

“The Stories We Want to Tell...” – HOMECOMING (SEPT 13, 2015)  
Ned Allyn Parker

By the time I call my parents today, as I do most Sunday afternoons, it will be evening in Maine. I’ll walk them through my week, which will take a winding path through random events. Eventually, because he values linear accounts of things, this winding path will make my father crazy. For their part, it will sound like they’re yelling on the other end of the phone... because they *are* yelling... they don’t yet know they can use their inside voices on speaker phone – which will make *me* crazy.

As I tell these stories of my week, I will land on worship, as I tend to do during these Sunday afternoon convo’s. I’ll tell them about the energy of the congregation, and about Faith’s poem, and the choir’s music, and Michelle’s arrangements... I’ll tell them about Janet’s quilt, and Patricia’s prayer, and remind them that **Richard Blanco** is coming next week. My dad will be silent for a moment, and then say something like, “Beautiful.” Or “Spectacular.” My mom... my mom will sigh, pause, and say, “You know, Ned Allyn, you’re never going to find another church like that one. You’ve really made a home there.”

None of us will comment on the linguistic peculiarity, which I, myself, have only recently noticed. At some point along the way, over the five years I’ve announced that I’m making one of these calls “*back home* to Maine,” I dropped the ‘back home’ entirely, and started saying simply, “I’m calling my parents in Maine.”

When I arrived in Seattle on Homecoming Weekend in 2010 my belongings were still in transit from Boston. I realized didn’t have any dress clothes or dress shoes – and the only shoes I did have in the car with me were a pair of sneakers and a pair of sandals.

Worried about what I would wear to worship, I told Tim. He shrugged it off and said, “Wear whichever – sneakers or sandals – it’s your choice!”

“Well,” I said to Tim, “I could also wear my Red Sox hat...”

“Don’t push it,” he responded, with that Tim-Phillip’s-twinkle in his eye.

Of course, what Tim failed to mention (but perhaps some of you remember) was at that time the pastors all sat in large wooden chairs up here on the chancel, facing you... my bare toes exposed for all two hundred of you to see. The only thing I remember from that first Sunday was trying to hide my sandaled feet up under my robe. David Kile was sitting next to me and noticed my discomfort. As we looked out over the entire congregation that Homecoming Sunday, he leaned in, gestured to my feet and whispered, “Well, if it’s good enough for Jesus... [You know we have a Nordstrom’s right down the hill...”]

While this congregation has a rich and vibrant history dating back to that small group of eleven people who gathered together in 1869, my experience of our *present* life has been nothing short of extraordinary. Our moments together have been rich and diverse; many of my own milestones have serendipitously paralleled and been marked by these Homecoming Sundays, which Tim recently called one of our three high holy days as a congregation.

From that first experience as a *slightly* embarrassed sandal-wearing pastor of this church, we moved the next year to September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 – the Homecoming that you ordained me, and together we tried to tell a new story of hope on a day marked by tragedy. The following Homecoming, in 2012, Bob constructed a model of the church, and we *re*introduced a weekly time with children as we slowly put the model together

over a period of eight weeks. The phases of construction were used to illustrate our values. The final week we removed the roof from the model and all of the kids looked inside, where a mirror was fixed, and they saw themselves looking back – acknowledging that they are full and integral participants in our life together.

Finally, it was only one year ago, as we sang *Bring Us Home*, I stood there shaking with tears, realizing I had a life to put back together; the emotion consuming me wasn't sadness – it was overwhelming gratitude that I even had the opportunity to start again. I looked up from the music with tears and snot running down my face and saw Mike Zaugg looking down from the choir loft. He pointed at me, gave me a thumbs up, and I knew in that instant it would all be ok. And it was; the best it's ever been, in fact.

Peppered throughout the Sundays during the rest of these years, I have had opportunities to tell you stories about my adolescent adventures with my best friend, Jeremy Davis, in Port Clyde, ME. Through these reflections, many of you have gone out with Jeremy and me in the back of a lobster boat; you've fished with us off the Port Clyde pier, and caught a seagull named Jean Claude.

Perhaps there are times I get up here and sound like I'm talking about me... me, me, me. But in these stories, you've been lost in the woods with us, and taken nighttime hikes along creeks looking for life *and light* in the darkness. You see, I use these stories to try and make sense out of something so much bigger than I can understand or imagine. I use these stories because, for me, they illustrate what trust and faithfulness look like. I use these stories because they remind me of a time I belonged.

And yet... and yet, I only use these stories to illustrate these things when I'm standing here, in this pulpit. Because whenever I'm anywhere else and I want to illustrate

belonging, and faithfulness, and trust, and being a part of something bigger than I can understand or imagine, I talk about you. I tell *our* stories.

At the opening of one of his books about the fictional place, Lake Wobegon, Garrison Keilor writes to his readers, “You’re the stories I’ve told for years and years.”

When services end, and I stand at the back of the sanctuary greeting you, I often get the same question about my early escapades through the small fishing village in Maine: “Did that really happen?” ... which is funny, because when I tell our stories, when I tell the stories of who Seattle First Baptist Church is and what we do – not what we did, but what we do – I’m often met with similar disbelief.

“Does your church really do that?”

As an established and historic community we often find ourselves telling the stories of who we were, and, yes, these indeed inform who we’ve become and who we’re becoming. But I wonder if, like me, you feel a deep and tender pull within, to tell new stories... the stories of who we are, today... stories yet to be told that are revealing themselves right now, just as the psalmist says:

Day after day a story unfolds;

night after night it rises up to be seen.

Not in speech or words;

sometimes no voice is heard.

But their message goes out through all the world;

their stories go everywhere to the ends of the earth.

It’s important to remember who we were, to be sure, but not at the expense of who we are – not in a way that dilutes the fullness of who we’re becoming. I think the

stories we want to tell are the stories that we're making (right now) - the ones unfolding, not in words just yet, but in our living and our loving together.

Today, we are beginning a whole new year of stories we'll want to tell. Just try to imagine what will unfold in this sanctuary and throughout this building in the next twelve months. Coincidentally, this evening in this very space we occupy now, our brothers and sisters of Bet Alef begin their observance of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New year. A synchronicity of our Spirit of togetherness and welcome... and evidence of the unfolding stories of the *present* life of us.

The stories we want to tell aren't just stories about what *has* happened, they are the stories *happening* now.

They are the stories we tell through our relationships with colleges and non-profits and Diverse Harmony and Companis – the stories being told through outreach.

They are the stories we tell through the intentional investment in resources, which allow us to continue the good work of our community – the stories being told through stewardship.

They are the stories we tell by sharing our space in a building now thriving as it never has before – the stories written on the pages of newly carpeted floors and freshly painted walls housing deeply appreciative non-profits as a result of our church and home operations.

They are the stories sung in the choir room, from the chancel; and the lofty notes of music, over our heads – the lyrical stories assuring us there is, indeed, a God somewhere.

They are the stories of belonging that unfold around this Communion table, where all are welcome and none are turned away hungry – authentic stories being told, even now, as a result of our worship together.

They are the stories told by simply knowing the names of our children and young people, and by creating safe places for them to explore who they're becoming; the stories told as we come together to raise little Maria and Jasmine and Garret and Oliver and Grayson all of the other children, so neither they nor their parents ever once have an opportunity to question how much they are cherished beyond measure – the stories written as a result of our love for families.

They are the stories that are *you*, sitting here, now – the stories told through our friends and members. Within these stories, you are the words giving them form and flow.

We are already telling the stories we think we want to tell.

We are already who we believe we want to become.

If you visit the website and look under the “History” tab, you’ll find a number of interesting occasions in our time as a community. Jim Segaar has done a beautiful job telling our story with this online presence. In the final paragraph on the history page, Jim writes, “That history remains alive among us as we continue to *write new stories* of faith, justice, and peace...” Well, here you are, those stories. If my heart had ears, I would be hearing them. *You*. Love stories.

The psalmist requests, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O God.” Perhaps, recognizing ourselves as the words in a great love story such as this one, we might find acceptance that redeems us, even when we think the story is over.

The good old church stories of grace and redemption and hope and joy aren't old at all, because we're sitting here. Full of God's grace, now. Redeemed, now. Hopeful, now. Joyful, now.

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Let me pause to say that I'm not dismissing or disregarding the stories some of us can tell about brokenness; I am not forgetting that some of us can tell a few stories about addiction; I'm not leaving voiceless those of us who have been abused... I cannot and will not forget these stories, because by walking into this space, we walk into a sacred covenant with one another – we covenant to hold the very tension of these realities; to write stories of gratitude while we're here, to share stories of hope when we leave, and to tell the neighbor's story when they can't tell it themselves.

They are stories we'll remember to tell... and they'll be accompanied by new stories, even as we end this service and go downstairs to share food around tables – just as our tradition tells us we should. Jesus said, “When you do this, do it remembering me.” In that remembering we are inspired to continue the great story of justice that transcends this community, and is yet being written on its behalf.

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It's about that time for us to get downstairs. I don't know about you, but afterwards, I need to get home to make a phone call to my parents in Maine. I want to show them some pictures of Janet's quilt... and I have a few new stories I want to tell. I hope you do, too.

So, my brothers and sisters, we close singing our blessing over the food we are about to eat, “Nourish us with sacred story till we claim it as our own... teach us through this holy banquet how to make love’s victory known...”

And may that sacred story continue to be told in fresh new ways...