

Going Public

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Matthew 3:13-17

Some of the questions I often get asked here have something to do with how in the world do I endure my daily commute from my Buffalo area home to Rochester. How long does it take? About 75 minutes with no traffic delays. Do I get bored during the drive? Well, my mom always told me and my siblings that “only boring people get bored.” So suffice it to say, getting bored is not an option! For I would never ever want to be known as a boring person!

So, to combat that dreaded outcome, I usually do a combination of things. Sometimes they're quiet - like meditating or praying, gearing up for the day or winding down at the end. Sometimes they're a little noisier, like arguing with God every once in a while, or singing along with some great 70's and 80's tunes. I often listen to great classical music on public radio – (I know exactly when I have to switch from the Buffalo to Rochester stations and vice versa). And then every day I'll spend some time listening to news and features on NPR.

If I'm doing that at 8:30 on Friday mornings, I'll get to hear StoryCorps, an oral history project that interviews and records the stories of ordinary people. Probably some of you listen to it. Maybe you heard the story I heard little more than a week ago – the story of Susan Mello Souza and Mary Moran Murphy. These two women talked about when they first met back in 1968. They were both teenagers and pregnant. Their families wanted to keep it a secret, so the girls were sent to a home for unwed mothers. Susan and Mary were assigned to be roommates at this institution and they recalled when they first met.

They were given fictitious names, they said. Mary was given the name Melody. And Susan was given the name Stella. The rule was - they weren't supposed to tell each other their real names. But they broke that rule. Susan said, “We did. I think the first thing we said to each other was, what's your real name?” Eventually they both gave birth, left their children there to be adopted, and returned to their homes, where those experiences were never discussed again. It broke my heart. What inner turmoil that must have generated – first to be shuttled off and kept hidden from the public, and then to be told to keep your very identity concealed. And then to go through a life-altering experience and to have to keep that story buried inside...

Poet Maya Angelou reportedly said, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” That pretty much says it, doesn't it? Whether the story tugs at you like the story of Susan and Mary, or whether the story is something wonderful and amazing, like the old joke about a pastor who decided to play hooky from church and skip preaching on a beautiful Sunday morning so she could go golfing. Well, she hit a hole in one, wanting to shout from the mountaintop, “Guess what, I made a hole in one!!” but she dare not tell anyone about it lest her congregation find out! Agony.

The Gospel of Matthew unfolds the story of Jesus and reveals his true identity in a really fascinating way. Matthew does it bit by bit, giving hints, to be sure, but never quite laying it out there so explicitly until the pivotal moment in today's Gospel reading when its magnitude can no longer be held back. If we go back to the beginning in chapter 1 verse 1, Matthew first reveals Jesus through his human genealogy, generation after generation after generation. It's the part we tend to skip over, even though we deprive ourselves of some hidden gems. More on that another day. In short, Jesus is human son, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Then Matthew sparsely (and I mean sparsely) narrates the birth story. His only embellishment is that upon learning of the pregnancy, Joseph wants

to save Mary from public disgrace and divorce her quietly until he learns the child is from the Holy Spirit.

But other than that, the story is simply that Mary bore a son, and Joseph named him Jesus. Jesus, son of Mary, married to Joseph, son of David. Nothing else. Neither angels nor shepherds make the cut (you have to go to Luke for that). Let's just keep this birth event under the radar until the wise men show up. That's the part of the story we celebrate at the Boar's Head Festival this weekend, the epiphany. But think about it, in Matthew's narrative, only the wise men learn of the Christ child (not the whole world, just the wise men). Then the baby's life is threatened by King Herod, so in secrecy, the Holy Family escapes to Egypt, to flee the Herod's wrath until they can return to an unremarkable agricultural village called Nazareth, to live and work in obscurity.

Then Matthew jumps ahead 30 years. From birth to this moment in today's Gospel, Matthew has said nothing else of Jesus' life. Nothing about his childhood, his adolescence, his apprenticeships and adventures. Nothing. In a literary sense, he's been hidden away, as if to protect his life. In fact, at this moment, it's not even Jesus that we hear of first. It's his cousin, John the Baptist, who is seemingly the extreme extrovert in this bunch. Now John has already made a name for himself with his tell-it-like-it-is, put-the-fear-of-God-in-them preaching, (spurred on, perhaps, by eating a just few too many locusts and drinking a little too much wild honey). Or maybe that camel's hair tunic was just a little too itchy – I don't know. Whatever the source, John sure could fire up a crowd, and today is no exception. John is out in the River Jordan in the wilderness, crowds of people lined up waiting their turn to be baptized by him.

Now...a wilderness might be, and usually is, a place of isolation, of desolation, of secrecy, even. But not today. Today is for people from all over Jerusalem and Judea to see – to see John baptizing folks one by one, confessing their sins. Can't you picture the folks peering around, craning their necks to see past the parade of pilgrims making their way down into the river? And look over there - blending in right in the middle of that procession, hiding in plain sight is Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, cousin of John, come to be baptized.

"You're kidding," John blurts out. "I'm the one that needs to be baptized by you; not you by me." It's only at this moment, for the very first time in Matthew, that we hear Jesus' own voice – "It's necessary to make things right." And so he is, baptized by John. As Jesus comes up from the water, droplets of the Jordan clinging to his skin, the heavens are suddenly ripped open. He sees the Spirit of God come down like a dove and a voice from heaven announces with great delight, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." This is the first time Matthew explicitly says for all to hear, the whole crowd - this is God's Son. Another epiphany – the Son of God breaking into our midst, hidden in plain sight no more. The secret's out. And everything changes. Now he's gone public – who he really is, everything he does, what he's all about – it's instantaneously all over social media; and about 12 hours later all over the front page of the newspaper.

In today's culture we have conflicted notions over what information ought to be public and what should remain private. When candidates run for public office, what are they obligated to reveal about their private lives? What's the public's right to know – where does it start, and where does it stop? And as more and more of our personal information is stored electronically, and our online usage patterns can be tracked, who gets to access to what information? And then of course, so many of us now can post pictures and comments online; where do we draw limits on how much to reveal on Facebook? (Personally, my rule of thumb is never post anything I wouldn't want my congregation to see).

But the rub for us in today's text, or the rub for me at least, is the question of what it means for us to live out our faith in a public way. For this Jesus event at the Jordan River was not only the public announcement of his divine identity, it was the inaugural event of his public ministry. You see, Jesus couldn't be God-With-Us and remain private. His identity had to be made public. Jesus embodied God's story of hope and restoration. And that story had to get out. It had to be told; it had to be lived; it

had to be experienced. Jesus had to enter the public stage. There was no choice. How else could he transform lives with his public ministry of healing and teaching and being Good News of great joy for all the people.

So it is for us. We whom God calls beloved children, too, have to grapple with the public implications of our identity in Christ - an identity meant not to be concealed, but to be revealed. What's just between me and God is nice. But what's between (or among) me and God and you and them and all of us together – well, that's where it gets really amazing.

Yesterday, I spent the day with folks from 24 other Presbyterian churches from this area and with Ray Jones from our denomination's Office of Evangelism and Church Growth. Ray, who describes himself as a "recovering fundamentalist" led us in a truly great day together. With humor and grace and humility, he helped us think about our own stories of where we have experienced good news, and in those stories finding ways to engage others more intentionally – to be more transparent about our faith through what we say and how we live our lives. Not to be judgmental or exclusionary of others who believe differently. Not because we have all the answers, but because it is what uniquely forms the hope that we have within us.

It's an area that some of the leaders of this church are thinking a lot about– how we will share the story of God's work in this church with our community. And it's something I'd love to explore with more of you in conversation. For we're all at particular places in our faith journeys. And the ways God calls us to grow and risk opening up with others are as particular as the journeys we're on. So I wonder what it means for each of us, at whatever place we are now, to take it up a notch? What's that next little step, a baby step, even?

Maybe there's a justice issue that we care about, but we haven't spoken up or done anything about it. We've let our voice remain silent far too long. I can certainly think of justice issues where I could and should have spoken up far sooner. Issues of racism, of economic injustice, access to good education, enough food for those at risk. We speak often of the need to walk the talk, and there are also times to talk the walk – to give voice to those who need one. That's certainly one that hit home for me in a particular ways. Some of those issues are so big, it's hard to know how to respond. So maybe that next step is to get informed (which is always a good thing before we open our mouths!).

Speaking of talking, maybe we have experienced God's presence in our own lives, and have yet to share that story in our own authentic words so that others might find hope through it.

In his retirement years, my dad drives a school bus route in my hometown. A few years ago, he told me about a fellow bus driver who had taken his own life. The man was considered by many to be a misfit. He struggled with depression and probably with other things. People and kids would make fun of him. But dad was a friend to him. They'd go together to go wash the school buses in between routes and they'd talk. And they'd done that just the day before this tragedy. The man said how much he felt unloved. And dad told me that even though he'd extended the hand of friendship to this man, the one thing he regretted he'd never said was, "God loves you." Would it have made a difference in the eventual outcome? Probably not. We all know issues surrounding mental health are so complicated that one simple sentence isn't going to change things. And I believe that God did not abandon this man in life or in death. But maybe for someone that one word of God's love would give a glimmer of hope, if just for a moment.

Sometimes I think we discount our own story as too little, too meaningless. Not so, my friend. Not so. I've heard some of your stories. They're remarkable. I have found hope through them.

Some of us, though, are tongue-tied. The good news is there are other ways to live our faith in public. What about the ministry of showing up in places where hope is sorely needed? Jesus had a knack for doing that. Where can we simply show up in peoples' lives? Where are the places of

loneliness and despair where we can bring our presence because we care as Jesus cared, and maybe not even have to say a word at all?

One of the things I love about the cloister connecting our chapel with the sanctuary are all of its clear windows. I love how people from the outside, people on the street, people on the sidewalks, can see through those windows and glimpse what's inside. This past summer, we held our weekly Tuesday morning prayer service in the cloister because it was air conditioned. But better than that, people could walk by and see this community gathered together in prayer. And I love how, every Sunday morning, especially as our adult and children's choirs line up in the cloister before worship, people on the outside can see something's happening. They can get beyond the stone façade and see the movement and the procession and the sense that we are part of the bigger story of God loving the world.

Speaking of choirs, the congregation I served prior to coming here had a tiny choir. It was a small ensemble; I sang with them, and we were usually a little off-key, musically speaking. But in terms of living their faith, they were right on pitch. There was a particular song they loved to sing, and I loved to sing it with them. They sang it again on my final Sunday with them, and the lyrics said this. "Do they see Jesus in me? Do they recognize his face? Do I communicate his love and his grace? Do they see Jesus in me?"

Do they? Do I? Do we? How can we not? Amen.