

## *Testify to Love - Your Story Matters*

### *“My Story”*

[Ephesians 2:8-10](#)

During the time of greeting after the worship service last Sunday, someone said these words to me, “Welcome! I am so happy that you are our pastor.” And with a big smile on her face, she continued, “I could understand everything you said today. I’ve had no problem!” I’m sure her relief was shared by other members of the congregation, who must have wondered about my English fluency when informed that I was not a native speaker. For those of you who were here last week, I hope your worship experience was as positive as hers and that you will continue to be able to understand me today and always!

But, let me share a warning with you. Although it has been over 28 years since I moved to the States, I still speak English with a slight accent -- maybe a southern accent because I come from South Korea. So, it might take a little while for you to get used to it. On the plus side, maybe it will keep you alert as you have to pay extra attention to what I am saying. But, if I see anyone dozing off during my sermon this morning, I will assume that they are still practicing saying my name with the two images I shared with you through the SPRC - an oak tree and yawning....

“Testify to Love - Your Story Matters” was the theme of the California-Nevada Annual Conference this year. Erin Hawks, the general secretary of the General Commission on Religion and Race led a Bible study on this theme in three sessions. She reflected on several biblical stories, told us her own stories, and also invited the members of our annual conference to share their stories with one another. This powerful Bible study that she led birthed a mantra which spread through the conference. Many speakers and presenters either began or ended their talks with the phrase of “This is my story,” or “This is our story.”

Throughout the annual conference, we heard many powerful stories from many different people, both clergy and laity alike. They were stories of imagination and reimagination, stories of creation and recreation, stories of development and redevelopment, stories of vitalization and revitalization, stories of passion and compassion, stories of courage and change, and stories of healing and hope. And, through their unique stories, everyone was testifying to the love of God in Jesus Christ at work in their lives!

I was so inspired by the spirit-filled session of the Cal-Nevada annual conference that I have decided to use its theme for our worship series this month. Today, I start with “My Story,” as we begin our journey together with me serving as your lead pastor. Next Sunday, we will reflect on “Our Story” as Campbell United Methodist Church, and the following Sunday, we will try to discover “God’s Story” for us. Now, let’s dive into the first sermon in the series, “My Story.”

Early this past April, our former District Superintendent, Rev. Staci Current introduced me to the Staff-Parish Relations Committee of our church. She gave the committee members copies of my resume and asked me to tell them something about myself. So, I did. I told them some stories about myself, my family, my ministry experiences, and why I was relocating to California.

As I recall, the message that I conveyed to the committee members through the stories I shared was basically this:

- *Throughout my life, God has led me to places where I had never planned to be;*
- *After following God to places where I had never even dreamed of visiting, once again, I am being led to this place where I could never have imagined myself going to.*
- *I do not now why God is sending me here. I wonder, 'For what purpose is God calling me?,' which is a question I have had before each of my past 5 appointments. What is the very thing God wants to accomplish at Campbell United Methodist Church through someone like me at a time like this?*
- *I don't have an answer for that question yet. But, what I know and can tell you is this:*

*We will have a great time together, as long as we come into partnership of ministry with a willingness to respect and appreciate each other's different gifts to build up the church, which is the body of Jesus Christ.*

Indeed, the story of my life and ministry has never had anything to do with my cleverness or diligence, but everything to do with the grace of God. By the grace of God, I was able to complete my theological studies and ordination process to become a clergywoman in the United Methodist Church. By the grace of God, I was able to successfully serve in all of my ministry fields. By the grace of God, my husband and I are still together in spite of our long distance marriage, and somehow our now adult children have found their way, both happily married and pursuing their passions.

When I consider all the things that I did not know or did not have or did not do to be successful over the course of my life and ministry, it's quite amazing that I have made it this far. When I began my ordained ministry, it was only 4 years after I had come to the States. Of course, my English was not as good as it is now, and I often mispronounced certain words. It was especially hard for me to differentiate between long vowels and short vowels. My linguistic shortcomings would sometimes shock and confuse people, and other times, they would lead to comedic moments with people bursting out in laughter. I fondly remember the day when shock, confusion, and laughter all happened at the same place.

The setting was a Staff-Parish Relations Committee meeting. After it had concluded, people were lingering to visit with one another. There were copies of an article that I wanted people to take with them on the way out. It was quite noisy in the room, so I said in a rather loud voice, "Please don't forget to take the sheet with you." Suddenly, all the talking stopped and everyone in the room froze. Within seconds, I knew what had happened. I had said something terrible. I had mispronounced sheet and had told everyone to take the S H I T with them! I quickly corrected my mistake by saying, "I mean S H E E T!" As you can imagine, the whole room broke down into laughter.

Without a doubt, the grace of God has saved me again and again, not only in my first church but in all of the subsequent church appointments and ministry fields God has sent me to work. Even at this very moment as I stand before you preaching this message, I know that I am being saved

by the grace of God. And if the past and present is any indication, I know that I will continue to be saved by the grace of God.

Today's scripture reading says, "by grace, you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Our United Methodist heritage is grounded in a deep understanding of God's grace. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, explained it in a threefold manner: as prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace.

Though I am certain many of you know the concepts of Wesley's grace as good, faithful United Methodists, let me refresh our memory:

- **Prevenient grace** is God's grace that is present in our lives even before we know it. This grace develops within us a desire to know God and to respond to God's invitation to be in relationship with God.
- **Justifying grace** is God's grace that is available to us through the work of God in Jesus Christ. By this grace, we experience repentance and forgiveness of sins, reconciliation and restoration in relationships with God and others.
- **Sanctifying grace** is God's grace that helps us to be holy, to continuously grow and mature in our love of God and one another.

This grace of God, which John Wesley explained in this threefold way, is a gift from God to each of us. There is nothing you have to do to receive God's grace because it is a gift! And, "My Story," the story I have the privilege of sharing with you today is of receiving such a gift from God every day and every moment of my life and ministry.

In the coming weeks, months, and (God-willing) years of ministering among you, I will have many occasions to tell you my story and the story of God's grace and mercy in my life and ministry. But, I would also like to listen to your stories, too. We carry with ourselves many different stories, and we love to share these stories. Some of our stories are stories of joy and celebration, while some are stories of pain and struggle. Some of our stories are stories of triumphant success, and others are stories of miserable failure. Among the multitude of stories which comprise the chapters of your life, I wonder what stories you will decide to share with me and the rest of the congregation.

No matter what kinds of stories you choose to tell, I leave you with a challenge. As you look back on your unique collection of memories, I ask that you examine them to find evidence of God's grace, this free gift that we have all received, are receiving, and will always receive. What amazing things has God done for you, with you, through you, and even in spite of you. In doing so, we testify to God's love. We testify to the love of God through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen!