

The gift of speech

Testimony and the formation of pastoral identity

Joel Miller

Here's a personal testimony for you, or perhaps a confession: I'm a pastor and I'm often not sure how to use language that names God's activity in the life of the world. It's not that I'm uncomfortable with theological discussion. I enjoy conversations about theology or scripture. But when it comes to using such language to reflect my own experience or to speak into the experience of another, I can get stuck. I hesitate. I don't yet know how to do it—to testify—in a way that feels quite right, authentic to who I am and true to the reality of God's presence among us.

This hesitation wasn't something I confronted for the first time when I became a pastor, but it has been heightened as I live out a

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vocation in which such practices are a regular part of how I relate to people. Some of my first questions in fitting into the pastoral role had to do with the use of such language. Now that I'm a pastor, I thought, I wonder if I'll learn to talk like a pastor. Am I now obliged to end each conversation with "God bless you," or will "See you later" still suffice? Can I encourage people to have a nice day, or do I need to ramp it up a notch to "Have a blessed day"? How often should I use words such as *discernment*, *journey*, and *mystery*?

Should I sign off on e-mails with "Blessings, Joel"; "Peace, Joel"; or just "Joel"? And should I insert the title some in the congregation use to refer to me: "Pastor Joel"?

These thoughts are just the tip of the linguistic iceberg. If testimony has to do with giving voice to what God is doing in and around me, then this form of speech is central to what I'm now about as a pastor. Beyond greetings and parting words, everything in between becomes a space for highlighting the holy.

I'm being somewhat playful here, but only to speak to a point that deserves serious attention: How do we become skilled at explicit forms of naming what is true, specifically as that truth pertains to God's abiding presence in our lives? How does the practice of testimony shape pastoral and Christian identity?

If I have hesitations in how I speak of God in conversational language, I can claim that there are some good motivations behind this tendency—motivations with a biblical flavor. When God reveals God's name to Moses, God's self-given title—"I AM WHO I AM"—seems more like a riddle; it is a name that is just as much a non-name. How do we speak of such a God? Caution around the use of God's name shows up again in the giving of the Decalogue. The third word of instruction commands that God's name not be misused, which I also understand to mean that it should not be used flippantly. At times I am among those who would prefer to live life in the spirit of the book of Esther—where the name of God is never mentioned but where God's presence permeates the entire story. Or I could point to the Song of Songs—the other book of the Bible in which God's name is nowhere to be found. There it's perfectly evident that we can live life passionately, reveling in the goodness of God's creation, in the delights of the body and soul, without voicing the name of God. Given the New Testament theme of incarnation, summarized wonderfully in John's Gospel as the Word becoming flesh, I can become satisfied with things moving solely in this direction, rather than in the direction of the flesh becoming word.

But if I'm honest with myself—and I try to be, as often as I can bear it—I know that this is only part of the picture. Since I began pastoring three years ago, I have been shaped and formed in important ways through the practice of testimony.

In the ordinary, seeing the presence of the holy

A significant way this formation has happened for me has been through recognizing and naming the presence of the holy within the ordinary. Those two verbs are both important: *recognizing* and *naming*. The story of the disciples' travels to Emmaus illustrates that it's possible, perhaps even the norm, to be in the presence of Christ without recognizing that presence. Fostering a capacity to see and an alertness to recognize such presence is key to pastoral

work. And the act of naming and testifying transforms the event from an internal perception, a personal epiphany, to a gift made available to the whole community. In naming what we recognize as Christ among us, we awaken in one another both recognition and the art of testimony.

The other part of the above sentence is also important: *the presence of the holy within the ordinary*. This theme continues to show itself again and again to me.

As I have had the opportunity, I have visited congregation members in their places of work. I ask to see their work area, perhaps meet a few colleagues, and if possible, sit down for lunch and hear how they entered this line of work and how it connects with their gifts and sense of calling. These visits have provided occasions for testimony.

Visiting a person who works for a large corporation and hearing about his enthusiasm for his work, I recognize that he has undergone the gift of Pentecost, inspired by the Spirit to become multilingual in speaking the language of faith and the language of business. Through him the Spirit is reconciling, encouraging

understanding, translating what these two communities have to learn from each other.

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At another visit I tour a campus where a member works closely with children from troubled families. Hearing some stories of her interactions with these young people, I am in the presence of the holy. She says this is the place where God chooses to incarnate Godself through her, and I affirm that through her and others working here, this place truly is holy ground; this is her parish, her sacred turf. All who enter this campus enter a place

where God is indeed becoming incarnate through the love each worker shows and in the emerging life of each child.

One way our congregation interacts with our mixed-income neighborhood is through Community Meal twice a month. Hosting the meal involves planning, gathering food items, preparing and cooking the food, setting the tables, opening the doors, sitting and conversing with neighborhood friends who come to eat with us, and cleaning up afterward—all ordinary enough activities. The

only overtly spiritual thing that we do during the time is sing the blessing “God is great and God is good” before the meal. But the truth of the matter, I have recognized, is that the whole event is shot through with the holiness of God. Here in our church basement twice a month, we not only gather for a meal but we enter into the sacramental, the holy act of sharing bread and cup, where Christ is the host and we are all guests. In their table fellowship, the Emmaus travelers recognized that they were in the presence of Christ, and we at Cincinnati Mennonite witness to the same truth. As I have worked to name this reality to the congregation, I have experienced my own sense of pastoral identity deepen. And through the testimonies we share together from our Community Meal, we enter more fully into our mission together and our sense of bond with our neighborhood friends.

These exchanges are powerful. Through testimony, a high rise office, a children’s home campus, and a church basement become places where we learn to recognize God among us. Learning this art has been an exciting part of pastoral ministry for me. It feels essential to what I am to be about.

In the extraordinary, finding words for the unspeakable

And then there are times that are not so ordinary, the rare or unusual occurrences—events that are perhaps unanticipated, or at least not a part of one’s plan for life.

Earlier this year my wife and I underwent a great loss. We had been expecting our third daughter, Belle. Instead of arriving as expected in September, she came to us, stillborn, in May, because of complications in the pregnancy. In the days that followed, writing became part of my way of grieving this loss. Surrounded as we were by the strong and holy presence of family, friends, and church, and with the season of Pentecost approaching, the theme unifying the writing quickly emerged. The reflection, shared on Pentecost Sunday at Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship, was titled “Stillbirth and live birth: The gift of Holy Spirit.” In the process of writing, I was aware that my identity as a husband, a friend, a father, and a pastor had merged in this experience. What I had to say, my testimony, was coming from a place deeper than any of these markers—the place where the self finds communion with God. This in itself was a valuable insight for me. It is sometimes

important to establish and maintain lines between my pastoral identity and my other roles, but there is also the abiding reality of the self as a unified whole. It is out of this depth of being, the place where the *I* encounters the divine *I AM*, that all identity, including pastoral identity, flows.

The writing and the conversations that have arisen from this experience capture for me the way testimony comes into being. A stillbirth is by its very nature an experience of deafening silence. At the time of birth, where parents have anticipated sounds, hoped for cries and coos, eagerly awaited the small body's first attempts at expression, there is instead stillness and quiet. One finds oneself in the presence of the ineffable. Only groans and tears seem able to convey the weight of the moment. Here, bearing witness to the truth involves remaining speechless.

But then something remarkable happens. The nearly unspeakable begins—slowly—to find articulation. Words are given. Phrases are found. Fragments and then whole collections of speech begin to form. They are offered between mourning spouses. They are given by loving friends and family and spiritual guides. They form in the mind and demand to be preserved in poetry or paragraph.

To our amazement, the words feel as natural and organic as the act of childbirth itself—at times coming painfully but arriving with a life of their own, with creative ability to bind together those in whose presence they form. We are speaking deep mysteries to one another, testifying to the Holy Spirit among us. We are remembering that we are a gathering of two, or three, or more, and Christ is so brilliantly in our midst. The testimony, we recognize, is being spoken through us, but it comes from a place beyond us—from which the creative Spirit of the universe seeks expression through us, asking us to be channels of its flow.

As a pastor, I am honored to be in a position where I am often given opportunity to be such a channel. I consider it a sacred challenge and privilege to walk with people through the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life with eyes wide open, recognizing and naming the holiness that pervades our existence.

About the author

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