

Tell Me a Story of Something Good  
Pentecost +1  
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Like many of you in this room, I grew up Baptist in the Coastal South. My family attended church a minimum of three times a week: Sunday morning for Sunday School, Worship, maybe an early handbell choir rehearsal, back again on Sunday night for Vesper Services, and Wednesday night for choir practice, children's missions activities, and midweek Bible Study and prayer meeting. We welcomed guest pastors and teachers for annual mid-winter Bible study and weeklong revival services. My Baptist upbringing was evangelical in the traditional understanding of the word. We were people who believed in the good news of God at work in the world through Jesus Christ. We believed that God draws near to us and welcomes us into relationship with God and with the community of faith. We believed that this good message was to be shared with others. But some other Baptist expressions practiced and taught differently and put tighter parameters on how "good" the news was and how "good" you had to be to receive it.

Religious groups have dividing lines between them for all sorts of reasons. This group believes that God stands alone while the other group believes that God is one in three persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit or Creator, Christ, Holy Ghost—see there's another division already). We're divided by our understanding of deity or trinity or salvation or afterlife. There are some big theological divides between the major world religions, and we expect that to be so.

Then within our Christian tradition, there are major denominational divides—Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, Lutherans, Roman Catholics and so on. Then within each of those groups are numerous splinter groups. Take us Baptists, for example. At St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, we have three primary affiliations: The Alliance of Baptists, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and the American Baptist Church. Each group is organized in different ways, values slightly different things, and each moves with a rhythm and purpose. In a distinctly Baptist way, we are primarily a local church with loose affiliations for missions, education, and advocacy. Most of what we know and experience remains here at the congregational or parish level.

For the longest stretch in our history, of course, we were a Southern Baptist congregation.

Our web site states on the “history” page:

“Striving to be a prophetic voice of faith in New Orleans and beyond, Saint Charles Avenue Baptist Church works to build and maintain an attitude of openness and a spirit of acceptance, affirming and living out true Baptist ideals. In a business session, held Sunday, May 27, 2001, Saint Charles Avenue Baptist Church considered, voted on and accepted the decision to end affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention.”

We don’t offer much explanation. Like true Southerners, we are far too polite to spell out what that business session really represented 13 years ago. We don’t talk about the years of discussion and debate that finally led to that 2001 vote. We let our old grief and our memories of great Baptist battles remain offline.

Most of the time, I don’t really think about any of those groups—the one that shaped the early years of my faith or the ones who offer great support and partnership in my daily work. I don’t think about being Baptist very often. I doubt many of us do. Having lived in Virginia for 10 years, the moderate and progressive Baptists there enjoyed a strong enough presence that I was privileged to focus on my calling and giftedness and the work at hand rather than battling it out with opposing voices. Every now and then a comment from the seminary in Louisville about women or heretics would float out across the Baptist-sphere, and my response was to quote Anne Lamott. She went shopping with her dear friend who was living with terminal cancer. Anne was trying on clothes and turned to her friend in the dressing room to ask something like, “Does this make me look fat?” To which her friend replied, “Oh, Anne. We don’t have time for that.”

By the time I began undergraduate studies at Samford University, I knew “my” kind of Baptists had new names; The Alliance and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship had formed by then. New seminaries and divinity schools were popping up across the country to house the former faculties of SBC seminaries. So responding to anything out of the SBC for almost all of my adult life has felt like that dressing room scene. We simply do not have time for that.

But upon returning to my Deep South home and visiting with friends I have not seen regularly in 20 years, I find myself responding often to, “Oh, you’re Baptist? I didn’t think Baptists had women pastors. Are you Southern Baptist? What kind of Baptist are you? You know no one really wants to go to a Baptist church in *this* town, right?”

They’re talking about boundaries and dividing lines. The deep grooves between people that keep us clearly separated.

Those boundaries, you see, sometimes become battle lines once they've been drawn. They get drawn to protect and defend integrity or some kind of moral purity. At their least powerful, the dividing lines of well-known Baptists are comical or antiquated and then fixed in time as a joke. (Like when Southern Baptists famously decided to boycott the Disney empire.) At their most powerful, however, the dividing lines are painful and exclusive and ultimately say to the ones being cut off from community: you aren't one of us, you aren't enough, you are a mistake, you got it wrong, God is displeased with you, you are no good.

Though I do not wish to reignite any old denominational battles, I do know there will be times when the best question to answer is, "What kind of Baptist are you?" One of our many tasks in being a faithful Baptist presence at St. Charles Avenue and Broadway is to articulate for newcomers and curious onlookers just who it is that we profess to be. What do we value? What do we practice? Why do we welcome? Why do we bless? What kind of community exists here in this place? We must answer these questions and answer them well.

When the SBC met in Baltimore last week, I only paid the slightest attention because a New Orleans pastor was ending his term as president. There was a long article in the paper about him, and that somehow brought the Maryland gathering onto my mental radar. Then I noticed a few headlines on Twitter and realized the Southern Baptist strategy remains: double down on sin. Enforce a zero tolerance policy for anyone who cannot affirm the SBC orthodoxy. If you can't affirm the inerrancy of scripture, you're out. If you believe that God calls women, just as God calls men, to service in the church as ordained preachers and teachers, you're out. And now: If your church welcome gays and lesbians, you're out. If you believe transgendered people are fully human and loved by God and can follow in the way of Jesus, you're out. You're out, you're out, you're out.

\*sigh\*

Dragging that denominational name into a worship service makes me tired, and it is not my goal to pick a fight. But not a week goes by that someone doesn't ask me: What kind of Baptist are you? And if I don't speak up about some of these issues, no one will ever assume you or I or this church we call our home are any different than the ones making their own headlines. No one will imagine that we believe in the length and breadth and winding curves of God's welcome table. People will hear our name and our silence and assume we are the same.

I am Baptist because, well, yes, I was mostly raised that way. But I remain Baptist all these years later by choice, though many encouraged me to look elsewhere and some still invite me to join them. I'm happy to call myself Baptist because I believe in some old principals that date back quite a while—principals of autonomy and freedom, beliefs about each human's ability to speak to God directly, to interpret scripture personally, about a congregation's need to discern and grow as a distinct people in a distinct place without interference from a governing body or a government.

Being Baptist has more to do with how we order ourselves here than accepting a unified statement of faith. When we say we are diverse and welcome all in this place, that is true. We run the spectrum on politics and theology and worldview. Our Baptist identity informs how we ordain our deacons and clergy, but also how we hold sacred the right to disagree with one another just as we hold sacred the right to call on God's name and explore holy texts individually and elbow-to-elbow.

But beyond the Baptist lines of congregational polity, I am Christian. And, at times, remaining Christian in the raging wars of right practice and right theology, is more a miracle than remaining Baptist. While there are these lines between Baptist groups, the same lines exist in the church at large. Evangelical once meant "us folks who bring a word of good news" but now means something political as well as theological. Evangelical often begins the checklist of what Christians are against. And again, if we do not take the time to define who we are and what we value, those outside our walls will assume we are something we are not.

One of our projects this summer is clarifying our vision, our values, and our mission in this place. Let me kick it off with sharing a few statements of my own inspired by the day's readings.

I am a Christian who believes in something good. I believe in the goodness of God and in the goodness of God's creation. I believe that God delights in the world that God created. I believe that God delights in you.

I believe in the poetry of Genesis 1. It's not a science lesson, it's a love song. In his commentary on Genesis, Walter Brueggemann writes, "At the outset, we must see that this text is not a scientific description but a theological affirmation. It makes a faith statement."<sup>1</sup> From the beginning of all things, whenever and wherever that beginning took place, God marked us with purpose and welcomed us into a divine relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*, p. 25

I believe that God speaks to us in stories and metaphors and poetry. I believe that God weaves in and out of scripture like a thread in a quilt. The good news of God's presence and affection and work in the world starts in the blessing words of Genesis 1.

I believe that somehow, not fully understandable to me, God enters time and space through the mystery of creation and initiates a relationship of blessing with humanity. God blesses the creation and invites humankind into a creative partnership of naming and caretaking. "God's creation, including people, who are created in [God's] image, is an extension of [God's] own goodness."<sup>2</sup>

I believe God breathed God's spirit into us just as I believe God created us in God's image. When we humans are at our best, we are like freshly cleaned mirrors that reflect God's nature back into the world.

I believe that the natural world around us bears God's fingerprints. And I believe we really are called to take care of the physical world just as we are called to take care of one another.

I believe the poetry of creation tells us all we need to know about loving each other. God has breathed God's essence into us and called us very good. So all people matter. All of them. The ones drawing lines to keep me out, the ones who are hard to love, the ones I avoid, the ones who avoid me, the ones searching for a place to be seen and heard and known and blessed just exactly as they are. We are, all of us, made in the image of God, and that divine imprint matters more than the things that separate us.

The story of creation in Genesis is one of grace. The story's writer is pointing to God's graciousness and the truth that life is gift. God celebrates what has been created. Daily, God looks it over and is pleased. When we understand this text properly, then "our entire world can be received and celebrated as a dimension of God's graceful way with us."<sup>3</sup>

I believe we humans are not the whole of creation. You and I are not the whole story. When we fall into the trap of believing that we are the only ones who matter—or worse, that some humans matter and others don't—when fear and anxiety become the lens through which we see the world, then we are missing the real story. And it's not just

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<sup>2</sup> *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, "Goodness", p. 344

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*, p. 27

some Baptists who had a meeting in Maryland and want to draw lines to cut out anyone they fear will keep them from earning God's blessing. This is about you and me here in this room. When my life and my drama and my bills and my stress become my focus, then I am missing out on the good news of God's loving presence, God's life-giving breath, God's nearness to us all.

Over the past three Sundays we talked about the work of the Holy Spirit, the consequences of invoking God's transforming, creative Spirit to be at work in our lives and in this place. When we look to the first story of all the stories, we listen as God hovers over what is to be created. The Spirit of the Lord—the very breath of God—the one that has hovered over the nothingness and spoken everything into being, that Spirit breathes a blessing over the humans and calls them lovely, very good, beautiful. Then God empowers those humans to be responsible for each other and for everything they have been given.

That's our starting point here. We gather to remember that blessing. We seek to take care of each other, of the stranger, of our neighbor. We work to take care of the world all around us and recall its beauty. We admit that we fall short. We confess that we fail to see the image of God in others and we forget God's image in ourselves. And then we hear a good word in this place reminding each of us and all of us together that our creator God is mindful of us and wants goodness for us. Then we strive to live in peace, reflecting God's goodness and love in each other and in this imperfect, honest, true community where there is room enough for all.

May it be so. Amen.