

Storytime

This is the second sermon in my series Holy Home. Last week, I reminded us that our faith is not something that we can strengthen and grow by practicing it only one hour a week, it requires our daily attention, in prayer, and attentiveness to God.

I never became a very good violinist, because even though I went to my lessons every week, I didn't do a good job as practicing all the other days. I got about as good as you can get practicing an hour a week, which wasn't good enough to play in my college's orchestra.

Our faith is something that we need to practice daily if it is going to transform our lives for the better.

Prayer is one great way to do that, introducing regular practices of prayer, especially with our children if they are still at home, is an important way to help our connection with God continue to grow.

This week I want to talk about another way. Telling stories.

I think I could practically write a script for Thanksgiving dinner with my Aunts, Uncles, and Cousins.

Each year we gather over familiar food, a touchpoint in our ever changing and growing lives.

But we don't just eat the same food every years.

We usually tell the same stories.

Sure there are the perfunctory updates about life, the funny thing that happened earlier in the kitchen, or a saga of this year's turkey, which, cooked faster than anyone expected it too (it always does).

But most of our time together is spent with the greatest hits.

There is the one about our Grandfather and Grandmother, who fell in love during a doubles tennis match at the Orienta Beach club in New York where she agreed to drive across country to Stanford with him the next week, when they stopped in Reno, my grandfather learned for the first time that my grandmother was engaged, when she realized she ought to call her fiancée and tell him the wedding was off.

Or there is the one about when one of my Aunts left her three children with a friend for the weekend. She were a little nervous, because they were leaving their kids with someone who did not have children of her own, and tended to be a bit of a free spirit. When they went back to pick their kids up several days later and were pleasantly surprised to find that not only were the children intact, but the babysitter had even taken time to fold and wash all the clothes and put them back in the suitcases just as they had been. My aunt called her friend to express her gratitude for this kind gesture, only to learn that in fact the suitcases had just simply never been opened.

Sometime before desert we hear the story about my grandfather Papa Charlie getting banned from the flip-the-frog carnival game on the Rehoboth Beach boardwalk after he won several enormous stuffed animals consecutively for us kids.

And we are always treated to what I regard as a somewhat dubious story about my grandmother who supposedly kept a baby Alligator in her bathtub in the East Village.

We love to tell these stores.

Not because we have never heard them before.

But because we like to hear them again.

My grandmother died several years ago. My grandfather will be 100 next year.

We love to tell these stories because they keep us connected to our past. They keep our memories alive. The story about my grandmother's alligator may not be strictly true, but that is almost beside the point, it might as well be, that's the kind of person she was. And when we hear that old familiar story, each of us gets to be in touch again with our best memories of her.

I think the story about the the babysitter who never once changed the kids clothes is offered as a kind of collective sigh of relief that we made it to this moment, and all those little bumps along the way that might have seemed like big deals at the time end up being amusing memories.

The stories help us keep our lives in perspective.

All of our families have stories. And they are not all the funny and charming ones either.

Some of stories of survival against all odds. Stories of deep sadness and grief. Stories of uncertainty and fear.

The children of immigrants for example often grow up hearing stories of the challenges of building a life in an unfamiliar land. These stories serve to affirm their own sense of feeling different than others around them, and yet also showing them that they too can find the courage to make their own way in the world.

Two psychologists at Emory University named Dr. Marshall Duke and Dr. Robyn Fivush set out to study family storytelling in the 90s, and they developed 20 questions that could be used to test how well children knew the stories of their families.

The questions include things like “Do you know where your parents grew up?” and “Do you know something that one of your parents learned from a hard experience?” and “Do you know about an illness or something bad that happened to someone in your family?”

They took a group of children and asked them these questions, as well as putting them through a battery of other standardized psychological tests and evaluations.

The results were astonishing. There was a clear correlation. The children who knew the most about their family story had the highest self-esteem and the strongest sense of control over their lives. Which are two critical emotional skills for children to develop.

This is linked to what psychiatrists call the 'inter-generational self' that is the emerging sense that you are a part of something bigger than yourself. That you belong to a group which is bigger than just you.

There is no reason that a biological family has to be that group. For some people it is not. It is a chosen family of friends. The people who have become family to us.

What matters is seeing and understanding ourselves as part of something that stretches back across time.

This morning we heard the beginning of Psalm 78. In which God tells God's people the very same thing that Drs. Duke and Fivush suggest today:

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter sayings from of old, things that our ancestors have told us.

We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

So that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children,

so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments;

and that they should not be like their ancestors, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

Remember where you came from, so that you know who you are.

We are the practitioners of a faith that is lives in stories.

The most important thing we do is learn the stories of our faith. The ones we love to tell, how Christ was born in Bethlehem, how Noah loaded those animals into an ark, how the Good Samaritan helped the man who was beaten and left by the roadside, how Jesus healed the sick, how the Israelites walked from slavery into freedom through a parted sea.

These stories are not trivia to us. They are not stories that we learn just because we are curious about the past. These stories teach us something about who we are, about where we have been, and where we are going.

We tell the Christmas story not just to remember what happened, but so that we know that God's very presence can come and dwell with us. That angels visit the rich and poor alike.

We tell the Easter story, so that we remember that the worst thing is never the last thing. That God always has a word of life waiting on the other side of death.

We tell these stories because they create in us that sense of something bigger that we are a part of, that stretches across generations, and around the world.

So this is an important part of practicing our faith during the week.

Tell stories. Read stories from the Bible, or stories about people from history whose faith and courage you admire.

Tell stories about the departed and living saints of this church that show you what it means to be a Christian.

If someone in your family, especially a child, is going through a difficult situation, tell them a story of a time that you were in a situation like that share your experience. It might be the most helpful thing you can do.

Stories don't need a straightforward moral. Or a clear 'take-away.' Or a reason to be told.

The story itself is the reason.

Those two psychologists, Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush published their research in early 2001.

A few months later when the September 11 attacks took place, they realized that there was an opportunity to test their hypothesis under much more powerful pressure.

They revisited each of the children. None had been directly impacted, but all had lived through this terrifying time of national trauma.

Again, the children who had known the most about their families, had regulated their stress and anxiety better.

Knowing their family story, helped them face down the worst that the world had to offer with a little more courage and a little more hope.

So make sure you tell your family's story. The ups and downs alike.

And make sure you tell this family's story. Our Christian family stories.

Because when we know our story, we know who we are, and we are ready to face the world.

