

6 Easter A: 29 May 2011

This Eastertide, in addition to reading in Acts the story of the earliest Christians, we have been experiencing first hand the different ways that we continue to form community as Christians, coming together to share our foundational story.

We did it when we combined communities to form one Easter celebration; when the bishop—the icon of the larger Church and our spiritual head—was in our midst; as we celebrated baptisms and graduations and confirmations and many many social gatherings.

And as you have at the same time been seeking to encapsulate the essence of your present-day story for the next rector—and, I hope, for yourselves—I have talked about the importance of stories in forming the community and asked what can we do to reach out and actively invite others into the Christ Church story, into the Christian story, offering them hospitality and room to make the story their own.

This is where I want to start today, with the stories we tell and how we tell them. We all love stories. Sometimes we pass along some really important truths wrapped up in a story. Sometimes the story itself is the point. And sometimes the story gets in the way.

My Dad's father, a southern Illinois farmer and ag agent, was one of those small town story tellers—not beyond stretching the truth a bit to make the tale richer. This is one of his favorites--one that I have always believed to be entirely true, because my cousins still live in the same Illinois county he was talking about.

Once Paw-paw had to officiate at a Masonic service in a remote part of this rural county. The local man who asked him to come gave him the following directions:

*Look for a big building, the biggest in these parts. You can't miss it.
Drive on out the old highway past the cemetery until you come to the Smith farm.
It's across the road from where the old school burned down about thirty years ago.
Turn left on the gravel lane there
and go down to where that great big oak tree was before the lightning hit it.
There is a road to right.
And off in the woods to the left
is that big ranch house that some lawyer from Springfield built last year.
You can't see it from the road, but it sure is a mighty big place for one man and his wife.
Anyway, don't turn there, just keep on going.
When you get to a place with some mail boxes,
I guess there must be six or seven of them, well maybe eight,
'cuz old man Johnson's son moved onto his place last year and built his own house.
There's a road around the bend from there about a quarter mile.
After you cross the bridge that the Simpson girl ran off of in the flood of '61,
you'll see a dirt road.
Take it on down to the grange hall and we'll be around there somewhere.*

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

Needless to say, my Granddad's guide was not a very good one. He thought he was giving good directions, but all of his landmarks could only be understood by somebody who'd been there before or grown up with them. They made little sense to a stranger. Paw-paw had to stop about three times to ask for clearer directions.

Today I suppose you'd just program your GPS, or print out directions on Mapquest. But think about how many times this sort of thing happens to each of us, in one context or another.

When we don't know the stories, and the history they carry, it's hard to know our way around with any confidence, let alone feel incorporated into the community that tells the stories. And sometimes, too, the story that is told just gets in the way.

I'll bet you can see where I'm going with this.

What are the stories you tell at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing?

I've heard quite a number of stories since arriving here.

Some are historical: the story of Welles and the founding generation;

some are financial, the stories of generous gifts made from grateful hearts;

some are amusing, the stories of quirky personalities and memorable events;

other stories are darker, and quite frankly are less than worthy of the telling—they verge on character assassination, or at best are painful remembrances of grievances nurtured against another;

and some stories, from my perspective, are simply untruths repeated often enough to carry the weight of certainty: we're too small, we're too poor, we're not...

fill in the blank, surely you've heard—maybe told—these stories.

What are the stories you want to pass on to the next generation?

Which stories will "build up the Body" rather than tear it down?

Which stories will attract others and pass along important truths?

Which stories will keep community and vision alive?

Which stories do you need to rewrite, or stop telling altogether?

In today's gospel Jesus tells us to keep his commandments:

to love God, to love one another as he loves us;

and to be filled with the Spirit,

who abides with us as Jesus' earthly presence now

who lives in us.

Here is a story to tell.

Here is one with room for others to make it their own.

Here is one that will feed our children and a world hungry to hear the good news.

I'm not saying you should cease being Christ Church Red Wing,

with all the rich, unique, incarnated history that you carry,

real stories about both the good parts and the times of struggle.

But maybe now is the time for considering which parts of the story

are worth holding on to and which are worth letting go.

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How would I decide, were it up to me?
I gave you a list just a moment ago
and suggested where I thought the real story lies,
but let me repeat the moral in different words.
When you talk about the life, identity and mission of Christ Church,
which stories are about abundant life rather than scarcity?
Which are told from the perspective of faith rather than fear?
Which stories proclaim, by word and example, the good news of God in Christ?
Which stories invite others to come and see
“that things which were cast down are being raised up,
and things which had grown old are being made new,
and that all things are being brought to their perfection
by him through whom all things were made...”

There is a psychological maxim that goes:
What we live with, we learn;
what we learn, we practice;
what we practice, we become.
You have a wonderful heritage. You have a God-given story.
Think prayerfully about how you tell it,
both to others and to yourselves.

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