



Always a place and always enough

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Rod Ayikotte Photo

On a Sunday evening in mid-May, I sat with 22 people in a worship service in a small house church.

Three days a week, this room with its sunny yellow walls and blue trim becomes a café, serving hot meals to some 200 people each day by donation and with volunteer help. Virtually none who eat there can donate anything. They are the homeless, the addicted and the working poor who remain invisible to many of us.

Some of these same folks come back for Sunday evening service at this ecumenical church that meets in the midst of one of our city's poorest neighborhoods. Communion is passed from hand to hand, and each person is seen and known and called by name – welcomed at God's table, where there is always a place and always enough.

After communion that Sunday evening, we stood and sang "Blessed Assurance." There was no organ, no guitar, no taped instrumentals. These few voices lifted in harmony and praise, full of joy and thanksgiving as we swayed and prayed the words of this great old hymn.

Three days after that service, I stood in a performing arts center in Nashville, Tenn., with 1,680 pastors at the annual Festival of Homiletics. And again, I sang "Blessed Assurance." This time, the multitude of voices swelled around me like rising waters, carrying me upon its crest.

"This is my story, this is my song,

Singing God's praises all the day long."

Two very different gatherings – each a group of believers singing about a story that transcends time, place and circumstance.

I believe in the power of story. I grew up listening to stories – those my father told as we sat on the front porch of our farm house in Missouri, those my grandmother told as I snuggled next to her on sleepovers, and those I read

long into the night as the crickets chirped their cadences outside my open bedroom windows.

Later, stories would become the way I made my living – first as a reporter and copy editor on a daily newspaper and later as a freelance writer for a variety of publications. For many years, I wrote a weekly column recounting the stories of our family life – seeking the humor and the holy in events as ordinary as carpooling and cleaning bathrooms.

I know a good story when I hear one. Most people innately do. The one thing I've learned is that the story has to have truth in it, something real to which people can relate. Fake it, manipulate it, tie it off with a tidy ending and readers will know. They can tell. It's the difference between fresh, churned butter and whipped oleo spread.

That's why one particular story has stayed with me and shaped me through most of my life. It's the one about a newborn baby, a cattle trough, a cry in the dark night, and a star that would shine through the ages.

It is a good story. It holds up. No matter how many times I've heard it or shared it, its power and vitality never falter. Even though a few pastors I can recall did their best to anesthetize it, the story prevails. And people who hear, know it. Somewhere deep within them, whether they want it to or not, this story resonates as truth.

Recently, I saw a bumper sticker with this message: "Giving up on humanity one person at a time."

That's bleak. That's despair. That story doesn't hold up for me. I see evidence against it every day – in the smile of a child, in laughter we hear in hall-

ways, in hands that serve hot food to the hungry, in friends gathered at a hospital bed.

The despair of that bumper sticker is not a story that will stand the test of time – even though it may hold us in its grip momentarily.

Maybe the power of the gospel story is that it is specifically for us. Like a genealogy carefully researched and documented, this is our family history. And no one is excluded from this family. Neither Jew nor Gentile, prostitute nor taxpayer, children, immigrants, gays, rich or homeless – not even the hard-hearted cynic.

We are known, recognized and invited to the table – with free dessert tickets even!

Each person's voice blends into this larger harmony, enriching and energizing not only those who sing it but those who hear it. It is our Sunday after the excruciating Friday, after the desolate Saturday.

We call it community.

Henri Nouwen, in a selection from *Gracias! A Latin American Journal* (1983), writes that, "Community develops where we experience that something significant is taking place where we are. It is the fruit of the intimate knowledge that we are together not because of a common need ... but because we are called together to help make God's presence visible in the world."

We are called together. I felt that in the small house church. I felt it in that cavernous convention hall. And the moral of this story is the exact opposite of that bumper sticker. A baby's cry tells us that humanity is worth believing in – one person at a time. Vicki_Marsh-Kabat@baylor.edu

The Unity of God

Julian of Norwich

God wants to be thought of as our Lover.

I must see myself so bound in love

as if everything that has been done

has been done for me.

That is to say, the Love of God makes such a unity

in us that when we see this unity

no one is able to separate oneself

from another.

Source: Meditations With Julian of Norwich