

“Couldn’t keep it to myself”

Testimony in the black church tradition

Regina Shands Stoltzfus

The song rings out, the choir keeping pace with the soloist, following her lead and making plenty of space for the times when she leaves behind the music on the page. She’s testifying about the One who has done so much for her, and a three-minute rendition of the song just isn’t enough:

*Said I wasn’t gonna tell nobody but
I couldn’t keep it to myself
I couldn’t keep it to myself
I couldn’t keep it to myself*

Testimony is truth telling

This singing is not a performance; it is a testimony. It is a truth-telling moment, not about a life that is free from trouble or

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sorrow—not at all. It’s truth telling at perhaps its most profound: Life can be—and often is—hard, gut-wrenchingly hard. But God is there, and God has seen me through, and I want to tell you all about it.

*Said I wasn’t gonna tell nobody but
I couldn’t keep it to myself
What the Lord has done for me*

Music in the black church tradition is one important way witnessing or testifying happens. Stemming from the very beginning of their presence in the Americas, enslaved Africans held onto as much of their cultures as possible, while shaping new ones. They created spirituals that drew on biblical narratives, used the hymn lining patterns they learned in Baptist and Methodist churches to “Africanize” European hymns, and developed gospel music rooted in nineteenth-century black urban experience. As the spirituals

had done more than a century earlier, these gospel songs interpreted the experiences of African Americans in a hostile world, while conveying belief and trust in a God who understands such suffering. Music, then, is an important way of testifying—but not the only one.

Testimony is telling the story

During my early tenure as a pastor, I was nervous about a few things, and visitation was one of them. It's not easy for me to make small talk, and I imagined perfunctory visits punctuated by awkward silences, with a rapid getaway once the basics had been covered. But the reality of these visits turned out to be completely unlike the uncomfortable scenarios I had imagined. Pastoral visits in homes, hospitals, and retirement communities became a favorite part of my assignment. Awkward silences were few and far between, and I was blessed over and over again by holy moments of storytelling and testimony. I use those two terms to distinguish between common but distinct movements that occurred during these visits.

People loved to tell me stories, and I loved to hear them. Visiting with older members of my predominantly African American congregation offered a privileged journey into their lives. They helped me understand the ways they had been shaped not only by their families and communities but also by their place in a wider historical context. The stories they told were etched in pain; often that pain was the result of their living in the U.S. under the laws of segregation, of experiencing life on the margins, of knowing that within your society, you are the least. You are at the bottom.

When I was a boy, my father took my sister and me with him to the prayer and testimony meeting each Wednesday night. He was the minister, and sometimes the three of us were the only ones there. But that didn't stop the service or hold back the Spirit. After we sang together and he prayed, it was time for my sister and me. "It is your time to pray," he would say, and I got on my knees and prayed. "Now sing your song." I would sing my little song. Next my sister would sing and pray. Then my father announced that it was time for the testimonies.

And I would get up and say, "Thank God for what God has done for me, and I hope that you all will pray for me so that I will grow strong." On our way home at the end of the evening, he would say, "Didn't we have a good time tonight!" Yes, we surely did, in song, prayer, and testimony.¹

This memory of Thomas Hoyt, a bishop in a mainline African American denomination (Christian Methodist Episcopal) in

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Birmingham, Alabama, recounts one of the most cherished practices of the black church, the practice of testimony. It is not a practice unique to African Americans. Indeed, testimony—telling the story—is a hallmark of every vital Christian community.

Testimony edifies the community

Testimony is the act of people speaking truthfully about what they have seen and experienced. This speaking is offered to the

community for the edification of all who will hear. It has roots, of course, in the testimony of God's people in the scriptural witness.

In testimony, the individual speaks about what he or she has experienced and seen, then offers it to the community so that the experience becomes part of the community's experience. The reality is bigger than the individual. It has meaning for the whole. Testimony is more than just telling other people what happened to you; it is a way of announcing your humanity in encounter with the divine. It is a way of edifying and encouraging one another.

Testimony fortifies for the struggle

The shape of testimony in black churches follows the form of what I experienced as a pastor visiting congregants who could not come to church. We would greet one another and pray together. I might read a passage of scripture to them. Then our conversation might go something like this: "How are you doing today, sister?" "Oh, honey, I'm just blessed. God is a good God. I'm still here and God is taking care of me." It is familiar—an echo of what Hoyt has called a classic praise testimony: "Thank you, God, for waking me up this morning; for putting shoes on my feet, clothes on my

back, and food on my table. Thank you, God, for health and strength and the activities of my limbs. Thank you that I awoke this morning, clothed in my right mind.”²

It was in the midst of this reality that the black church from its beginnings in the United States became a buffer against racism. It builds and continues a tradition of affirming the humanity of black people and providing us with an opportunity to shape our cultural context. Black womanist ethicist Katie Cannon talks about cultural inheritance from the black church when its participants were under the mantle of slavery, when their very bodies were not their own:

*Our ancestors had the hours from nightfall to daybreak to foster, sustain, and transmit cultural mechanisms that enabled them to cope with . . . bondage. In spite of every form of institutional constraint, Afro-American slaves were able to create another world, a counterculture within the White-defined world, complete with their own folklore, spirituals, and religious practices. These tales, songs and prayers are the most distinctive cultural windows through which I was taught to see the nature and range of Black people’s response to the dehumanizing pressures of slavery and plantation life.*³

The stories I heard, hear, and tell are part of a long tradition of the telling of truths—the truth of life’s experiences, the truth of our own humanity, and the truth of the goodness of God, the liberating power of the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

The identification of marginalized people with the suffering of Christ on the cross is reflected in black theology, with the earliest iterations being found in the words of spirituals—what W. E. B. Du Bois called “sorrow songs.” Enslaved Africans, faced with crafting a new culture and way of being from within the structure of the dehumanizing cruelty of bondage, built a foundation for the many aspects of African American Christianity. Generations later, their descendents continued the development of a unique strand of faith, one that testifies to the adherents’ humanity in a context that denies that humanity. Telling this story—the story of being created in the image of God, and of being loved and cared for by that God, is not a method of escape. It is instead a way of fortify-

ing oneself to continue in the struggle; to heal body, mind, and spirit; and to forge a path toward justice.

Testimony transforms trauma

Telling stories helps transform trauma. Clinicians who work with survivors of political persecution, survivors of physical and sexual abuse—those who experience trauma of various kinds—note this common pattern: testimony is an important ritual in the process of healing. Testimony has an easily detected personal dimension, a confessional aspect. Yet testimony also has a public dimension, as critique and naming of what needs to be corrected and changed.

Thus, the trauma story becomes a new story, a story no longer

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about shame and humiliation but about dignity and virtue. For Christians, the recognition is that Jesus comes to bear our burdens with us, help us heal, and point the way to a new reality. Hurting communities recognize the power of testimony.

I recently visited a church with a dedicated time for testimony in the service each Sunday. After a reading of scripture and a call for reflection on the text, the congregation takes time for testimony. One by one, folks stand up, greet the congregation, and from their place in the sanctuary share the story of

an encounter, a conversation, a happening in their life. On this particular morning in early summer, people share about illnesses and family concerns. A number of people are looking for work: a better job or just a job, period. A recent high school graduate expresses gratitude for the congregation's support "these past eighteen years." The time of testimony ends with a song: "God is good, all the time." Later I ask some members about the practice. They assure me that this is an important part of the congregation's gathering. For this small congregation, telling their stories to one another fortifies them for the week ahead and strengthens their witness to those outside the congregation.

Testimony requires witnesses

What does it mean when church is the one place where you can

tell the truth of your own life in all its triumph and tragedy? What does it mean for the gathered community to bear witness to such telling? Thomas Hoyt claims that in testimony a believer describes what God has done in her life, in words both biblical and personal, and the hands of her friends clap in affirmation. Her individual speech thus becomes part of an affirmation that is shared. In addition to the praise testimony mentioned before, this evolved form of the testimony, as Hoyt names it, continues in the pattern of slave testimonies. Most slave testimonies told of God's work in creating a new self, affirming the humanity of physically enslaved testifiers and even helping them transcend their slavery. The first part of the testimony identifies a deficit, a problem, or a

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difficult situation. The second part tells of God's work in overcoming it. Testimonies require the presence of witnesses, people who have also seen or experienced God's work, and who, as they hear another's testimonies, are able to certify or attest to the truth of God's activity in that person's life.

Testimony helps us see God's reign

The song quoted at the beginning of this article has its roots in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. Mark plunges into the story of the beginning of Jesus' ministry—John an-

nounces the coming of Jesus; Jesus is baptized, then tempted, then calls disciples and a healing ministry begins in earnest. A man with an unclean spirit is released, and people are amazed and talk about the authority and the power with which Jesus heals. The word goes out, and hordes of people are brought to Jesus with their various diseases. Even demons are cast out, and Jesus does not permit them to speak.

Jesus heals a man with leprosy, one who comes to him and says, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus replies, "I do choose." Jesus bids the man say nothing to anyone but to present himself before the priests. Ched Myers, in *Binding the Strong Man*, his commentary on Mark, sees three themes in the beginning of this Gospel: a call to discipleship, a campaign of direct action, and the construction of a new order.⁴ Jesus' healing ministry, in

Myers's view, is an essential part of his struggle to bring concrete liberation to the oppressed and marginalized of Palestinian society—a new order. “Don't tell anyone—go back to the priests and present yourself.” But the man couldn't keep such wondrous news to himself. He went out and began to proclaim it freely—the news of healing, the news of liberation.

When I tell you the story of how God has been moving in my life, and you tell me your story, we create a new story together. We recognize our common humanity and the ways our lives are intertwined. We recognize that God has indeed called for the construction of a new order and that we are invited to be a part of the construction. We see for ourselves that the kingdom of God is near.

Notes

¹ Thomas Hoyt, “Testimony,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 91.

² *Ibid.*, 94.

³ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press 1988), 33.

⁴ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

About the author

Regina Shands Stoltzfus lives in Elkhart, Indiana, and teaches at Goshen College in the peace/justice/conflict studies program. She formerly served as a pastor at Lee Heights Community Church in Cleveland, Ohio.