

DEEP STORIES AND COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20b-6:10; ASH WEDNESDAY, MARCH 1, 2017; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC

Paul's Second Letter to the Church in Corinth is, to say the least, timely. Remember he was writing to a church or a group of churches that were deeply divided over leadership and ideology. Sound familiar?

Some factions claimed one leader as their teacher, others raised the ante and said they were baptized by a different leader and so it went splintering the Christian community in Corinth.

Paul writes to the Corinthians with the affection and love of a parent whose child has wandered into danger. Their fighting ignores and negates the fact that Jesus Christ is the one they are called to follow. No leader surpasses the founder of the faith. Because they like to fight and because they seek to gain advantage over one another they fail to appreciate one another. They undercut their purpose as a church – to function as a single body with many parts – serving Jesus in the world.

And so, Paul calls them in his first letter to recognize and celebrate their marvelous diversity. How can the foot say to the hand 'I have no need of you' or the eye to the ear 'because I am not an ear I do not belong to the body.' If the whole body were an ear where would the sense of seeing be? Rather, all are one body and all are interdependent. Not one part is unimportant to the whole or unaffected by the other parts.

Then, from the apostle's quill comes his sublime chapter on love; I think of that Rembrandt of Paul writing, alone at night, by the light of an oil lamp. He points to the magnanimity of love: not arrogant, boastful, or rude but long suffering, kind and generous. Love protects, perseveres, trusts, and hopes.

Then in his second letter, in today's lesson, he appeals to them to be ambassadors for Christ but first, he writes, they must be "katalagete" in the Greek, that is, "reconciled to God."

This is the hinge of the faith on which the door of discipleship swings. We can't be ambassadors for God unless we are reconciled, made one with, made right with God.

Will D. Campbell, of blessed memory, a liberal Southern Baptist and activist back in the 60s came to the conclusion that all of the protesting, marching and civil disobedience of the anti-war and peace movement did not amount to anything if the faith leaders doing the marching, protesting and civil disobeying were not themselves 'right with God.' And so Campbell stopped showing up at anti-war rallies and started going to the funerals of Ku Klux Klan members and Jim Crow politicians and preachers. He started a newsletter and movement called, "Katalagate" – if we get that message across, he believed, if people are reconciled to God the rest will follow.

Campbell came under fire as you can imagine from his colleagues in the anti-war, civil rights and peace movements. But he persisted. He preached reconciliation. He erased the barriers to his former enemies – the racists and military hawks. He saw them as brothers and sisters, in need of God's grace, as much as anyone.

We are beginning the season of Lent today. I am suggesting we use the time, as Christians have since the early church, to “be reconciled to God.” That is, to take time away from our busy lives and engage in some self-reflection about who we are and how our faith in and relationship to God is at work in our lives.

On each Tuesday of Lent, starting next Tuesday, we will gather for dinner and to listen to a leader of this church present his or her own deep story of faith. Then, around the dinner tables, we will share with one another some of our own deep story: formative experiences, early mentors, core values – things that make us who we are as adults, influence our commitments and guide our lives.

Arlie Russell Hochschild, author of “Strangers In Their Own Land: A Journey Into The Heart Of Our Political Divide” says that by learning one another’s deep stories we learn, beneath the politics of the day, at a human level, who we are – not just how we differ but also how much we have in common. This is not an exercise in niceness, she says. This is an effort to build bridges in a deeply divided time by finding out what life is like in one another’s shoes.

Researchers say one of the casualties of our social media-obsessed age is empathy – the capacity to feel compassion for others because our smart phones omit in-person contact, nuance, and non-verbal communication. The trend is concerning and no doubt fuels much of today’s ugly political rhetoric.

It is hard to remember a time so divided; maybe the 60s but the stakes today seem higher. Yet, the church calls us back to a place of empathy, to a way of life that values service to our neighbor above all else.

Our aim this Lent is to equip us through our Tuesday dinners to relearn how to listen and speak at a deeper, personal level. If we can accomplish this in the safety of our church family, we can use this approach to engage others from family members, to neighbors, to even strangers whose political preferences may be opposed to our own. The question is how can Westminster be a force for healing and change in today’s world?

So in the time that remains let me tell you my deep story. I want to connect three themes: my early experience of diversity, my path to ministry and my love of poetry.

When I asked people to speak at our dinner series some demurred and said, “my life is boring, no one will be interested in my story.” Which reminded me of Fred Buechner who once said, listening to Maya Angelo tell her story at a ceremony at which they were both invited to speak, “I thought there couldn’t be two people more different, she African American, raised in poverty and me, a WASP, raised in privilege; but as I heard her, I heard my own story.”

Much about me will be different than you – ethnicity perhaps, geographic origin, and career path – but I am counting on the common ground we share at the level of hopes, dreams and fears – at a human level – to allow you to understand and appreciate ‘where I am coming from’ even if we disagree about something.

The surnames of my grandparents are: Seaman, Hager, Hissem and Yorty – sounds like a German law firm! Yorty, from the German “Jordan,” with the “J” that sounds like a “Y,” and got interpreted by the English scribe in Philadelphia when my ancestors got off of the proverbial boat, as Y-o-r-d-y and eventually Y-o-r-t-y. Most of them are buried in Lancaster County, PA, in Lutheran church cemeteries. They were farmers, merchants and a later generation, some I’m sorry to say, were Hessian mercenary soldiers who fought for the British in the Revolutionary War.

Somehow they all live in me from Peter Yorty who arrived to the new world in 1709 to Tom Yorty, my father; from Ludwig Seaman buried in the churchyard of St. Michael’s Lutheran Church in Hellertown, PA to Herb Seaman my grandfather – and Marye Hager my grandmother and so on.

They are all there. Like when I cut the grass or rake the leaves or shovel the snow and make sure the yard and front, side, and back walks are spotless. I think of those Philadelphia row houses and eastern PA farms how manicured and ship shape they look and I hear those German ancestors telling me to get the broom one more time.

Unlike my brother-in-law Ron Bell, a descendent of Alexander Graham Bell, and an engineer who *likes* to fix things, I am of that Pennsylvania Dutch heritage that says, “If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it.” This has been a blessing and a curse in my life.

I grew up in Pittsburgh of solid middle class stock. We lived in one of America’s first planned communities designed to be socially and economically diverse but quickly became, during the Depression, when Chatham Village opened, a middle class/white/professional enclave that valued financial solvency and was as openly racist as the rest of America at that time.

It was a socio-economic bubble; mostly Protestant surrounded by a predominantly blue-collar community. So every day I went to school the socio-economic, racial bubble popped. I found the diversity and differences of my classmates from our ‘white bread’ planned village refreshing. Thanks to public education my world was vastly expanded. Yet, these differences disappeared in the classroom and athletic field.

My parents divorced – due largely to my father’s alcoholism (a chapter of my life filled with confusion, struggle and eventually help and healing). When my mother remarried we moved to an even more socio-economically rarified community. I do not remember any person of color in my high school of 3,000 students.

We were called ‘cake eaters’ by our arch-rivals. And we were proud of it. But what never left me was the memory the deep bonds of friendship I had with my classmates and teammates back in my in my city neighborhood.

I knew this upper middle class white suburban town was a tiny slice of a much bigger world. Though I cherish my years in Mt. Lebanon and still go back for an annual dinner with a couple dozen classmates, I felt called even then, to pursue a path that wasn’t so hermetically sealed and one-dimensional. In college, the chaplain somehow saw this and challenged me to get out of my narrow, self-absorbed bible study and become a big brother for a twelve-year old boy without a father.

I chose Yale Divinity School because of its academic excellence but also because it was located in a real city. The Divinity School offered field-work placements in hospitals, prisons and legal aid offices. Women's liberation was just emerging, same sex relationships were a topic of biblical/theological debate. Yale was a veritable United Nations with nearly every state, ethnic/racial group represented. It was exhilarating to be a student there after four years in a small Ohio liberal arts college.

I thought I might want to be a legal aid attorney who could read theology. My office in the projects was with a law student and one attorney. We met for a weekly seminar. At the end of the year, I did not want to pursue legal aid.

My time as a paralegal was spent listening to people talk about their utilities being shut off, or domestic abuse, or debt collectors knocking on the door. All I had to offer was a legal bandaid. Filing papers, showing up in the cavernous courts of the city and county of New Haven was missing something important. The next year I had a similar experience discovering I did not want to become a teacher. As a teacher's aid in a school for emotionally troubled kids I realized what these children got at the school did not address their deepest needs.

That's when I decided to spend the next two summers and school year in two churches – a mid-sized south shore Long Island church during the school year and a large suburban congregation in Allentown, PA the summers before and after.

I discovered the pastor of a church has access to people where they live – at home. That's where families are formed and children shaped. Home is where it all happens. The churches I served impacted the lives of members with problems similar to those I saw in legal aid and teaching. On Long Island discharged patients from state mental institutions after the advent of psycho-tropic drugs were filling the rooming houses and cheap motels along the south shore. These people were marginalized in communities that feared them. So we started a fellowship/field trip/dinner group at the church. In Allentown I ran an inner city kids program, and assisted in an outreach ministry to migrants on local farms. By the end of the year I sensed a call to ministry.

There's not time to tell you about mentors and others who were the right people at the right time; or formative experiences from childhood to the present. But that leaves us something to talk about, as I hope all the Lent presenters do. Plus, I'd like to hear your deep story.

Concerning poetry let me say this, I rediscovered poetry after a brief encounter in college, shortly after my arrival here at Westminster. What I found again in poetry is how it recognizes the beauty of life in the everyday and ordinary; the pain as much as the joy, the defeats and failures as much as the victories.

Poetry gets to the human level, deepens self-understanding and our capacity for empathy as does all great literature. Which brings us to where we started: that feisty church in Corinth, our nation now, and bridging differences.

Let the ashes today stand for putting away the language and labels that divide us. Join us this Lent, on Tuesday nights, to share deep stories and enter into courageous conversations. Amen.