

## BELOVEDS, TELL YOUR STORY

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Grace Church in New York  
John 6:51-58  
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My first job after seminary was in Orange County, California. Since I was living in Connecticut at the time, this meant that I would need to drive cross country to move there. My roommate in seminary was a woman named Sarah, and she decided to join me so that we could turn the move into a road trip, and we decided to drive the historic Route 66 from Chicago to Los Angeles. Sarah bought one of those books about Route 66 that tells you all the cool places to visit along the way, and we decided to visit as many of them as we could. One was a Native American reservation called Acoma. Acoma is the oldest continually inhabited village in the United States, and well worth the trip if you're ever in the area. Sarah and I took the official tour, and because the town is situated on the top of a mesa, or mountain plateau that seems to tower over the surrounding desert, we took a bus up to the top. From the edge, if you looked down, it looked like a drop of a couple hundred feet.

As part of the tour, our guide took us to their church, Saint Stephen's. The tour guide explained to us that this church was called St Stephen's because Stephen was the first Christian martyr, and while there was currently a Catholic church in their community, it had taken the villagers many years to accept Catholicism, and many Spanish missionaries had tried to convert them earlier on, but each was martyred when the villagers, deciding they didn't like the missionaries, threw them off the cliff of the mesa to their deaths. Upon hearing that there was a history of throwing priests over the edge, Sarah and I looked at each other and said, "let's not tell them what we do."

Sometimes it seems difficult to talk about my faith. Not just in moments where I'm surrounded by strangers and don't know how they'd perceive me and my beliefs, but also sometimes around people I know, and specifically, people I know well. I'm not always confident that I know how they'd react if I told them about how my faith is influencing my opinions or actions.

I'll share my opinion and continue with my same action, but I might not tell people the *why*. Maybe I'm afraid that they'll see me differently, or lump me in with other Christians with whom I vehemently disagree on many topics. Maybe I'm afraid they'll share their beliefs and I'll learn that I disagree with them. Maybe other things are going on that I'm not even fully aware of.

And maybe you know what I mean, maybe you can relate. Maybe you, too, have had moment when it would make sense for you to share a story about your faith, and yet you've shied away from telling that story. I wish I could assure us all that this is okay. That holding back on our beliefs and what we know and believe about God is part of our Christian way of life. But after reading today's Gospel reading, I can't. This passage challenges me – and challenges us all – to tell our faith story. Our life as Christians is meant to mold us more and more in the likeness of Christ, and in today's reading that means speaking boldly about what we believe.

Today is the third Sunday in a row when Jesus speaks of being the Bread of Life. Each week he has gotten more and more adamant about what he believes his purpose on earth is to be, and has said so with more and more force.

At first, he claimed to be the Bread of Life to the hungry crowds, who were looking for a sign that God loved them, then he claimed to be the Bread of Life to the religious authorities who were outraged that he would make such a claim, and this week he pushes them even further by adding, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.” If he hadn’t infuriated the religious authorities already, he was certainly doing it now.

Jesus knew his purpose: that God had sent him for the sake of the redemption of the world. That he was going to sacrifice himself for all people, as a sign of unbounded, unmerited love and grace. That people would connect with him so deeply after that, that they would feel his presence in their lives, and in their very being.

And that Jesus would be the resurrection, and in the resurrection take all people to eternal life. Jesus did not shy from making his beliefs known, even though he knew this would only upset those around him. Today’s Gospel, then, challenges those of us who shy away from telling our faith story, our connection to God, our calling, or our walk with Jesus.

In an effort, then, to practice what I preach, here is a story that influences how I understand the resurrection. I have a cousin named Leslie, who died a little over four years ago. When she was in her late 20’s she was diagnosed with colon cancer, and by the time it was discovered, it had also spread to her liver. Throughout the next six years she went through a series of treatments, surgeries, and extended hospital visits. Every day for six years I prayed for her health and that she might live. Eventually the cancer also spread to her lungs, and there was no longer anything that medical science could do for her. She died in her early 30’s.

To say I was angry was an understatement. Knowing myself, and that I’m the kind of person who could be swallowed up by these emotions indefinitely, I prayed for a miracle, that I would somehow find peace in the midst of all of this pain. No sooner had I finished this request than the thought came to me – not from within my own anger-filled mind, but as a gift – the thought occurred to me that Leslie was on death’s door the moment she was diagnosed and the fact that she lived for another six years – six years! – was a miracle. It was borrowed time, and time really well spent with the people she loved, enjoying the things she loved. I was able to see those such years as a gift, and the thought was balm for my soul. I was able to give up my anger and feel comfort. I was able to understand that each day any of us has is a gift, and in the midst of pain, feel such gratitude.

For the first time, I had experienced the agony of death, and the gift of new life. And then I thought, if this is how God has granted me new life, imagine what God has done for Leslie. For the first time, the concept of the resurrection seemed not only plausible, but utterly real. To Jesus’ statement that he will raise us up, I can confidently declare, yes, Lord, I believe.

One of my greatest joys while being here at Grace Church these past two years is hearing your stories of faith. So many of you have stories of prayers answered, miracles witnessed, and grace received.

So many of you have leaned on your faith to make bold decisions and proclaim great truths. And each time you have shared these things with me, I was blessed and my faith was strengthened. I wonder, though, how often do we share these faith stories with each other?

Jesus modeled for us the way to share our faith boldly. The church has taken this model and used it to inform our weekly worship in two ways. Each time we proclaim the Nicene Creed, we stand side by side and proclaim what we believe. And each time we share in communion, we pray the Eucharistic Prayer to God, in which we recount the history of redemption, and how that culminated in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

So you and I have to confess that, at the end of the day, we have a lot of practice in telling our story of faith, but again, I return to the question of how often we, in fact, share our faith stories with each other and with the world.

As I hope you've heard – unless you are new to Grace Church today, in which case: welcome! – that today is my last day here at Grace Church. I have been called to serve as the interim rector at another Grace Church, in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York. I have loved being a part of this community, and will be forever grateful for my time here. I will cherish each and every story that you have shared with me, and please know that each time you have shared your faith, you have strengthened mine. I pray the same is true for you.

There is a tradition that when a priest gives their final sermon to a congregation, they give a charge. Here is my charge for you: tell your faith stories.

Jesus boldly told his faith story. He knew his role in the kingdom of God and the story of redemption. He proclaimed with authority what he knew God was working in the world. Through telling his story, he invited others in, to be a part of his story, and thereby the story of God's love. He did not care if everyone agreed with him or understood him, he only cared that they used his words to draw closer to God, and let God abide in their lives. Because Jesus is in you, and you are in him, your stories of faith carry that same power. Each time you share your story of faith, of what God has done in your life, you carry the potential to help someone else realize what God is doing in their life. And so, we all build each other up when we share with each other our stories of faith.

My story was about how I came to understand the idea of walking in newness of life. Your story may capture some other example of God's great love. But all of us, together, sharing our stories, build up each other; they build up the church.

When Jesus told his story, it changed the world. The world still needs to hear the Good News of God's great love for us all and the ways that manifests in each of our lives. I know that God's love is manifest in your lives, you have told me about it. So with confidence I can say, friends, you are God's beloved. Beloveds, tell your story.