again. The church is coming alive with a new kind of honesty and vitality that is bringing healing and wholeness in our world.

That's the thing about sharing your story. There is something so uniquely powerful about hearing and receiving someone's story. I've experienced it here with many of you... in Community Groups when we've done spiritual autobiographies. And also in worship, when some of you have gotten up and share a piece of your story with us. When you do that, you are giving us such a healing, sacred gift.

In fact, the only thing more powerful than hearing one another's story may just be telling your own... ***because there is nothing more transformative, nothing more life giving than being "known" for who you really are... and still being loved and embraced.*** That's what happens when we tell our stories in a Christ-shaped community.

Now, I know there are all kinds of reasons not to do this. I know that there is a time and a place for certain stories, and there are risks to opening up our worship to one another, and risks to sharing our stories. But here's what I also believe: If we will begin to make this a more regular practice... then our church will experience new depths of God's presence, new depths of being a Resurrection Community... new depths in our

Gathering,
our Healing
our Giving
our Converting
our Welcoming...

...all these attributes we've been talking about since Easter.

All of that will experience new life by our "Telling."

I also know that the Church has come alive in each new generation by telling... by testimony... of God **"making wholeness out of human woundedness, human incompleteness."**⁴ And if we want our church to live into the future, if we want the gift

⁴ Bass, 141

of this community to grow and be passed on, it might just mean we need to pray for the boldness, the willingness, the openness to tell our stories.

So, as we draw this series on the Resurrection Community to a close, my invitation to you is to consider if you might be willing to tell yours... not all of it, not every detail...

but a piece of it... maybe a piece from this year...

maybe a piece from the last month,

maybe a piece from your past...

For the next several months, in this Season of Pentecost... I want us to experiment with telling our own Pentecost stories... stories of how we've experience the presence of God, or encountered the Sprit of God in our unique life...

My hope is that we'll have these stories a couple times a month during this season following Pentecost... and we'll share them in worship... offering them to one another.

And as we do, ***we'll be offering the story of our life...***

to the One who gives us life.

As we hold that possibility in our hearts and minds, let's pray together...

O God, we pray for the life of our church...

that we might more fully become the Resurrection Community you're inviting us to be.

When that's scary and vulnerable, grant us courage and wisdom

When it exciting and joyful, grant us gratitude to you alone.

We offer you our lives. We offer you this Church.

You're kingdom come. Your will be done here, among us and in us... as it is in heaven.

Through Christ we pray, Amen.

Reflection:

"Testimony is not a formula of salvation; rather, it is a way of being, a map to an undiscovered country. And, in telling the stories of our lives, we find we are not alone on the journey. Other pilgrims are on this road, too. Pilgrims have always told stories along the way. And, in those stories, we may well hear God ringing in our ears." ~Diana Butler Bass

Song of Reflection:

Lydia singing – *Servant Song*.