

“WHAT'S YOUR STORY?”
 (Galatians 1:11-17, 21-23)
 © 2022 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[Cornerstone U.M.C., 7-17-22]

--I--

1. **[11am ONLY]** Read Text: Galatians 1:11-17, 21-23 and **PRAY**.

2. As Christians, stories are at the heart of our faith.

A--In fact, our faith is one that's centered around stories: stories about God; stories about humanity; stories about the relationship between God and humanity.

B--But of all the stories of God's people in scripture and in history, other than the story of Jesus, there is perhaps no more important story to tell... than that our *own* faith story. ¹

3. In fact, in today's scripture from Galatians 1, we find the apostle Paul doing this very thing to invite others into a relationship with God.

[9am ONLY] Let me read it to you (Verses 11-17 and 21-23)...

11 Brothers and sisters, I want you to know that the gospel I preached isn't human in origin. 12 I didn't receive it or learn it from a human. It came through a revelation from Jesus Christ. 13 You heard about my previous life in Judaism, how severely I harassed God's church and tried to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my peers, because I was much more militant about the traditions of my ancestors. 15 But God had set me apart from birth and called me through his grace. He was pleased 16 to reveal his Son to me, so that I might preach about him to the Gentiles. I didn't immediately consult with any human being. 17 I didn't go up to Jerusalem to see the men who were apostles before me either, but I went away into Arabia and I returned again to Damascus....

21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, 22 but I wasn't known personally by the Christian churches in Judea. 23 They only heard a report about me: "The man who used to harass us now preaches the faith that he once tried to destroy."

*****PRAYER*****

[BOTH SERVICES] A--Here, Paul shares the story of his own journey from being a man of "religion" to being a man of true faith – from being a keeper of *rules* and regulations, to being a seeker of a *relationship*. ²

B--*His* story is meant to inspire those who hear it (including us) to consider how God works through the lives of all kinds of people.

4. So -- with that same sense of intention -- I'd like to share my a bit of **my own story of faith**, and how I ended up as a pastor.

--II--

5. My sister Amy and I were both raised in East Point, GA ³ in a close-knit family, and from a very young age, our parents taught us the importance of a strong spiritual life.

A--For one, we attended Sunday School and worship regularly at College Park First U.M.C. (near the Atlanta airport) -- it was *not* an option, but it wasn't forced on us, either; it was just something we did without fail on Sunday mornings.

B--Yet, while as a child I certainly understood the importance of God and church, it wasn't until attending our Methodist camp in Dahlonga (Camp Glisson) in my early teens that I first understood the great joy having Jesus as a personal friend and Savior.

1--In my particular situation, there was no altar call that I answered, no thunderous voice or bright lights that I heard or saw, and at the time I didn't even make any special point of remembrance. ⁴

2--But I knew that something was *different* about my life, because I had a new desire for God & His ways that I'd not had before, & looking back, I now see how my camp experiences were the beginning of my personal walk with God.

C--From there, I continued to grow as a Christian, and find ways to put legs to my faith:

1--I was active as a leader in my church youth group, youth choir, youth handbell choir, and even served as youth representative on our Church Council.

2--In 1984, I had the great opportunity of touring Europe with "The Methodist Festival Choir," a group of 100 young adults from UMCs across the U.S.

3--And since that was the bicentennial year of American Methodism, we sang in many of the historical Methodist shrines throughout England, and I was fascinated by the history, commitment, and zeal of John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodists of England and America.

4--It was also then that I first began to perceive why I was "at home" as a Methodist Christian, and dedicated myself to help bring about renewal to my church tradition through active lay ministry and service. ⁵

5--And though I didn't know it at the time, God used all of these to prepare me for a career as an ordained minister.

6. Later that Fall, I started at LaGrange College as a History Major and Music Minor.

A--And there, God continued to cultivate my leadership abilities as President and song-leader of the Wesley Fellowship group on campus, and was active at LaGrange First UMC (where I later served as Senior Pastor).

B--In 1986, I was an exchange student through Rotary International at the University of Oslo (Norway), and spent the entire summer not only in class with students from 65 other countries, but also in my extra-curricular time sharing Christ by leading programs and music at an interdenominational Christian group on campus.

C--Back home, my family and I moved to Fayetteville and we joined Fayetteville First U.M.C., where I formed a new young adult ministry there, and also became a certified Lay Speaker (now called Lay Servants) in our NGA Conference.

D--In 1987, while visiting Tulsa First U.M.C. (Oklahoma), I experienced a deepening encounter with, and further realization of, the power and purpose of the Holy Spirit in my life, and that experience deepened my own personal interest in reading & studying the scriptures, in the power of prayer, and in an ability/desire to share my faith.

7. After graduating from college in May 1988, I enrolled at what's now called Regent University School of Law in Virginia Beach, VA, intent on answering what I thought was God's call to blend my Christian witness with my love of law.

A--But despite that perception, deep down I was not at peace -- even then, I knew God was calling me to something *different*, though I didn't quite know *what*.

B--At the time, I thought it was simply to come back to Georgia & finish law school -- So in 1989 I moved back, married Trish, and transferred to Emory Univ. School of Law.

1--But I *still* wasn't content, & people kept pointing out (in college, law school, & back home) gifts & graces I had for ministry that everyone could see but me.

2--Even Trish (before we were married) once told me, "*Brian, either God's not talking, or you're not listening!*"

3--You see, while I thought I was doing what God wanted, in reality I was just making excuses = rationalizing why I *shouldn't* do what God was asking.

4--In many ways, I was just like Jonah in Old Testament: called by God to go one direction (to Nineveh) and instead going in the other (to Tarshish)!

C--Thankfully, though, God doesn't give up on us easily, & just as He sent a whale to swallow Jonah to get him "back on track," so God used people in my life to help me see that I wasn't going to be truly at peace *until* I was in *full-time* Christian ministry.

8. You know, there are times in our lives when we will NOT find peace *until* we're doing whatever it is that the Lord asks of us... whether teaching a Sunday School class, singing in choir/praise team, helping with O'Rourke ministries, or just praying for someone.

A--And in June 1989, when I quit running from *my* call (which happened to be to ordained ministry), I found a new peace, new joy, and a new excitement in life.

1--And it's something I've never regretted.

2--Yes, there've been times I've been frustrated and tempted to quit, but at the end of the day God always said, "*Brian, I **called** you, and it will be all right!*"

B--And since that time 33 years ago, I've been on roller coaster with the Lord, getting my M.Div. degree from Emory's Candler School of Theology and (later) my D.Min. degree from Saint Paul School of Theology (in Kansas City),⁶ serving and leading U.M. churches in College Park, Carrollton, Augusta, Cartersville, Marietta, LaGrange, Lawrenceville, and now here in Cowetta County.

1--Every one of them has been different, each with differing challenges and strengths, frustrations, and joys.⁷

2--In some places, it's clear that God sent me to lead *them*; in other places, I was clearly there to be led *by* them; & at still others it was a combination of both.

3--But wherever I've been, I've known for sure that it was God who sent me, and that there was always a reason for me to be there.

--III--

9. Now, obviously there's more to my story that I could tell, but I hope what *I've* shared gives you a better feel not only of where I as your *Pastor* have come from, but also has invited you to consider *your* God-story -- the story of *your* faith, & how God has (and is) bringing you to be who you are today (in your bulletin, you'll find some questions meant to provoke your thinking about this, and how you might respond).⁸

A--In the meantime, know that each of our faith stories will be different and unique -- and they certainly *won't* all include a call to *ordained* ministry like mine!

B--But I do think it's important that we both *know* our story and be available to *share* it,⁹ because (as Paul describes in today's scripture) God's church grows and multiplies primarily through the sharing of *our* stories, which invites others to find God in *theirs*.

C--So, if someone asks, would you be able (and willing) to share the place that God has in your life today, and how your church here at Cornerstone has helped you to do that? In short, "**What's YOUR Story**" ...of faith, and how are you sharing it today?

10. [PRAYER]

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ We often call this faith practice "*giving testimony*" or "*witnessing*."
- ² In case you didn't catch it, in the verses we read, he tells about his former life as a zealous Pharisee and persecutor of Christians, and how he was converted and now fulfills his call to preach Jesus to the Gentiles in regions beyond Jerusalem.
- ³ Although I was born on an army base (Fort Lee) in Virginia, I really don't consider Virginia "home" because I only lived there 6 months before my family moved back to Georgia.
- ⁴ I do not believe the Bible teaches it necessary to be able to name or identify a date, time, and/or place of one's conversion to Christ. To the contrary, scripture instead describes at least two models of Christian conversion:
- (#1) the more romanticized "Damascus Road" experience of the apostle Paul, which *was* sudden, dramatic, "flashy", and happened at a specific point in time; and..
- (#2) the less "flashy" but probably more common "sunrise" experience of Peter and the other disciples; they walked and shared ministry with Jesus for three years, yet the scripture gives no hint of a specific time, date, or place where they "definitively" changed their lives from non-believer to believer -- instead, theirs was a process conversion where they *gradually* gave more and more of their lives to Jesus. Both models are *equally* valid and *equally* biblical ways to experience Christian conversion. My experience was the latter, even while I know some people who's experience is the former.
- ⁵ Later that year, I had an opportunity to put that dedication to work as my family and I became charter members of a new congregation started by our North Georgia Conference (North Fayette U.M.C. in Fayette County).
- ⁶ My D.Min. focus was on how to reach today's culture from a Wesleyan/Methodist ministry perspective.
- ⁷ And even though they're all different churches, the people at them are strangely generally the same (different names, yes, but with the same needs and concerns and even -- at times -- idiosyncrasies!).
- ⁸ Stories are at the heart of who we are as people of faith. We learn both who God is and who we are through stories such as those found in the Bible. But do we really know our own story, and could we articulate it to others? 1 Peter 3:13 says "*Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.*" Could you do that? Here are a few questions to consider that might help:
1. What were/are the pivotal events and/or experiences in your spiritual life and development, and how did they shape you into who you are today?
 2. Who were/are the persons who've most influenced and shaped your spiritual journey, and why?
 3. Do you remember when you accepted Jesus as your Savior, and how did that change your experience of life?
 4. Even if you can't remember a specific time when you did this, do you possess an *assurance* that God loves you and that you are a follower of Jesus, and what does that mean to you? (Note: if you don't currently have this assurance or know Jesus as your Savior, I as your Pastor am available to talk with you about what this might mean in and for your life)
 5. Is there a Bible character or story that you most relate to as being similar to your own? What/who is it, and why?
 6. What do you see as the next chapter in your life and walk with Christ? What do you sense God is calling you to now?
- ⁹ While our faith is certainly a *personal* thing, it should never be a *private* thing. We don't need to lord it over others, nor do we use it to imply that we are perfect and have our life all together. But we should at least be aware of the faith dimensions of our life story and be able to share with others how we are who we are *because* of our faith in Jesus Christ.