

A STORY WITH MEANING

PSALM 78

SEPTEMBER 7, 2008 – RALLY DAY

THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rally Day is a little bit like the first day of school. *USA Today* columnist Craig Wilson told his readers this past week about his friend Viv who went back to school Tuesday. Viv was heading off to her first day of first grade.

Everything was different – the bus driver, the bus – she didn't have her assigned seat but could sit anywhere on the bus which she didn't like – adding insult to injury she tripped and fell on her way into the bus hurting her pride more than anything else. All the change did not make Viv very happy.

Wilson says while change can be good, even healthy that does not mean we have to like it.

We are going through some change here at Westminster today. A new schedule, new Sunday school meeting spaces, a relatively new way of distributing the elements of communion in this service.

The good news is that Craig Wilson's friend Viv discovered the second day of first grade was better...she found a new friend who sat next to her, everything was a little more familiar, it looked like the year might turn out OK after all.

Hopefully, after a few Sundays we'll find ourselves, like Viv, growing into a new schedule and routine.

But there are other changes on the horizon. You may have heard about our new vision and strategic plan put together by our elders, lay leaders and staff at a retreat last spring. Copies are available on the sermon table. I encourage you to take one home, reflect upon it, and let me know what you think.

The philosopher/poet Heraclites said long ago that this life is in a state of constant flux and change.

Another old saying advises if we don't change, the world will pass us by. Whether we like it or not things change. But I'm not talking this morning about change for change's sake. I am talking about changes we need to make to grow as a community of faith.

I'd like to talk today and over the next two weeks about becoming a more vital, faith-centered church family.

I'd like to consider what it would take to make our own lives more Christ-like, what it would take for us to reach out not just to a portion of the West Side, as noble as that is, but to the people who live in the apartments that surround this block. What it would take for us to reach out to every person who walks by our door, walks through our doors. To say come as you are, we invite you to share your journey with us. We invite you to know as deeply and as personally as we do the God of life who is the center of our lives and our reason for being here.

Nothing else matters – not your clothes, your age, your income, your job, your past. Following this God of hope and new life is what matters.

The desire to share what we know about God with another human being is our theme today and what each of our five readers were talking about in this morning's litany.

You who are called to teach, to lead the children, to help others know the meaning of life, you who are called to show your friendship and lend your strength – that's you and me!

Two of the oldest stories we have are stories of healing and deliverance: Israel's Exodus and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Psalm 78 which we'll be looking at the next few weeks is a retelling of the Exodus. After its first appearance in the Torah it shows up all over the place in the Old Testament. And everywhere he goes Paul retells the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The impulse to share God's saving grace and power with another person is uncontainable.

Is it any wonder that a new book reports that churches that grow have pastors who respond yes to the question 'have you led another person to make a commitment in Christ in the last ninety days.' The measure of a church's vitality is to what extent we are not just sharing our story but leading others to commit themselves to follow God.

But it's not just the pastor. It's the entire congregation. My hunch is that it was not a minister but another person – a parent, a Sunday School teacher, a friend, a mentor who shared their faith with you the first time.

What the bible tells us and what we know in our hearts is that each one of us has a responsibility which is really a joy, to talk about what God has done; how God saved us from the train wreck or slow death of our lives.

I agree with that book on church growth, passing on our faith is perhaps the most important measure of spiritual vitality. You could call it the spiritual pulse of a congregation; it is the diastolic/systolic movement of God's Spirit from one life to another in the body of Christ, the church.

Because we are made in God's image we are wired not only to receive the story of hope and life from others but to pass along that good news.

But often we are held back from this simple act of sharing. There could be several reasons: after we've been saved from some disaster or crisis following our fervent prayers—life goes on and we forget what God did for us. Or maybe we think sharing our faith with another person is a breach of everyone's privacy, lacks decorum. And some of us may simply feel inferior – as if we were the only ones God had to step in and save.

But each person—at every stage of life—as our litany said today, needs to have someone who cares enough to pass along God's story of hope and salvation to them.

One of the reasons I love Psalm 78, which is the basis for our 'Pass It On' theme, is that it tells the story of the Exodus from God's point of view.

Every miracle God gave Israel was forgotten by the time they faced a new danger. This is not the "B Team", this is God's chosen nation! The point is even the chosen ones need another person to tell them how God resuscitates life because these are the stories that give us strength to face an angry Pharaoh or broken dream or bad diagnosis.

I am going to my high school reunion in October. There is a classmate who will be there who shared his faith with me when we were ‘wet-behind-the-ear’ sophomores struggling through three-a-day football practices in late August.

It was a particularly vulnerable time in my adolescent life. My world seemed to be caving in, plus I was the new kid on the block, in a new community that seemed to have more of everything than I had ever experienced – more money, more smart people, more successful sports teams, more brokenness I now know though I didn’t see it then.

I felt like a nobody in this new world where I didn’t know a soul and was coming from a humble community with humble aims.

But the moment my new friend—who today teaches philosophy at Gettysburg College—told me that he had questions and fears and worried about his social life just like me, I realized I wasn’t so different or odd or inferior.

He shared with me the direction he found for his life and relationships in the example of Jesus; and his experience that when he prayed for understanding and strength he found it.

He said he believed God had a purpose for each one of us; and if we learned to surrender to and trust God, life wouldn’t become easier as much as filled with new challenges, rewarding service and deep peace and joy.

I think it was making himself vulnerable – even though he was a star athlete and scholar – that convinced me he didn’t have any agenda other than reaching out with something he said that changed his life. Something that made all the difference in our school driven by excess and experimentation and more than its share of competition and loneliness.

Whatever else we do – from building houses to tutoring children to offering programs of education for all ages – telling one another and the world how God has transformed our personal lives and can transform theirs is what makes this a Christian church.

But learning to speak that language means overcoming several hurdles: the hurdle of forgetfulness – that God has been there when we’ve needed her; the hurdle of fear – that we are violating some tenet of decorum and respectability; and the hurdle of feeling inferior – as if we are the only ones who are driven to our knees when life goes awry.

How do we tell our story of transformation to another person? Very simple: “This is where I hurt. This is where I find healing and hope. My hunch is this might work for you.” That’s all there is to it. If we could learn to speak that language this church would grow by leaps and bounds because word would get around that we’re not only committed to helping the underprivileged but to helping even those who think they have everything.

But maybe the only part you know is the ‘hurt,’ part. That’s OK. There is someone here today who’s been there too and has some good news for you.

Jesus said, I am with you, do not be afraid. If we trust him he’ll match those who are hurting with those who’ve found hope. All we have to do is open up to each other. It will profoundly change who we are. And like that first grader Viv – I’ll bet we’ll even discover we like it. Amen.