

Faith Journey Stories
Rev. Lauren Hodgson, January 31, 2016
St. Matthew's United Church, Toronto

Please pray with me... May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

This past week, I did something I normally don't do. I watched a commercial. Now that most of my tv watching is done through Netflix or recorded shows on our PVR, there just aren't the commercial interludes – or I can fast-forward through them!

So when a car commercial came on the tv, I found myself strangely intrigued to watch... The commercial starts with a young woman rock climbing, then getting into her car and driving to a construction site, where she gets out of her car and climbs a long ladder... up, up, up into the cab of a huge crane. Over the images, we hear these words...

“Everyday you have a chance to make your story epic. Each challenge becomes a chapter of a journey that is uniquely yours. unscripted, unabridged, uncensored. Just you living each word of this great story. So, make it legendary.”

I'm not going to lie – I was a bit surprised at the end when I realized this was a car commercial. But it caught my attention for more than the product it was advertising. It caught my attention because it made me think about what we are doing today and something that I've always known.... that we all have legendary stories. And I don't know if we get enough of a chance to share them.

Yes, we have learned one another's names, we know a bit about one another's cultural background, but we don't really know each others' stories. We don't know about the places where each other has lived, or even worked, let alone much about our real joys or struggles.

We don't really know why we are all here. What has brought each other to this church on this day we don't know about how each of us feels about God or if we even believe in God. Yes, some of that is private, but some of it isn't or doesn't need to be. It is said that when we listen to each others' stories, the more likely our hearts and compassion is opened and the more likely we are to care.

Today in our scripture reading we hear a story that tells about journeys... It's an interesting story because it reminds us that when we are sent out into the world, we can't help but be transformed. We hear of this through the beginning of this morning's text, where Jesus has a difficult time returning to his hometown. He'll always be seen in a particular way, won't he?!

And then later, Jesus does the sending... he sends off the twelve... and in his Jesus-type of way, I believe that he's sending them off to make epic lives... their own and the lives of others. They are instructed not to take much – in fact, they will need barely anything for this journey – which, I think, will help them to focus on their own sense of calling and what they take with them...

How often are we faced with moments that cause us to pause and truly reflect on what our life means or even what our life has been about. So, what is the point to life? What is the story of your life? I'm not sure what the point is to life. But I feel like our lives on some scale, to someone, to each other - matters. It matters on levels we don't even know. *We are supposed* to take the choices given to us and make our stories epic.

And I believe that you all have a great life story, that faith on some level has been a part of that story and I believe that each of your stories are worth telling. I also believe that God is there through it all...not necessarily making things happen or not happen, but is simply there...but I will say, you don't need to believe that. Because you have made your own meaning of life and of God.

And so it's my hope that every four or six weeks, we will have a chance to share our stories. I've chosen to do this during worship because I believe that not only do your stories matter but that they are sacred.

So today we are going to begin our Faith Journey series with stories from two of our friends – Bridget and Sheila. Thank you both for your willingness to share your stories through vulnerability, honesty and compassion....

Story Shared by Bridget:

Lauren asked me to talk for a few minutes about my faith journey, which I guess in the grand scheme of things has really just begun. I want to be as honest as possible and share my perspective on faith with you. I've grown up here, since before I was born. There is nothing that I have more respect for than the St. Matthews community, than this approach to Christianity and to faith. I have no doubt, that I share all of the values, lessons and morals that I have learned here with you. Although, I don't take a literal interpretation of the stories told. What's important to me about religion is what we can take out of it, because I feel that if given the chance to explore, I could take a lot from each religion, rather than specifically identifying with one.

Some questions that I have asked are "Why worship?" and "Why pray?". I once had a long conversation with a friend about my feelings toward religion, and she unknowingly helped me with some of these types of questions. A few years back she lost someone important to her, and she told me that when she prays she knows that that person can hear her. Another friend, more recently taught me that to some, it is special knowing that members of your family have for a long time been members and believers in their exact same religion.

Sometimes I am confused. There have been moments in my life where I have felt a greater presence, in really strong and profound ways. I understand that faith is an extremely personal element, and that is why I have feelings and beliefs on the topic, and not opinions. Because how I feel reflects only on me, and not on anyone else.

Over the past year, I have come to terms with where I am in faith right

now and my beliefs. My thoughts often lead back to the theory of the Big Bang, which Georges Lemaître planted the roots of, 89 years ago. Basically, it's the idea that the universe started from a small, hot, dense bubble, thousands of times smaller than a grain of rice. And maybe that is correct, mathematically, but I don't believe that. I don't believe that science can give true meaning to the universe and life. I do believe in the infinite, in the greater force of the world. Kind of like a god, but not quite so concrete. Not something that I feel a need to pray for or worship to.

The reason I'm going into all of these complicated thoughts, is just to show you where I am at in this point of my life. I can't say if all of these thoughts will stick with me in the future or not. Either way, I doubt that I will ever believe that one religion or theory can define or sum up everything we have.

Story Shared by Sheila:

Mine is a much longer journey than Bridget's – but we have an important meeting after this so I can't go on too long!

Early memories are of Sunday school in a shed. It was post war England - in a nearby village when I was around 3. They gave me a little book and a brightly, coloured sticker to put in it each week. That obviously made an impression. Then I remember going to the cold, dank Church of England in the next street for Sunday School when I was 6 and 7 and living in Liverpool – I went with my friend while my parents stayed in bed – which is probably why the cold and dankness left such an impression!

I took a workshop many years ago when I taught in the church school and by making us recall our memories from childhood, we came to understand that how children feel about their experience of church impacts their faith journey even more than what they learn about God.

Back to both of my lying-in-bed parents. They both came from church going families – well almost everyone did in those days. But serious church going. There's a cluster of prominent church of Scotland and Presbyterian church of Canada ministers on my father's side. At my grandparent's house everyone went to church every Sunday morning and discussed the sermon over the Sunday roast.

My mother's side was completely different and very complicated - but I must have been around 9 when I learned the dark secret that I was never tell anyone – my mother had been raised as a Roman Catholic but had changed her religion. I wasn't to tell

because several families we were close to were Catholic and she didn't want to deal with their reaction.

Hers was not a happy story. She ended up in a convent orphanage from age 10-14 which was as grim as anything in movies like *Philomena*. And then at 22 she married my father and agreed to join the protestant church. She wanted to get along with his family and she needed a family. The local priest excommunicated her bell, book and candle. Her prayer books and bibles burned and she was shunned if he saw her on the street. And she was told, as she had been taught all along, that she was going to hell.

So I spent a lot of time over the next ten years in theological discussions with my mother. How bad did you have to be to go to hell? Hers was a very loving marriage, how could that be a sin? Would a loving God really send people to hell? Is it really possible that there is a God who would send people who live good lives to hell just because they were Jewish or Hindu and not Christian – or Roman Catholic. Wasn't hell going to be awfully crowded? Could all those other religions be wrong and just a few of us right? And maybe there wasn't a hell? Maybe the idea of hell was more human than divine.

At the same time as we were wrestling with the choice she had made, she was able to give me a real insight into the things she loved about the Catholic faith that she felt were lacking in the protestant church: the deep sense of mystery; the importance of regular, ritualistic prayer; and praying to Mary.

Maybe as protestants, we don't need to talk through an intermediary to reach God but sometimes it is easier to talk to a woman! An important "AhHa" moment for me later at St. Matthew's came while watching a video of prominent theologians talking about their image of God. A Korean theologian said, 'God looks like my mother – a fifty year-old Korean woman.'

So I learned a respect for other faiths. That every faith has strengths and weaknesses. That your beliefs should not cause you to hurt other people and if they do, maybe you should change your beliefs. And that you need to question and make up your own mind.

The other thing my mother said - I think I was in my twenties and it was the furthest thing from my mind as my church attendance was pretty spasmodic in my 20's and early 30's - she said, "don't get involved in church work. It takes up your whole life!"

So let's skip half a century... Here I am at St. Matthew's. We have been worshipping here as a family for over 30 years. And I could tell a lot of stories of my experiences. Many wonderful ones. Some that were a struggle. But I would rather focus on where I am and where we are now. I have been working with the redevelopment committee for over two years now with a strong church board supporting us.

It takes a lot of time. There are no material rewards. No fancy lunches or volunteer acknowledgement events. There's no prestige. It used to be that serving on a church board gave you some status. Now it raises a red flag that you might be peculiar.

But the members of the redevelopment committee show up for meeting after meeting without complaint. They work collaboratively and share the tasks. AND no one pushes their personal agenda. Or seeks to use this as a network for personal profit. And there is no religious bullying - "I believe this so we have to do this"

There is a deeply-shared, faith-based commitment to what is really important about St. Matthew's.

It's as if we are on a pilgrimage to a place that we hope we are going to recognize when we see it. And as with any pilgrimage, the possibility of failure is real. But after two years, so far! no one has said they have had enough. It's truly awesome!

I don't want to say that only a faith group can produce this kind of team. It probably happens elsewhere in organizations that share a deep sense of purpose and community. But I think faith groups can more easily set up expectations of its members within the community – compassion, self-sacrifice and service to others. Even so, I know we couldn't have assembled a united committee for this work 20 or 30 years ago at St. Matthew's. And I certainly wouldn't have been a participant. This congregation has been on an incredible faith journey. And the transformation has been an important part of my personal faith journey.