

September 15, 2013 Norwalk

Pastoral Prayer

For the sheer goodness of the morning, O God, we give you thanks – for the air that fills our lungs and the sunlight that feeds our eyes; for the breeze that interrupts the heat and the deep, settling awareness, sitting here, that you are holding us in the strength of your embrace. We are grateful for fertile fields and the farmers who work them; active and fertile minds and the teachers who stretch them; honest businesses and the workers who drive them; and companions along the way – like those who surround us just now – who befriend and encourage us, and who reveal and reflect your image among us. Indeed, we are grateful for all those blessings that coax and nourish and utilize the best within us and, by your grace, enable us to thrive. Here in the power of these moments we know ourselves to be blessed.

But so blessed, we are not always blessing. We can parade ourselves to the front of the room when the banquet isn't about us. We can assert the definitive answer when the question wasn't addressed to us. We sometimes talk when we ought to be listening, and we can strut when we ought to bow. We can judge, sometimes, when grace would be the better posture, and we can stack and hoard and jealously protect when we already have far more than we need. Help us, then, to lighten up and loosen up and consider the possibility that together we are co-workers in a common project instead of competitors in a fight to the finish.

You began this day in generosity and goodness. Fulfill its promise, we pray, through us. We pray in Jesus' name, and continue with the words he taught us: Our father in heaven...

1 Timothy 1:12-17

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

From Humble Beginnings

Rock guitarist Joe Walsh -- once-upon-a-time the frontman of the band, "*The James Gang*" and in more recent decades lead guitar player for the iconic band "*The Eagles*," -- recently reflected on his assessment of contemporary music: "They're just cranking out music that is like a recipe," he lamented. "Nobody's playing at the same time. Everybody's adding on virtual instruments that don't exist, onto a drum machine that somebody programmed. It's all been programmed. There's no mojo. There's nobody testifying."

I was struck when I heard his description. "There's nobody 'testifying.'" What does that mean, I wondered? It's an old, old word, to be sure -- especially in the church. But while some ardent fans might argue that listening to his music occasions, for them, something like a "religious experience," I don't really think Walsh was talking about faith. I think what he was getting at is the honest expression -- through music -- of something of the core of one's truth; without contrivance or artifice; just the authentic expression of realness.

Which took me back to the once-common practice of "testifying" in church. It hardly ever happens anymore -- especially in mainline churches like ours. Perhaps it's because of all the narrative excesses that came to characterize them -- the seeming self-aggrandizing tales of depravity and debauchery that were miraculously transformed by some dramatic conversion into piety. Or maybe it's because we simply came to be bent much more in the direction of privacy and keeping our spiritual business to ourselves. Whatever the reason, it has, in our generation, become largely a lost art.

Lillian Daniel, a United Church of Christ minister serving at the time a congregation in New Haven, Connecticut, came to the sense that the "lostness" of that artform was costing her congregation something precious. They were good, intellectually sophisticated and socially conscious Christians, but they didn't talk much about their faith -- at least their experience of it.

And so she resolved to help the congregation exercise that muscle. But there were some big obstacles. While they were familiar with testimonials the likes of which they wanted to avoid, they didn't have any clarity about how to offer them differently. They began to talk to one another in small groups, and to learn more about the practice from their tradition's history. Eventually, as a way of adding some juice to their worship experience throughout one season of Lent, they recruited 5 members that were not commonly in front of the congregation to offer their testimony.

Even then, knowing how to do it was elusive. What, after all, “could we testify to on Sunday morning that we could not just as easily testify to on National Public Radio?”

“Our definition ended up being simple: A testimony was your spoken story about how you had experienced God, offered in the context of our community worship.” That middle phrase became the challenging but iron-clad requirement: somewhere, sometime in the course of a testimonial, they had to refer to “God.” (from the book, *Tell It Like It Is*)

I can appreciate the difficulty. Several years ago I took our church’s Preparation for Baptism class over to a retirement home to visit with a couple of the “saints” of the congregation -- longtime faithful members who were the type more commonly referred to as “pillars of the church.” After some introductory small-talk I asked the elders to talk to the kids about their faith -- how it had influenced their living, their work lives, their relationships. These, after all, were church leaders -- the ones who had literally built that congregation through blood, sweat, tears and financial struggles. “Tell us about your faith,” I asked. And all we heard were crickets. Nothing. These two blessed saints whose lives were woven into the fabric of our congregation -- for whom the church had been the centerpiece of life -- could think of nothing to say. I couldn’t believe it! Where was the testimony?

In the passage read this morning, the Apostle Paul, in the course, apparently, of guiding a young protégé into the groove of church leadership, gives us no small introduction to the fine art of it. “Here’s who I was. Here’s what happened. Here’s who I am as a result -- and here’s who ought to get the credit.”

Originally from the city of Tarsus in Asia Minor, Paul – originally named “Saul” -- received at least some of his education from a well-respected rabbi in Jerusalem; went on to become a Pharisee with a passion for fiercely defending his ancestral traditions. Indeed, according to the book of Acts, “Saul laid waste to the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (8:3). Just before telling the conversion story to which Paul here refers, the narrator notes that Saul was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord (9:1)”.

And then something happened that changed Saul’s life forever. Often referred to as a “conversion”, the militant “Saul” became the Apostle “Paul” bearing witness to a change so great that only a new name could represent it. And with an energy equal to that with which he had opposed the spreading Gospel, Paul became the movement’s greatest proponent. It was, as I think about it, classic spiritual aikido.

Aikido is a Japanese martial art synthesizing physical defense, philosophy and even religious belief, which redirects the force of an attacker into a positive action. It is an action that absorbs an evil and turns it into a good – as in the Holy Spirit redirecting Saul’s murderous vigilantism into Paul’s evangelistic zeal. I love to see that kind of thing happen!

About this time last year Lori and I traveled across the prairies of Kansas to attend the 34th annual

Prairie Festival sponsored by the [Land Institute](#) near Salina. There were scientific reports, art exhibitions, folk concerts, dire lectures by climate change experts, glimpses into the tragic stories of farmers in India who were shifted from subsistence farming to cash cropping.

And there were prairie walks. We hiked out into the fields to explore the test plots under the guidance and annotation of the scientists who are conducting the fascinating research undertaken by the Institute. All focused on the perennialization of grains, my favorite of which involved efforts involving grain sorghum.....and Johnson grass. Johnson grass -- a noxious weed -- and sorghum -- a desirable grain. Crossed.

It turns out that Johnson grass and sorghum share some genetic ancestry which make them likely partners. This isn't, after all, the kind of genetic modification that borrows an isolated gene from a butterfly and inserts it into a squash to produce a kind of tie-dyed pumpkin. This is the slow and tedious process of shaping and nudging the generations of natural selection and crossing between cousins to borrow the desirable traits in one for the benefit of the other.

Or, as I was thinking, a kind of horticultural aikido: redirecting the tenacious reproductive and perennial prowess of the Johnson grass -- typically viewed with hostility by gardeners the world over -- to the positive benefit of the sorghum, rendering it not only perennial, but also as tenacious as its incorporated cousin.

“I’m so grateful to Christ Jesus,” Paul testifies in the translation known as “The Message,” for making me adequate to do this work. He went out on a limb, you know, in trusting me with this ministry. The only credentials I brought to it were invective and witch hunts and arrogance. But I was treated mercifully because I didn’t know what I was doing—didn’t know Who I was doing it against! Grace mixed with faith and love poured over me and into me. And all because of Jesus. Here’s a word you can take to heart and depend on: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. I’m proof—Public Sinner Number One—of someone who could never have made it apart from sheer mercy. And now he shows me off—evidence of his endless patience—to those who are right on the edge of trusting him forever.”

Here is the power of testimony: not merely experiencing the transformation, but articulating it humbly and honestly; to be able to confess out loud, “I was on the wrong side.”

Several years ago the church I was serving undertook a fairly extensive renovation of our sanctuary. One elderly member – a longtime elder and leader in his prime – was adamantly opposed to the project. By this time a 90-something year-old curmudgeon, he was nonetheless still vigorously involved influentially in various expressions of congregational life, and he never missed an opportunity to bad mouth the project. His were the usual bag of reasons -- needless expense; foolhardy undertaking; what we had was fine. As far as he was concerned, the whole idea was

patently absurd.

We met in the fellowship Hall while the renovation was underway, and the work construction zone was fairly well sealed off, so the actual progress of the work was sort of under wraps. But finally the day came for the great unveiling. On the first Sunday back, as worship proceeded to the sharing of joys and concerns, this outspoken antagonist stood and recalled his vocal and very public opposition. “But,” he confessed stalwartly, “I am here to eat crow. I was dead wrong. This is the best thing this congregation has done in years.”

That man has become my hero – a model of the power of conversion and the willingness to speak of it forthrightly and “on the record.”

Something like the Apostle Paul. “Here’s who I was – wrong as it was. Here, by the graceful aikido of the Holy Spirit, is who I am. Thanks be to God.”

I don’t know what your story might be – nor the redirecting aikido by which the Holy Spirit reshaped it toward holy use. Nor do I know who it is who needs to hear that story. I only know that the world hears more than enough virtual instruments that don’t really exist, added onto pre-programmed rhythms devoid of any mojo; and that it could use some testifying – some honest glimpse into the soul of something real that has been strummed into what can only be described as music by nothing less than the hand of God.

That’s what they call “evangelism,” you know.

And that’s why they call it, “good news.”