

March 1 & 2, 2008
Unbinding Your Heart: Community Matters
Philippians 2:1-11
Rev. Susan Bresser

Song/Poem 47 *Beavers on the Big, Blue Sea* (by Phil Vischer)

So why'd I tell this story? What's the point for me and you?
We might find ourselves someday trapped by Trapper Stu,
Or staring down our own big sharks or facing nasty weather,
But we've been blessed, and things go best when we all work together!

Community matters. Things go best when we all work together.

Community matters ... the theme of our sermon today. We continue with our sermon series – Unbinding Your Heart – and today we focus on relationships.

If you've seen any television in the Madison area, you've seen commercials for Meriter Hospital. They have a theme called *What's Your Story?*

Here's their tag-line: Meriter feels privileged to be able to care for patients, families and loved ones during times of happiness and sorrow. We believe a community grows stronger and more compassionate by sharing in others' experiences. Have a special story about your Meriter experience? We'd be honored if you would share it with us at MyMeriterStory.com.

I experienced exceptional care at Meriter Hospital, not just once, not twice, but three times ... my experiences are called Eva, John and Henry. Three of my four children were born at Meriter. The first time I saw a *What's Your Story* commercial I didn't blink an eye ... I went directly to the website and shared my testimony. You can find it at MyMeriterStory.com under Birth

Stories ... look on the right hand side of the page and click on 'Brent & Susan.'

I'm not here to put in a plug for Meriter Hospital. But I am here to ask: what's your story? Not about Meriter but about your faith, about your experiences of God, about your church. What's your story and have you shared it? Have you witnessed to the care and love you find in your faith community? Have you witnessed to the care you have received at the Sun Prairie United Methodist Church? Have you shared testimony to how your life has changed because of a faith experience?

Listen again to Meriter's tag line: We believe a community grows stronger and more compassionate by sharing in others' experiences. Wow ... I want those words ... I want SPUMC to use those words. *We believe a community grows stronger and more compassionate by sharing in others' experiences.* Can we steal it? Can we borrow it?

Here's the reality: the unchurched population has reached 100 million people: that is 1/3 of the American population.

This from the book that we've reading called *Unbinding Your Heart*:

In 1960, pews filled when a loving, well-run church opened its doors. Today, people who have never attended a church populate our neighborhoods and workplaces. The next decades will see millions more. They won't have memories of a Christian grandmother, father or next-door neighbor. The thought of "going back to church" when they're in trouble will never occur to them, because they have never been inside a church

building in the first place. For them, a church is an alien, possibly intimidating place – not a cradle of comfort and hope.

The reality: the institutional church is near death. We, the church, is so caught up in our survival that we have forgotten why we're really here. The church was created to change lives. To invite others to join in a movement of healing. To infuse humankind with vision. To help others experience transformation. To share the story of good news to counter the bad news that is reported every hour on the hour. The church is near death. And I think it's because we don't share our story.

We have no problem entering in our workplace on a Monday morning, sharing these stories:

“I saw that new movie this weekend. It was great. You've got to see it.”

“Have you read this book? It's really good.”

“We tried that new restaurant downtown. It was pretty good.”

“Did you see that TV show last night? It was very inspirational.”

“Have you heard so-and-so's new CD? I think you'd like the music.”

Very soon, if we haven't yet, many of us will have no problem putting bumper stickers on our cars and signs in our yards claiming that our candidate should be the President of the United States.

I have no problem saying to someone:

“If you need a doctor, you should see mine ... she's excellent.”

“I think you'd like the lady who does my hair.”

“The orthodontist that my children go to is really gentle, very kind ... we highly recommend him.”

“If you can request a kindergarten teacher, ask for Mrs. Bieri.”

Why is it so easy to share stories about everything else other than our faith?

I know many of you share your story. We know that. And we applaud those efforts. There are some of you who bring your friends to worship. You encourage others to join a music group. You invite your neighbors to LOGOS. You encourage your co-workers to join in a mission project. Some of you have invited your co-workers and your neighbors to join a small group. Thank you. Thank you. I know some of you work very hard at that ... but maybe we need to do it more.

Almost 60% of people who visit churches get there because a person invited them. We're talking about evangelism – the “E” word. Evangelism is as simple as inviting someone to church. Those surveyed about attending a church for the first time said that the biggest barrier was not knowing anyone there.

One woman told about a tough transition in her life. She talked with six friends about what was going on in her life. One Saturday night she decided to try a church. On Sunday morning she walked into a congregation close to her house. She was shocked to find five of the six people she'd talked to sitting in the sanctuary. Not one of them had suggested that church might help. She had no idea that any of them were even members of a church. She didn't even know they were Christians.

Is this your story? Is this our story?

The silly little beaver story I shared with you earlier I actually have been meaning to share with the confirmation class. There are a lot of things I want that class of 21 students to know. I want them to know more about God. I want them to know about faith in and through Jesus Christ. I want them to know about what makes our denomination special, but I want them to know that there are other Christian journeys and other faith walks in this world. We visited a church in the inner-city of Milwaukee last weekend so that we could learn about other people, so that we could learn more about diversity. I want this class to learn a lot of things, but the most important message I want them to hear AND experience is: YOU ARE NOT ALONE. You needn't live in this big world as if you're all alone. We are created to be in community. We are created, by the grace of God, to support, encourage and lift each other up.

I'm concerned about those who haven't experienced the feeling of a faith community. There are hundreds, thousands in our community alone who we define as the unchurched, who haven't yet experienced the grace of God because they don't know how ... they don't know how to get here.

An invitation brings people to church. A warm welcome keeps people coming back.

Who have you invited to church? When was the last time you welcomed a visitor? Have you participated in helping Jesus transform someone else's life?

You don't need anyone's permission to share your story. You don't need a committee or a budget. You don't need a degree in theology or sales and marketing. You just need to be motivated to share the story about a place where hope is growing, about a people who care enough to open their doors and their hearts.

Let's pray: God, how can we help people see your face? Who do you want us to pray for? Show us today, lead us to the ones you can reach through us. Please show us how our church can serve you, how we can better organize ourselves to help you. Let us be a part of what you want to do next. Amen.