

DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL

PROCLAMATION OF THE PRIESTHOOD:  
A STUDY OF VOCATION, NARRATIVE, AND CONGREGATIONAL STORYTELLING

SUBMITTED TO DR. RICHARD LISCHER  
IN FULFILLMENT OF  
PARISH 399: PROCLAMATION OF THE PRIESTHOOD

BY  
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## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no single quote better describes the basis for the Priesthood of All Believers than this: “Ministry belongs to the whole people of God through their union with Christ and through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> My desire for a robust understanding of the Priesthood of All Believers arose out of my time spent as an Assistant Youth Leader at Grace Lutheran Church in Durham, North Carolina. During this fourteen-month period, the Gospel repeatedly appeared within the oft-simple yet profound stories told by the congregants. Through the act of storytelling, these Christians proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Concomitantly, the congregation’s behavior, as well as the explicit desires of leadership, revealed hierarchical expectations of ministry incongruous with a theology of the Priesthood that emphasizes the inherent equality of Christians in the calling to carry the Gospel into the world.

Rather than blaming these Christians, however, this project intends to provide congregations with a two-fold resource. By reviewing the theological undergirding of the Priesthood of All Believers, both in Scripture and the available literature, this project seeks to provide churches a baseline from which conversations about the Priesthood of All Believers may arise. Parallel to this runs a study of a particular congregation’s priestly activity – storytelling within Grace Lutheran Church – and how this communal activity exhibits the Priesthood’s proclamation of the Gospel. The result hopes to inspire two things within congregants: that all Christians equally share in the vocation of “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9 NRSV), and that this priestly identity appears within even one the most mundane of activities, telling stories.

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<sup>1</sup> Allen C Guelzo, “Are You a Priest?” *Christianity Today*. 35.10 (1991), 37.

## THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS: A BRIEF REVIEW

One need only look at the dismal amount of recent publication concerning the Priesthood of All Believers to see that the lack of emphasis upon the Priesthood within a congregation arises (at least in part) from a lack of attention from ecclesial and academic leaders. Even those books available often assume a previous established doctrine of the Priesthood, much like Lutheran pastors and scholars assume readers retain an orthodox understanding of the Trinity (itself another faulty assumption in many cases). Fortunately, a few theologians provide solid groundings from which discussion may arise.

In *Callings*, William Placher provides excerpts from Christian writers from throughout Church history, all of which pertain to vocation, as well as groups and evaluates the particular theological considerations that appear within four periods. Within the church of 100-500 CE, vocation spoke to the entirety of Christian life. From 500-1500 CE, vocations became stratified and hierarchical, with ordained leadership representing the preeminent calling for Christians, below which all other ways of living existed. 1500-1800 CE brought the Reformation to all aspects of church life, including the vocation. Within this time, Luther's "idea that any station in life could be equally a place from which to serve God constituted a breakthrough toward equality."<sup>2</sup> This era proposed that Christian vocation included occupation, which eventually became the primary category of calling. Holy living as a vocational precept for all Christians flashed quickly, then fizzled like a match, relegating vocation to considerations of career-related endeavors.

According to Placher, in the time since 1800 CE, Christian reflection on vocation increasingly reflected the thoughts of the early Church. Vocation in this era continues to concern

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<sup>2</sup> William C. Placher., ed., *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2005), 207.

itself with discipleship. Placher goes so far as to suggest that vocation, in a post Christian society, essentially entails a return to the vocational reality of “simply living as Christians.”<sup>3</sup> The Reformers emphasized that vocation remains specific to every individual but proceeds from God to all persons. Extending far beyond employment, vocation in our era challenges holistically, engaging all portions of the Christian person.

Placher’s main assumption, that God calls persons to particular vocations, certainly represents the opinions of those writer’s he sampled. The question arises, though, whether Placher’s “Christian life” accurately represents a synonym for the Priesthood of All Believers. While Placher makes no such connection, he describes the history of Christian understanding about the ways in which God makes claims upon God’s people. Placher ramifies, then, a concept of vocation that includes any and all activity to which God calls God’s people.

Robert A. Muthiah offers a prescriptive theology of the Priesthood of All Believers that compliments Placher’s descriptive project. In *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty First Century: Living Faithfully as the Whole People of God in a Postmodern Context*, Muthiah relies on Biblical evidence as well as the work of John Howard Yoder in order to qualify the development of ecclesial leaders. Muthiah believes that, “New Testament texts reject the role of religious specialists,” and further, “New Testament models recognize that all the people of God have charisms [gifts] and all charisms are to be used for ministry.”<sup>4</sup> The sending of the Holy Spirit by the resurrected Jesus endowed all Christians with the capacity for ministry, and as such, Muthiah promotes an egalitarian model of the Priesthood. Rather than relying upon pastors and missionaries to perform church work, each Christian obtains particular God-given gifts of equal

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>4</sup>Robert A. Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty First Century: Living Faithfully as the Whole People of God in a Postmodern Context* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 2009), 41.

importance to proclaiming the Gospel. Beyond the capacity for ministry, each Christian also retains the responsibility to minister.

Even with in this egalitarian framework, Muthiah avoids condemning the pastorate. Borrowing from the work of Miroslav Volf, Muthiah notes the Triune God's self-revelation to humanity as an example of an egalitarian model in which persons perform certain roles. For instance, the Father's eternal begetting of the Son who became Incarnate indicates discreet ways in which each person acts. Yet, in dignity and divinity, the Father and Son (and Holy Spirit) are coequals. God's Triune example, for Muthiah, fosters an egalitarian conception of the Priesthood that allows for expressly ecclesial occupations (missionaries, pastors, bishops, et al) without glorifying the offices or the occupants therein.

At least two observations arise from these texts. First, throughout her existence, the church considered vocation as the claim of God upon one's life for the purpose of witness. While the Middle Ages largely relegated the concept of divine calling to the life of the religious, Christians lived under the expectation that God's claim through the sacraments altered one's life course such that all the baptized were to live a certain way. While the Reformation led to considering "vocation" and "occupation" as synonyms, the earliest witnesses of Luther and Calvin provide reason to believe that God calls all people to live a godly life, an inherently evangelistic act that reflected God's goodness. From Pentecost to the present, then, we see the Christian life as the primary vocation for Christians.

Second, Muthiah's work connects the placement into a Christian community with a particular way of living as the very core of the Priesthood of All Believers. Scripture and tradition affirm that one's vocation as a priest of God remains the primary call, and one that all Christians experience. Other vocations arise, but all in fact offer avenues of fulfilling the

primary calling as priest. The proper distinction between pastors and postwomen, priests as public officials, never subsists of priority, but always of activity. No occupation is more important. All of one's activities contain the potential to proclaim God's goodness and presence in Jesus Christ, and while some may appear more obvious, none are less important or useful. The role of priest falls to all Christians.

#### THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS: A PROPOSED THEOLOGY

These contributions from Placher and Muthiah – a ubiquitous calling to the vocation of Priest experienced by each individual while manifest in discreet and active charisms – seem consistent with the oft-quoted Scriptural support for the Priesthood of All Believers, 1 Peter 2:9-10. Peter describes the Church in this way: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Through mercy, God created the Church in order to proclaim God's salvific activity. This general calling experienced by all typifies the Priesthood of All Believers. Yet, as Peter later discloses in his letter, this occurs through “whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Pet 4:10). The calling to proclamation, then, engenders Christians to continually tell of God's unfailing love through those avenues that God opens in individual persons. The entire Church must proclaim, but the manifestation of that proclamation will differ from person to person.

Further, if participation within the Priesthood necessitates a change in identity as God's people, then it seems inevitable that the Priestly calling extends to all realms of one's life. This is certainly consistent with the Lutheran conception of the Priesthood of All Believers as expressed by Cyril Eastwood: “Luther did not argue for less priesthood, but for more. All our

life-work or vocation should be the expression of our spiritual priesthood. Unless our priesthood is actually regarded as a vocation its significance is lost.”<sup>5</sup> Membership within the Priesthood of All Believers represents not only a potential category into which God may call people, but the core identity bestowed upon all Christians by God. This means that, while certain individuals may only perform particular actions, no Priest is exempt from the call to holy living and the constant telling of the good news. The vocation of Priest, then, encompasses the entire believer, including any other vocations into which God calls a person. The Priesthood of All Believers, therefore, represents primary calling in the Christian life, and all other activities of life remain subject to one’s identity as a Priest of the One True God revealed in Jesus Christ.

In *Theology is for Proclamation*, Gerhard Forde succinctly illustrates this proclamatory function alive in the life of all Christians: “proclamation is more comprehensive because it occurs apart from formal preaching, most notably in the sacraments and the liturgy, but also in the everyday conversation of Christians.”<sup>6</sup> Forde reveals the wide range of potential for proclamation, including even the mundane of the Christian life as prospective situations for declaration of God’s goodness. Proclamation includes preaching, but is not limited by a pulpit, service, or sanctuary. In other words, all preaching is proclamation, but not all proclamation is preaching.

For Forde, the *telos* distinguishes proclamation from other forms of speech. Proclamation hopes to inspire worship, the human response to God’s activity. While all speech entails a purpose of sorts, the proclaimer intends to reveal something significant about God, humanity, and the relationship between the two. Thus, any time a Christian speaks with such intent, more occurs than a simple description of facts or exhortation to action; indeed, a testimony arises. The

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<sup>5</sup> Cyril Eastwood, *The Priesthood of All Believers: An Examination of the Doctrine from the Reformation to the Present Day*. (Wipf and Stock: Eugene, 2009), 63-4.

<sup>6</sup> Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Fortress: Philadelphia, 1990),1-2.

purpose of proclamation extends beyond description, prescription, and explanation into explication. The events, the advice, and the narrative culminate in the developmental analysis of explication that answers not only the questions of “who, what, when, where, and how,” but encourages the illumination of why such things occurred, and why the story obtains personal and communal significance.

Forde considers this why element as the Holy Spirit’s indwelling within the proclamatory act. The unique character of proclamation arises from one source: the living Christ and Him crucified, whose Holy Spirit dwells within each of the baptized. With this end in mind, the nature of the story at hand obtains immediate and eschatological implications. Yet, what lacks in Forde’s presentation is an explicit connection of this unique nature of proclamation to the activity of proclaiming. In other words, Forde fails to offer a constructive assessment of how theology might operate in proclamation, or of methods that prove particularly accessible. A charitable reading acknowledges that Forde’s main concern was liberating theological discourse from the professional realm into the hands, ears, and mouths of the common people. Admittedly, community particularities necessitate attentive forms of communication, and therefore proclamation, so Forde’s omission is not inherently deleterious. Even so, by offering an abstract formula – theology is for proclamation – without providing avenues for application, Forde left proclamation in the control of the specialists.

In a sense, then, this project attempts to take up Forde’s cause by proposing a Theology of the Priesthood that entails proclamation as the key vocational act, and to make some initial observations about a particular form of proclamation – storytelling – within a particular congregation. With Forde’s purpose for theology in mind, this endeavor asks: “How is theology proclaimed in the parish?”



## STORYTELLING AS A METHOD OF PROCLAMATION

During my time as an intern and Assistant Youth Director at Grace Lutheran Church in Durham, NC, two things became abundantly clear: the importance of storytelling within this particular congregation, and the desire for intimate association in the ministry of the church in both local and global senses. Conceptually, this association is similar to “ownership” of or “accountability” to the church’s ministry. However, these terms are problematic in varying ways. In an a socio-political setting driven by capitalism, “ownership” connotes possession, control, and jurisdiction, while the members of Grace sought a relationship network with ecclesial activity, such that the ministry of the church represented the membership of the church. Yet, accountability implies responsibility, at least in terms of a one (ministry) to one (person or committee) liability, for which congregants expressed little want. Yet, the stories told by congregants revealed that the congregation already obtained intimate association with the life of the church. Rather than developing different associations, it seems appropriate to call attention to the extant connections.

### HELPFUL DATA FROM LITERARY THEORY

Helping congregations to understand how persons use stories to convey meaning may foster deeper comprehension of the connections already existing between the members and the ministry of the local church. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, H. Porter Abbott offers a helpful overview of the terms, theories, and functions of stories. Abbott defines narrative as “the representation of an event or series of events.”<sup>7</sup> Under Abbott’s consideration, two basic components constitute a narrative – story and narrative discourse. For Abbott, a *story* is an event or sequence of events, while the *narrative discourse* is the representation of such events. *Entities* are the necessary elements of a story, which include *characters*, entities with

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<sup>7</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2008). 13 ff.

human qualities. *Events* record the actions or reactions of the entities within the *narrative world*, or environment generated by the narrative discourse. Some events are *constituent*, or necessary to the forward movement of the story, while others are non-essential to the stories consistency, and thus known as *supplementary*. While such a rehearsal of terminology feels dry, establishing a common language for stories will promote more stable communication for congregations who seek to understand narrative and its influence.

For Abbott, *normalization* is “bringing a collection of events into narrative coherence,” with the purpose of explaining events.<sup>8</sup> In this Abbott notes that the receivers of all narratives assume causality exists within the story. In other words, those who experience a narrative perceive inherent connections between the events that occur in sequence. How the storyteller constructs the narrative play a significant role in how the receivers will interpret meaning, for the sequence of events appears to the receiver as conveying causal meaning. The meaning gains another layer of significance when one realizes that conflict seems inherent to all narratives. Thus, the process of normalization and the presentation of events allow the storyteller to communicate intentionally a particular view of casual relationships as they relate to the existence and potential resolution of a specific conflict.

Abbott’s review provides valuable acumen into functional aspects of narrative. In “The Effects of Personal Involvement in Narrative Discourse,” Max Louwerse and Don Kuiken provide a complimentary insight into the relationship of narratives to tellers and receivers. According to this study, “during narrative encounters, feeling becomes fluid, comprehension seems multifaceted, the narrated world is brought vividly to presence...lingering mood, changed beliefs, and shifts in self-perception indicate that something has not only been ingested, but also

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 44.

lastingly absorbed”.<sup>9</sup> The increase of late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century interdisciplinary research in the areas of psychology, literary studies, and education leads Louwarse and Kuiken to believe a mutually beneficial relationship exists between narrative and human society. Not only do human beings create narratives through the communication process; the process of telling, listening, and experiencing stories, narratives give life to persons.

Abbott refers to narratives that become engrained within human experience as *masterplots* because such stories transcend the experience of individuals and groups.<sup>10</sup> Consider, for instance, that nearly every culture obtains an epic myth concerning a destructive flood of worldly proportions. The details of events and entities within the narrative discourse differ (length and reasons for the flood, materials used to construct an ark, sorts of animals involved), as do the characters (the deities involved as well as the chosen persons Noah/Gilgamesh/Manu). Even so, each of these narratives gave meaning to societies throughout history, and continue to provide inspiration in postmodernity. The transcultural existence of the flood narrative, as well as the far-reaching influence, defines it as a major masterplot.

While masterplots represent only one type of narrative, they illustrate the capacity narratives have to exert major influence the persons and societies from which they arise. A potential reason that the flood story carries such significant societal import lies with the literary construction of the myth. Louwarse and Kuiken identify four key elements that allow narratives to exercise influence, all of which are present in the Judeo-Christian version of the story, commonly referred to as “Noah’s Ark,” which appears in chapters 6-9 of Genesis.<sup>11</sup> Louwarse and Kuiken suggest utilizing literary tools such as foregrounding that assist the reader to enter

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<sup>9</sup> Max Louwarse and Don Kuiken, “The Effects of Personal Involvement in Narrative Discourse,” *Discourse Processes*, 38(2), 169.

<sup>10</sup> Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction*, 46.

<sup>11</sup> Louwarse and Kuiken, “The Effects of Personal Involvement in Narrative Discourse,” 170-2.

the logic of the narrative world. Foregrounding is the explicit emphasis of prominent details within a narrative. The images of a chaotic, destructive water that God controls recalls the creative images of Genesis 1 where the LORD parts the waters, in essence creating providing space for human flourishing. Thus, a story about narrow escape from a destructive flood takes on a deeper meaning, namely that of re-creation of a people and society able to commune with God.

A second characteristic that helps person's connect with narrative is the genre, and more specifically, the ways in which that genre allows the story to seem conceptually possible. For readers throughout time, the destructive power of nature provided a constant threat to stability. While modern science provided numerous critiques into the plausibility of truly worldwide flood, recent science related to global climate change and to polarity revealed the potential for catastrophic destruction due to meteorological shifts. Yet, one must remember that this story is mythical in nature. In this sense, myth is different than a fable, or a fictional account created to communicate a moral. Rather, within a myth, the line between historical and metaphysical accuracy remains indiscernible. What is important is that the narrative communicates a fundamental truth to the human existence. The transiency of life, the unpredictability of this world, and the unstoppable will of God to accomplish restoration of relationship come arise as the fundamental truths.

Louwse and Kuiken further emphasize that, if a person can connect personal history to the narrative at hand, the narrative is more likely to obtain deeper impact. Noah's Ark provides avenues for deep connection with those who have experienced the tragedy of natural disaster, and how mere survival may in fact represent divine deliverance. Others may find solace in the

myth through metaphorical connections of loss, of helplessness, or of providence through dire circumstances.

In each of the above situations, however, Louwerse and Kuiken emphasize the importance of narrative performance. In this sense, performance implies something more than just acting. The acts of retelling and listening, as well as contextual reinterpretation and application, all represent various sorts of narrative performance. Repetition and contextualization bring the story deeper into the conceptual being of a person, and thus enables persons to consider myths not only possible, but also as intimately related to life.

Two final insights from literary theory draw the insights of Louwerse and Kuiken together with Abbott's descriptive work. In *The Nature of Narrative*, Robert Scholes states, "meaning, in a narrative work of art, is a function of relationship between two worlds: the fictional world created by the author and the 'real' world, the apprehensible universe."<sup>12</sup> When one participates in the narrative process, either as a receiver or a narrator, meaning occurs only as a relationship forms. This relationship exists on two planes: between the narrator and receivers, and between the narrative world and life experience. Whether the story is representative of reality (mimetic) or allegorically related to truth (symbolic), narrative finds meaning only in the relationship between persons and applicability of stories.

Scholes further elaborates, "by awakening complex correspondences between the psyches of character and reader, such characterization provides a rich and intense experience for the reader... ultimately assisting him to perceive and comprehend the world of reality more sharply and more sensitively than he otherwise might."<sup>13</sup> Here Scholes reveals explicitly that to which Abbott, Louwerse, and Kuiken only allude: narratives obtain the capacity to elucidate the depth

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford University Press: NY, 2006), 82.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

of meaning innate to the human condition. By connecting individuals, and connecting those persons to the truth embedded within story form, narratives identify the significance of human interaction. The dissemination of stories, in other words, operates as a selfless transmission of value to another, in order to increase the others capacity to connect with reality.

### **HEARING CONGREGATIONAL STORIES AS PROCLAMATION**

The following stories arose in various parts of congregational life: during a Youth Servant Event, a Bible study, a young adult fellowship outing, and a home visit. First, a note on the gathering process is pertinent. I proposed the project to the church council and received approval prior to asking the congregation to share particular stories. The initial response from the leaders as well as the gathered body was enthusiastic, and many expressed interest in sharing stories. However, when opportunity arose to share stories through different mediums, most congregants evaded direct approach. Many who initially shared stories then asked not to be included in the final form of the study, often because of the emotional reactions that occurred during the interviews.

Rather than abandon the project, however, I inquired with congregants who shared particularly salient stories at various public events, and thus indicated a willingness to experience vulnerability. Further, I attempted to select stories for the study that represented key themes from other stories that were shared with me. Thus, each narrative included represents common motifs present in the life of Grace Lutheran Church. I include a brief description of the setting where the story was shared, and relay the account in the voice of the narrator. After the narrative itself, an evaluation appears that expands upon the above insight from literary theory and the theological importance of proclamation.

## NARRATIVE OF JOYFUL SUBMISSION

Within Grace, many narratives exist that describe the importance of giving oneself in order for another to succeed. Miriam,<sup>14</sup> something of a matriarch of the congregation, often tells the following story to visitors in the narthex prior to or following the Sunday morning service, in a jubilant voice that signals the audience of the sheer goodness contained within the story, and its teller:

*When my husband was in Chicago getting a Ph.D. – he was a scholar, you know – well anyway, while James was getting his Ph.D., I was working as a secretary with the Jesuits. While he was getting his Ph.D., I was getting my P.H.T – my Put Hubby Through!*

Notice that Miriam’s story is laconic – this succinct story contains deep meaning. By taking on the role of sole provider, a role uncommon to many women in American Christian marriages during the 1950’s, Miriam assumed great responsibility in order for her husband to study Scripture deeply. Further, Miriam accepted this as an opportunity for living out God’s will. By financially supporting Louie during this time, Erna subjected herself to long hours of work while her husband embraced the opportunity to receive further education and training.

In a sense, Miriam presents a Lived Theology to each visitor who experiences Grace. According to Charles Marsh, perhaps the originator of Lived Theology as a discipline, “Lived theology calls us to a language more direct and communicative of the effects of the divine-human encounter in the world.”<sup>15</sup> Lived Theology expresses the ways in which God moves God’s people to act. For Erna, embracing a new family role in order for Louie to seek a vocation in Christian education was itself a response to God. While no explicit reference to God exists in

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<sup>14</sup> In an attempt to make reading this as objective as possible for any reader familiar with the congregation, I have changed the names of those who shared stories for this project.

<sup>15</sup> Marsh, Charles. “What is Lived Theology?” n.p. [cited March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011]. Online: <http://www.livedtheology.org/resources.html#Papers>.

her tale, for the hearers in the narthex, preparing for or leaving the event of corporate worship, this story obtains immediate connection to the action of God. The church operates as the matrix out of which this story flows. Indeed, the narrative discourse presents characters that now stand in front of the audience as evidence of the stories veracity and efficacy, choosing to be a part of a community that fosters gladness in surrender.

This narrative offers a sense of joyful submission, a fairly common narrative at Grace. Like Miriam, many people recalled life situations other than their ideal, and yet saw in them an opportunity to offer grace to another. Stories of parenthood noted this aspect poignantly, especially those of giving birth and of the adoption process. Some stories contained more explicit reference to how individuals believed God operated in the particular situation, but many stories simply carried the implicit reference of submission to the other as a virtue. In a community grounded in witness of God's submission to death, even death on a cross, for the sake of others benefit, one may expect such narratives to gain import. Such is the case at Grace.

It is important to note what the story does not do as well. Since the story does not reference God explicitly, it belongs only in a place that assumes people obtain some sort of knowledge about Christianity prior to entering the doors of a church. This proclamation, then, is a proclamation to a person familiar the Bible and the church, even if estranged in some way. Context clues exist within the supplementary details – the Ph.D. in Old Testament and reference to the Jesuits chief amongst them – but a person unfamiliar with the faith likely has little understanding of how such persons and degrees operate in the church. While such a narrative becomes a part of the communal anthology, a lack of explanation – which Miriam will offer when one inquires – endangers the narrative's potential as an effective witness to God's activity in bringing joyful submission.



## NARRATIVE OF SOVEREIGNTY

During one adult Sunday school class, a heated conversation arose while one recently retired church member presented the Young Earth account of creation. Many members work in scientific fields and took issue with the suspect science being proponed, while others disagreed with the Biblical literalism behind Young Earth Creation. Alfred, a retired Old Testament professor, shared out of his knowledge of the Old Testament and his conviction that God remains active in the world.

*A few years ago, Alice and I visited the Smithsonian. We were at the Museum of Natural History, and there were these enormous banners covering the ceiling of the place. They had the different eras and epochs and so on. As we looked, we saw the days of creation. The creation of sky and water and livable land and animals. Maybe these things are compatible, God and Scripture and science.*

The proclamatory power of such a story only takes shape when one comprehends the depth of the contextual division. As a church grounded in the traditions of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, some members at Grace hold Biblical literalism and thus conservative outlooks on sexuality and women’s roles in church as central faith claims. Others utilize a wider range of hermeneutical lenses through which to read and interpret Scripture, thus allowing more confidence in current scientific claims and social-psychological study.

In the midst of such dichotomous views, Louie’s story speaks of a solution based in God’s self. Rather than pick sides, one may accept the gifts of nature and Scripture as complementary forms of revelation. In this way, Alfred’s tale exemplifies Nancy Ammerman’s belief that congregational story telling reveals the blurred line between “sacred and profane, religious and secular.”<sup>16</sup> According to Louie, if God remains in control as creator and redeemer of all things, then there is no reason to fear or rebuke science. Instead, human pursuits in all

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<sup>16</sup> Ammerman, Nancy T. *Telling Congregational Stories*. *Review of Religious Research*. 35.4 (June, 1994), 296.

fields are best understood through the lens of the Triune God. In this story, the Gospel of reconciliation extends not only to humanity, but indeed to all creation throughout space and time.

This motif appears often in conversations at Grace, for in God commonalities might be found that bridge the chasms of division within the church. Some cite the Book of Concord as a potential grounding for conciliatory dialogue between branches of Lutheranism. Others point to the liturgy as a place of unity where Christians with differing theological beliefs may experience something of an eschatological unity. Notice that such suggestions find basis not in full agreement between persons, but in God's full presence with persons despite individual differences.

What this story did not do, however, was speak to the central chasm between the two camps: Scriptural interpretation. Alfred's story implicitly affirms a hermeneutic that embraces metaphor and myth as positive readings of Scripture. Despite this, however, such a narrative emphasizes God's ultimate sovereignty. Without reading Genesis 1-2 as literal histories (in the Modern sense of "literal" and "history"), Alfred's experience continues to embrace God's sovereign role in cosmic history, a key aspect that literal readings attempt to protect. As such, stories like this offer potential for reconciliation within the continuously divided Body of Christ based in God's sovereignty.

#### NARRATIVE OF MUNDANE PRESENCE

Not all stories at Grace are told in the church. Congregants proclaim Gospel-laden narratives in various places in the community, including the home. After lunch at a local eatery, Bruce shared the following story while sitting in his living room.

*I hadn't gotten my B.A. when I went to Duke. I had people working for me that had a Masters in our department. I was stretched and I moved rather quickly from manager of personnel food services to employment to wage and salary. Every time I did something it happened that it came beyond my own abilities. I knew without*

*question that it was the Lord's. I can remember having a union meeting in Roxboro. The union rep from Greensboro, and he would just talk hateful to me. The president suggested we give people a turkey for Thanksgiving. We're at the meeting and I said "We're gonna give the people a turkey for thanksgiving." (The rep replied) "We don't want no turkeys. We want money." So we didn't have anything that year. I had "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" – I had the first initial of each word written out on a piece of paper in of my desk. I would always sit and pull my desk out and glance at that and then go back to work in a bad situation.*

Something beautifully commonplace comes across in this narrative. Rather than a rehearsed epithet (like Miriam's) or a theological reflection (like Alfred's), Bruce's narrative appears within a stream of consciousness recollection of the past. The trials, successes, and failures intermingle in a singular story, and yet Dale intently professes the activity of God in all of it.

Perhaps more than any other in this project, Bruce's story exemplifies Louwense and Kuiken's four notes of a powerful narrative. The reference to God's providence in Dale's success foregrounds the theme of reliance upon God. The genre – recent history – invites the receivers to believe its truth. Further, the simplicity allows receivers to connect personal experiences to the story, for all know benefit and disappointment at work. Finally, the repetition of the story in person allows a performative feeling to rise in the dialogue. Dale feels the words he conveys, for it is his history, and his experience of God concretely in that past.

While all the facets for potential connection with people exist within the story, the ordinary character may impede a receiver's apprehension of the good news within. Yet, the proclamation of the Gospel depends not on the listener, or even the narrator, but upon God's activity. An essential key in understanding storytelling as proclamation is realizing the need for attentiveness to the stories shared by our brothers and sisters in Christ. As Bruce notes, God not only created the cosmos, but comes alongside creation in intimate fashions. At Grace, God's presence in the mundane appears in many stories. Success in school assignments, loss of family

pets, and assistance in paying bills reflect only a few of the narratives shared where God's appears as a fellow traveler through life.

#### NARRATIVE OF HOPEFUL REMEMBRANCE

Elders are not the only storytellers connected with Grace. A young man sought by numerous collegiate football recruiters, Jeremiah tore knee ligaments on two different occasions, and had them repaired surgically each time. Before a hike at the annual Youth Servant Event in the Appalachian Mountains, he relayed the following story to a group of new youth and adults only two weeks after his second injury and subsequent second surgery.

*You're gonna love the hike! There's this great pool at the bottom of the waterfall. Last year Eli and I jumped in and were swimming around, just having fun. Chris went nuts. He was so mad, yelling at us to get out. But Brian was just laughing and having a great time, telling us to stay in so we could get a picture. We didn't know it was illegal – whoever owns the water rights forbids swimming or fishing – but that made sense why Chris got so angry. But Bryan was so cool. Even though we were wrong, he saw the fun we were having. It was good.*

Context provides the central key to the Gospel message in this narrative. An active veteran of the servant event, Jeremiah found himself incapacitated, unable to take part in much of the construction work and fellowship activities. Even so, Jeremiah's spirit remained high. According to Phyllis Cohen, such healing came from "numerous acts of interpersonal contact, positive identifications, working through anger in the here-and-now, and from progressive communication."<sup>17</sup> In other words, this was not the first time Jeremiah told this story. Indeed, it was a continual conversation piece between him and those who could share in the depth of emotion conveyed through the narrative. Jeremiah's positive attitude occurred in part because he told the story and others listened.

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<sup>17</sup> Phyllis F. Cohen, "The New York Inferno: Taking Solace from the Stories," *Journal of Religion and Health*, 41(2), Summer 2002, 119.

The reactions of the two leaders reveal different yet complementary responses of the church to our activity: regulation and cooperation. Despite Chris's anger, Jeremiah saw the need for rebuke and readily accepted it as guidance. At the same time, Jeremiah relished that Brian, another leader, saw the good in the activity. Despite the fact that swimming in that pool was illegal, the joy of life was seen in those waters. By retelling the narrative of the impromptu bath, Jeremiah recalled a time when he fully enjoyed the use of his body, and further the different ways God's people can respond positively to particular situations.

This narrative characterizes a hopeful remembrance, indicative both of bygone times and an anticipated future. In other words, the retelling of such a story not only brought forth memories of a valuable life experience, but it also fostered hope for a new day: a time when a leg once again heals, when in the fullness of health creation becomes a playground. In Grace, many other stories like this exist, from eldest to youngest. When children squeal of zoo trips, youth bashfully recall first dates, adults reminisce of simpler times, or elders recall a former vibrancy, each proclaims the Gospel that the joy once experienced is a foretaste of the feast to come.

#### NARRATIVE OF PURPOSIVE SUFFERING

During an intergenerational summer Sunday school session on Sabbath, a cancer survivor shared the following, quasi-aphoristic narrative about her experience and God's use of that travail. Karen spoke emphatically, passionate about God's deliverance through struggle.

*I thank God for my cancer. Only after I had to slow down because of treatment did I learn what Sabbath meant. You know? How to rest, how to find peace. I prayed more. I read Scripture more. I got more involved at church. I don't think God gave me cancer, but God used it to bring me closer.*

The power of this claim struck the roomful of listeners. Rather than condemnation, cancer provided an opportunity for a renewal of life. Notice the relationship between this story and the

Easter story: in the hands of God, pain became profitable. In this story, Grace heard the Gospel of purposive suffering.

Notice that Karen's claim did not equate her suffering with salvation. Instead, the salvation wrought by God on the Cross wrought the possibility of anguish being fruitful. Peter Muntigl, a narrative therapist, suggests that re-narrating one's life in the perspective of another allows for a vast growth in meaning.<sup>18</sup> Karen's story does just this: it sees her own story through the lens of God's restoration of humanity. Storytelling within the church, then, takes on a specific character when it embraces the witness of God through history, found specifically in Scripture and the Church, and then tells stories informed by that specific medium.

The story Karen tells does not address the evil of cancer in a direct fashion; it is not a philosophical theodicy. Instead, Karen accepted that the world was imperfect while at the same time perceiving God's work for the good through all things. The narrative of purposive suffering at Grace exists in more unique forms than the other motifs mentioned above. Few carried the weight of Karen's confession, yet many claimed to find purpose in their struggles because God allowed a deeper engagement with the Kingdom of God. Many who told these stories were the men and women who would come by daily, asking for food, clothing, or money to make ends meet. The stories told by a pro golfer out of luck and cash or a Congolese doctor who cannot be accredited in the U.S. cannot be conflated into the story of a woman with cancer. At the same time, each experienced true agony and real loss. And each perceived God to work through that suffering to deepen faith in God and relationship with others.

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Muntigl, "Ontogenesis in Narrative Therapy: A Linguistic-Semiotic Examination of Client Change," *Family Processes*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2004, 110.

## THE PROCLAMATION OF THE PRIESTHOOD

As stated above, the intent of this project is to reveal how communal activity exhibits the congregation's proclamation of the Gospel. The above stories divulge only a miniscule portion of the stories told in Grace Lutheran Church. Yet, the noted motifs allow at least a wider window into the sorts of stories being told, and more importantly, how those stories proclaim the Gospel. The review of literary theory exists to help readers see more deeply into the stories told by brothers and sisters in Christ. The connections of particular stories to the field of literary theory serve as potential ways for Christians to experience the source of the Gospel at the core of the storyteller.

Even so, more explicit connections might be made. The narrative of joyful submission proclaims the value of discipleship, but also reveals a specific disciple before one's eyes. The narrative of sovereignty proclaims God's transcendence while the narrative of mundane presence proclaims the imminence of God, and each reveals the importance of human experience of both God's greatness and condescension. The narrative of hopeful remembrance proclaims the promise of God's kingdom to come, as well as ratifies the goodness of human experience of God in the current life. The narrative of purposive suffering admits current imperfection in the world while embracing God's redemption upon the Cross as the ultimate victory of good over evil, and as such allows suffering to become a conduit of God's deliverance.

We pay attention to these stories because, as Charles Marsh says, such narratives "cast light on the intersection of the experience of God and the experience of the world and shows us in a more vivid form than theology what it means to say that God's purposes are directed always toward the concrete, historical person in community."<sup>19</sup> The proclamation of the Gospel takes

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Marsh, Keith Miller and Beverly Prestwood-Taylor. "Theology and Memoir." n.p. [cited October 27, 2010]. Online: <http://www.livedtheology.org/resources.html#Papers>.

place in history, between persons, and becomes vivid in the life of God's people. The above stories, then, are the particular proclamations of a particular people. However, that through simple narratives Christians can convey such profound truth indicates something deeply significant. Through storytelling, Christians participate in the dispensation of the Gospel. This is the Proclamation of the Priesthood.

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