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Telling One's Own Story as a Means of Telling the Story

Robert Moore

Stationed in Leipzig and Wittenberg by ELCA Global Mission for over three years, I have enjoyed my work in various pulpits in Germany. As guest pastor at St. Thomas Church, Leipzig, I preach at least once a month and sometimes as many as three times per month. That's a lot for me. All preaching is in German, in the historic church where Johann Sebastian Bach worked as cantor from 1723 until 1750. Germany is well known for its secularized society, which is even stronger in the eastern (formerly communist) states that composed the German Democratic Republic. Church membership comprises roughly 18 percent of the population. The Western organization of the churches was imposed on the churches during the communist dictatorship. The churches that struggled through the aftermath of World War I, the Nazi dictatorship, and the socialist, atheistic dictatorship following World War II are in many ways unsuited to the new context in which they find themselves, following the reunification of Germany.

Society is secular here but is not bereft of an awareness of the sacred. "Spiritual but not religious" might characterize the situation. My own development through life has moved me away from the understanding of "telling the story" that was put forth by my American evangelical and Baptist roots. Telling the story meant telling others about Jesus and what Jesus had done for me. It was about

In the context of his current position in the eastern sector of Germany, Moore relates his own story of coming to a mature faith, which he sees as having an applicability to the secularized world of a formerly communist and atheistic society.

telling people about my decision to accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior. It was telling people about being "born again." Most of this did not work. It did not work for me even as a child.

My earliest remembrance of an experience with the Holy, with that which is wholly other—yes, with God—comes from early childhood as I was sitting on the front porch on a bright sunny day on the high plains of Texas. The sky was deep blue and limitless. My older brother was there. He knew much more than me. As I looked into the sky, I asked my brother, "What is on the other side of the sky?" "Nothing," he answered. "It's sky. It goes on and on forever. There is no other side." I believed him! I then reclined on the porch and began to look, as best I could, into the sky to see how far I could see. I was resolved to see beyond. I persistently stared into the vast expanse of space, hearing my brother's voice saying, "It goes on and on forever." Suddenly something broke. My eyes stopped seeing and there was only a white light that enveloped me, taking me out of my small dusty town and beyond to a place unknown. I was apprehensive and lay still with my eyes closed until I sensed my physical self still intact. My body shuddered. I was captivated by the experience, but also a little frightened.

I already had a sense of the awe generated by such experiences. I had been taught about Genesis 1. We not only read its great poetry; our Sunday school teachers had us memorize the six days of creation and the seventh day of rest. We were not bothered with questions of historical or scientific fact. We simply read and enjoyed the connection with the cosmos. Regularly, too, I heard the psalms as they invited me to consider the infinite God and the vastness of creation:

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> O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. . . . When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? (Ps 8:1, 3–4)

That was a holy moment, and my memory of that day would shape subsequent experiences of my life. During my "age of innocence," consciousness of the infinite and consequently of God were quite straightforward. My apprehension did not connect with a feeling of sin or guilt but rather with a sense of otherness out there. The sense of alienation emerged as I grew older. Being good, doing things right, pleasing those in authority, excelling beyond others—these became driving forces for me. With each attempt to meet such standards, a sense of myself grew that just

did not add up, and every time I misbehaved, did things wrong, displeased my teachers, parents, or peers, I would work on myself as though I were divided in two.

I grew up in a time when God was a very real player in my rural society. God was everywhere, and it seemed that God was just as upset with me as I was with myself. This was too much for me to deal with, especially with puberty setting in. Adolescence hit me hard. Trapped in my own efforts, I was unable to cope with the circumstances, and in my paralysis, I felt a sense of helplessness. At that time, while seeking the "right" religious experience, I discovered the gift of music both inside and outside the church. Something like the porch experience began to happen as I experienced the power of music in an occasional hymn, solo, or choral presentation. The most powerful event would happen when I played great classical works: Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*, Bach's *Brandenburg Concerti*, Mendelssohn's *Italian Symphony*. These works offered me an escape from the unrelenting demands of adolescence. Sometimes I just closed my eyes through a whole musical work and experienced release. These were holy moments for me.

Only later was I able to add words to the music as I sang in high school and later in a university choir. I learned the words to the "Magnificat" and to the Vesper Psalms 115, 116, and 147. Then came a series of great works that I learned by heart through choir rehearsals for Faure's *Requiem*, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. I was captivated by Robert Shaw's recording of Bach's *B Minor Mass*. All of these spoke to me. They were repeatable texts that seemed to open the gates to something beyond. These texts "preached" to me, and I found I could remember them. They made God present in a way I had not learned in society, church, or even family.

> Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us.
> Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us.
> Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; grant us peace, grant us peace.

Such texts were holy because they invoked and put me in a new relationship with the Holy. As I approached the completion of my bachelor studies, I was steadily exposed to the message of the earliest church through these writings.

It was a message alien to my religious background—an indigenous religion that had come to expression in several denominations in the United States. Out of a spirit of optimism tied with the independence of the new republic, the rejection of creeds, the authority of individual conscience, and rejection of infant baptism, a new religion had emerged. As lay preachers with no formal education began to dominate the frontier and rural regions of the US, the gospel increasingly became an attempt to stir people's emotions and have them experience a second "birth" through an adult decision to repent of sin and turn to Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. The authority of individual conscience led to the dominance of a decision-based religion that spoke of the freedom of the individual to decide about their own relationship with God.

The effort to generate an emotional response by means of a decision to believe in Jesus Christ led to a style of preaching that deliberately sought to excite the emotions and motivate individuals to make the "right decision" with respect to God. I was exposed to this religion every day of my youth, and especially on Sundays. Preachers were desperate to get people to make decisions for Christ. During altar calls, or "invitations," persons would walk forward to the pulpit area and give their hearts to Jesus.

I had grown up in heretical semi-Pelagianism that preached salvation by grace but insisted that people "make a decision" to accept Christ as a precondition of their salvation. The emotional expression of this decision was understood to be proof of the faith, that they were "born again," and baptism was the beginning of a lifetime of public witness to the faith. Preaching of this type was not holy, did not speak to the people about the human encounter with the Holy, and left people largely to their own efforts to live a life of conformity with the church, which, particularly in the South, meant conformity with what society wanted in a segregated, racist, male-dominated, sexually repressed, and violent culture.

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I had read Paul Tillich's *Courage to Be* and was stirred by a sense of the sacred struggle of humanity toward the fulfillment of some holy goal. Later I discovered the three volumes of Tillich's sermons. I read them with relish and could not get enough of the sense of the Holy in his treatment of the biblical texts from which he preached in the academic settings of Harvard and the University of Chicago. Now I had a model for preaching that communicated the holiness of God, elusive but present, and inviting humanity into communion with the Creator.

In Tillich's sermons I experienced the juxtaposition of the human existential condition and the divine Word that confronts and heals. Following the trauma of his experience as an ambulance driver on the battlegrounds of World War I and his disillusionment with the society of his day, Tillich was unabashed in his depiction of human cruelty, blindness, and self-interest. His effort to express the suffering of humanity, and then to address it with a word of hope and courage, was evident in his sermons. Referring to the human experience of the Holy as the "Eternal Now," Tillich wrote of that encounter between the tragic nature of life and the revelatory moment in which God is present.

From Tillich I learned the Lutheran understanding of the alien word—that is, the message entrusted to the church as a word not generated from within

humanity but a word that is brought to humanity embodied in Jesus Christ, whom the church acknowledges as the Word of God, God speaking into the human situation. This juxtaposition enables the freedom of human beings to transcend their captivity in the forces of nature, human sin, and evil without presuming that we are immune from or independent of these existential conditions. From Tillich I learned what every Lutheran should know: that the Word of God is to be spoken into the real conditions of human life.

In the formative years that followed, I began to realize what it meant to preach in light of a theology of the cross, which was well-known in the works of Martin Luther. I had been taught that Jesus had died for my sins and that his death paid the debt owed by humanity to God. All we needed to do was to decide to accept this gift and we would be relieved of our sin and guilt and be free to live happy and prosperous lives. This, however, left the cross and faith as bargaining chips of a sort: Jesus died for my sins so that all I need to do is accept it and everything will be okay. But this view does not jibe with a historic understanding of the cross. Jesus died, yes, "once and for all," but the cross is not just a one-time event. It is an ongoing sign that indicates something about the Holy that human beings, by our very nature, do not want to accept: that is, that the presence of God who is Lord over heaven and earth can be found in the most ungodly of events, including the execution of one who proclaimed the rule of God over all creation, a rule that reverses all human values.

The preaching of the cross is the ongoing proclamation of God's presence, God's rule over all: good and bad, right and wrong, sick and well, rich and poor, insider and outsider. Where this preaching takes place there is an experience of the Holy. That is the significance of the cross today. The church is called to proclaim this message, to point out the Holy in the midst of the profane, to include God everywhere that we would expect God *not* to be. That is the surprise in the whole scheme of things. And not only is God there, but God suffers with the suffering.

One major element was needed for me to be free of the decision-based faith: to change my ecclesiastical base. As I approached the conclusion of my doctoral work in New Testament, my wife and I found ourselves to be outsiders in the denomination in which we had been raised. We were as estranged from the liberal reaction to the fundamentalist direction of the Baptist church as we were from the fundamentalist, evangelical movement itself. We decided over several years that we needed to become Lutherans. In 2016 Kathy and I were called to serve in Leipzig and Wittenberg in an unusual arrangement between the city of Leipzig and the ELCA. During this time, I have served as guest pastor at St. Thomas Church, where Luther preached in 1519, as well as in 1539 when the Reformation officially came to Leipzig. Bach, too, carried out his work here, and as history would have it, his remains rest in the chancel of this church. Leipzig is the birthplace of the Peaceful Revolution, the Peace Prayers, and the Monday Demonstration (October 9, 1989) that led directly to the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989.

I did my graduate work in an environment of narrative studies involving researchers like Hans Frei, Werner Kelber, Paul Ricœur, David Rhoads, Mark Allan

Powell, and others. This burgeoning field has given new life to narrative research literature as a medium to communicate the gospel. Hans Frei made biblical scholarship aware that, beginning with the Enlightenment, there occurred an "eclipse of biblical narrative."[1] This historical development had its genesis in Rationalism, which was deeply troubled by the presence of untenable historic and scientific elements in the Bible. Rationalistic interpretation took on the task of transforming or reducing every miracle story into an abstract philosophical or ethical truth. Just as one would not eat the shell of a nut, so—the reasoning went—the coarse shell of biblical narrative must be opened to find the kernel within. Once that work was done, the shell could be properly dispensed with. Frei shows in his work that the history of biblical interpretation in Germany is one of dismissing the narrative substance of the Bible.

The renaissance of storytelling that took place in America has not found a significant place in the educational system of pastors in Germany. In fact, one could say there is resistance to storytelling, especially to telling "my" story. There is an implicit assumption that the preacher should not draw attention to him- or herself. This became clear to me as I prepared to preach a sermon in St. Thomas Church, Leipzig, on the 800th anniversary of the congregation. I asked a German colleague to help me with the manuscript. When he read the text, he found that the heart of the sermon was an autobiographical section about my struggle with faith. Even though the self-revealing section did not identify me as the subject, he told me I had to remove it. At first, I thought he meant it was not good material and did not serve the sermon. But he said, "Take it out; it's not about you." When I went to another trusted colleague, he replied, "You can't take it out; it *is* the sermon!" The sermon went well, but I was keenly aware I was walking a fine line between witness to the presence of God—that is, to the Holy—and putting myself in the center and making the sermon about me.

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My engagement with the work of Hans Frei and my personal experience with some German-trained colleagues have made me conscious of the need for appropriation of faith stories, first, in sacred writings of the Christian tradition and, second, in the appropriation of personal story for the life of faith. Despite my limitations in German, I met with significant appreciation for how the use of narrative engages people and helps them grasp the role of faith in life. Bringing biblical narrative together with human narratives is a powerful way to transform lives by

[1] Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (London: Yale University Press, 1980).

training people to look for the presence of the Holy in their lives and to recognize what God has done

The German churches are aware of this need in the work and art of preaching. Two examples of efforts to address the issue include the *Zentrum für evangelische Gottesdienst- und Predigtkultur*, or ZfP (Center for Protestant Worship and Preaching Culture), established by the Protestant Church of Germany (EKD), and the *Liturgiewissenschaftliches Institut Leipzig*, or LIL (Leipzig Institute of Liturgical Studies), established by the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD). Professor Alexander Deeg has has directed the ZfP and now directs the LIL. Pastor Kathrin Oxen is the former director of the ZfP and now holds a pastoral position at the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin. Both Deeg and Oxen are prominent examples of a change slowly taking place in pastoral formation in Germany.

I have just told a good part of my own story, which builds an identity for who I am in the mind of the reader. Just so, the identity of Jesus Christ is woven into a constellation of images using narrative. To the question "Who is Robert Moore?" comes an answer: "Let me tell you a story." Likewise, to the question "Who is Jesus Christ?" comes an answer: "Let me tell you a story." In the American setting, the juxtaposition of "my" story with the story of Jesus has great potential for the emergence of faith. I use here the word *juxtaposition* rather than *merging* or *blending* because the story of God and the human story are two. The story of God given in the biblical witness enables the proclamation of a word outside human beings, but one that has everything to do with us. The task of the preacher is to preserve both stories, which, when brought into juxtaposition, can present us with the presence of the Holy in our lives. In other words, they make both God and us present. Thus, the unquenchable thirst for God (Psalm 42) is stated just as St. Augustine would have it:

> You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.[2]

ROBERT MOORE *is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and for many years was lead pastor in a large Lutheran congregation in Houston, Texas. Currently he is stationed in Leipzig and Wittenberg, Germany, serving with ELCA Global Mission.*

[2] Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1997), 3.