

National Youth Sunday 2017

Generations Celebrating Faith (Psalm 145:4 & Acts 2:42-47)

Sermon reflection by Joshua Brockway

Stories matter. My introduction to the peace testimony of the Church of the Brethren came through the story of Ted Studebaker. When my family would take a road trip to see family or to Annual Conference we would often listen to songs by Andy and Terry Murray. One of those songs was “Brave Young Man from Ohio.” The lyrics of the song tell the story of Ted’s conscious objection to the war in Vietnam, his decision to enter voluntary service, and his eventual murder by the Viet-Cong. I still find myself humming the refrain—“Give me a shovel instead of a gun, and I’ll say so long for now. And if I die, I’ll die making something instead of tearing something down.”

Stories, either sung or told around the kitchen table, shape us as persons. They communicate to us what we should value. They tell us the heroes of our people. And they often tell us why things are the way they are. By listening to these stories, we are brought into the longer story lines of our families, our community, and especially our faith.

The thing about these kinds of stories is that they need a narrator. For me, stuck in the back seat of our car, Andy and Terry were my story tellers. They were part of an age old tradition of passing stories down from one generation to the next. Long ago, the family or village elders would gather the people around a fire and tell these formative stories. Not so long ago, these stories would come up in dining rooms as the older members of the family would reminisce about their shared past. And the young would sit and take it all in. It was part of their becoming part of the family or the community.

There are few places today where young people can sit at the feet of their elders and hear the key stories of their people. We are caught by the flickering pixels of our screens, large and small, and so often seek out the stories that confirm what we already think and believe.

Yet, the psalmist reminds us that we need to be telling one another how we have experienced God. “One generation will commend your works to another, they will tell of your mighty acts” (Ps 145:4, NIV). This means three things. First, we need a generation to tell the stories. And we need a generation to hear them. Finally, we need a setting in which those stories can be shared.

Luke tells us that the first Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, and to the fellowship, and to the breaking of bread, and to prayer” (Acts 2:42, NIV). We might imagine this to look a lot like Sunday morning in our congregations. However, we have to remember that these gatherings were much more like a family reunion than they were Sunday School. The children of families who received baptism probably were not sent off to their own room, but rather played at the feet of their parents. They would listen as the believers would share their experiences, their memories of the apostles, and the stories of Jesus himself.

While there is a time and a place to separate ourselves out by age, the image of the first church challenges us to create intergenerational spaces so that the young can hear the stories of the faith and the church. If we divide ourselves by age, the stories we tell can morph into self-conforming fables. For the elders, the stories too easily become nostalgic, disconnecting them from the questions and needs of the present. And for the young, the stories become so novel that they lose sight of the long trajectory of God's faithful deeds of the past.

By bringing the generations together, the questions of the present can be shaped by the stories of our past. Together, we can find the treasures of our tradition, the heroes of our faith, and the capacity to imagine what faithfulness looks like now. Stories shape who we are, how we think, and what we value, just like I learned that peacemaking was not something done in abstract, but lived out creatively and courageously by singing the story of Ted Studebaker in the car with my parents.