



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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Tales from the Parlor, Kitchen and Porch 2nd Sunday after Epiphany January 18, 2015

Philippians 3:1-11

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

I suspect that we have the same question on our minds: "who am I looking at?" You know very little about me and by the same token, I know very little about you. Some of you may have been so bold as to "google" my name and find out a bit more about me. I will confess that I spent a great deal of time researching Poland Presbyterian Church and got to know some things about the church, its history and the community.

But we really don't know each other beyond some facts and public information that is out there. We don't know each other's stories, except for the ones that are publicly shared. For example, you might have read that I am married to Karen. She is a native of Wisconsin and we have a daughter who lives in Washington D.C. But do you know the joys we have shared, the struggles we have been through. You don't know the things that cause me to laugh, to cry and to argue. This information is found in the stories or tales that gives each of us our unique identity.

Yesterday I attended a Men's Group meeting, and the speaker was fascinating as he shared his life and work. At the end of the meeting, someone commented about the interesting life that the speaker led. He responded insightfully by saying, "We all have great stories to tell." He was suggesting that perhaps we need to pay more attention to our own narratives. Our stories are the containers of our identities.

The Bible is a fabulous narrative, containing stories filled with passion, hope, dreams, disappointment and sin. When the Hebrew people were asked who they were they replied, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous." They told their story, a story of suffering, a story of hope, a story of God's redemptive activity in their common life. 600 years after the Exodus, it was an important part of their identity. (It is still today!)

The apostle Paul, writing to the Philippians told his story, but with an interesting twist. He said, "if anyone has a reason to boast, I have more," and then proceeded to brag about his pedigree, his education, and his piety. (If he was a Presbyterian Pastor, we would refer to this a PIF or Personal Information Form.) But then he made one of the most amazing statements in the Bible: All these things I count as loss "because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Paul's story was more than his accomplishments. It was the story of Christ transforming his life.

Our stories reveal who we are. They are the containers of our identity. My message this morning is about our stories, the biblical story, our personal stories, and perhaps most important for this moment, the story of Poland Presbyterian Church. This is an exciting time but also an anxious time. It is a time filled with both hope and peril. My calling, (our work together), is to lay a firm foundation for the future. One that will be hopeful, faithful, and filled with joy for the people of Poland Presbyterian Church and the wider community. To do that, we must understand our stories, the identity they bestow upon us, and the power they have over us.

Congregations have three different types of stories. I have named them for rooms in my grandmother's house. They are tales from the parlor, the kitchen and the porch.

I

My grandmother's house is not too far from here. One of my earliest childhood recollections were the visits we made to "grandma's house." There we would gather with the cousins, neighbors and others, and the place would literally vibrate with talk and chatter. This was before the internet, texting and iPads. Television was a piece of furniture and it only picked up two stations. So we talked. Grandma called it "visiting". The conversations varied, depending upon the room you were in.

The first room was the *living room*, (but grandma called it the "parlor"). Parlor conversations were as formal as the furniture. The language was proper and polite without interruptions. Most of the visitors to Grandma's house were limited to this room.

The second room was the kitchen. This was a busy place because grandma was either cooking or baking. After a meal, we would gather there and do the dishes, (she never had a dishwasher!) We were never alone there, but would be joined by others. Here the chatter was going a hundred miles an hour as the women and men caught up on the "local news," and other stories of the neighborhood. These conversations were different in content and tone from the parlor. There were interruptions and giggles and a lot of laughter. For a young boy, the kitchen was a great deal more interesting than the parlor. It was earthier, engaging and a lot more fun. I learned a great deal about human nature in grandma's kitchen.

But my favorite room was the back porch. It was enclosed and had comfortable old furniture. Here my uncles would go and smoke. The porch language was casual, and grammar was often butchered to make a point. Here the opinions were shared, arguments were aired, and the family let its hair down. There was an earthy honesty and vulnerability in the conversations on the porch that one never heard in the parlor.

Three different rooms, parlor, kitchen and porch, with three different types of stories or tales.

During my 38 years of ministering in congregations of all sizes, I have discovered that a church's identity is also found in its stories or narratives. . As you might guess, I believe there are three types of stories in the life of a congregation: parlor, kitchen and back porch stories. The memberships change, the buildings change, the pastors come and go, but the stories... the collective narrative is the repository of our identity. Each generation contributes to these stories. Our stories tell who we are. There are parlor stories, the formal narrative that we wish to project to others and the community. There are the kitchen stories that are a

bit earthier, often humorous. And there the back porch stories. These are the tacit tales we seldom tell, but they are usually the closest to who we truly are.

My calling as your interim pastor is to enable Poland Presbyterian Church understand its story: its identity. As we move through this transition together, we need to be cognizant of these stories:

- how they have gotten us to this point,
- how they affect our program and planning,
- and how they limit us and influence our decisions.

Knowing and owning our stories gives us insights into our identity:

- who we are,
- who God is calling us to be,
- what our unique mission is in this community and the world,
- and how we live out our discipleship to Jesus Christ,

Knowledge of these things are crucial to a successful ministry because they enable us to make better decisions. They arm us with the moral courage to change those things that need to be changed, but also preserve that which is essential and important.

II

Poland Presbyterian Church has a parlor story. This is the formal story, the story that we want people to know. It is in the brochures that are printed and given to visitors. It is in the announcements that we use to entice people to come to concerts and classes, events and study groups. It is on the web page with the best pictures of the church, its members, its leaders and the staff. It is in the written history that tells the story of over 200 years of ministry in this community. This is the "parlor tale" of Poland Presbyterian Church. Formal, well written, well-illustrated. To the visitor or casual inquirer it presents well.

The "kitchen tales" are less formal. This is the story that isn't always apparent at first, but is revealed in the work and ministry. It is shared over coffee during fellowship times. It is present in the give and take of committee meetings and session debates. This story contains some of the anxiety that is present in a congregation that is going through transition. It is a story that asks a number of yet unanswered questions.

On the Poland Presbyterian Church website is a section devoted to the *Strategic Plan*. The plan wrestled with the harder questions that congregations seldom deal with formally.

- They are questions about the future.
- They express the fear of decline.
- They reflect the anxiety that all congregations have in the 21st century. These are challenging times for churches.

The strategic planning blog contains anecdotal and narrative information and opinions. The honesty of the questions and responses lend the document its integrity. (Personal comment: It takes a great deal of moral courage to post that on the website, and I find that to be a hopeful sign.)

Poland Presbyterian Church also has its porch story. These are tacit tales. They are seldom spoken and yet exert a great deal of power over decision making. They are close to the bone,

and we protect them. We are not always comfortable with what they tell about us. They make us feel vulnerable. They are our secrets. Pastors must earn the trust of a congregation before those stories are known, and they often come in bits and pieces. Porch stories are important because they are the answer to why our plans will work or not. In many ways, understanding and coming to terms with these stories are the key to a healthy future for a congregation.

My calling is to enable you to enjoy a healthy future of faithful ministry and mission.

III

Allow me to conclude with a theological statement and personal note.

- As we wrestle with our stories and come to terms with our identity as a congregation, we must not forget that the firm foundation of who we are is Jesus Christ, (and in the words of Paul, "*I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.*" (I Cor 2:2). The primary challenge 21st century Christians face is not
 - About restructuring
 - Not about worship styles
 - Not about facilities and maintenance
 - Not even about survival

The challenge for us today is to ask and keep asking the question "who is Jesus Christ for us today?" We need to get that right. We need to interpret our stories in the light of the Christ's story. I believe that this interim period, anxious as it might feel, can also be a creative one for us, if we are focused on the one who is the foundation of our faith.

- Personal Note: Sometimes we get awfully serious in our church work, and well we should because it is important. But our Maker created us to enjoy God and creation and that includes the church. I like to laugh. I enjoy being playful and those activities are crucial to ministry. God imparts grace through laughter and play. This is my way of saying, I plan on working hard and dealing with the tough issues that are before the congregation..... but we are going to have a good time doing it.

It is time to work, to share our stories, to study, to pray, to laugh and to play. In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.