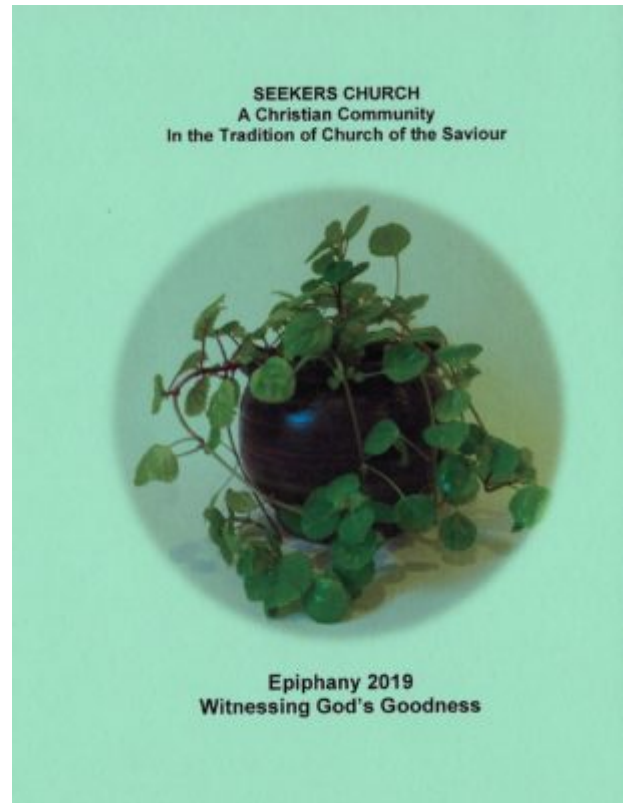


“Salvation Stories” by Pat Conover

February 17, 2019



The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

When I'm at a party or social gathering with a lot of people I don't know, and when Trish abandons me to go talk to someone else, I try hard to avoid small talk about the weather, or having a headache last week, or about a change in the garbage pickup schedule. My tactic is to ask one of two questions. If we haven't shared names I'm likely to ask "What do you care about?" If we have shared names I'm likely to ask the person to "Tell me a story about yourself so that I have a chance to remember this conversation with you and just possibly might remember your name." It surprises me, even sort of shocks me, that a fair number of people get stuck and can't come up with a story, and instead say something like "I have two children" or "I work for the Federal Bureau of Imagination."

Since I know most of you by name, I'm asking you a better version of the second question. Take a minute to think of a story that you would want someone to remember so that they would know you a little better. Take a little note so you won't forget it. After worship is done today, pair off with someone you don't know very well and exchange stories.

Now for a minute of reflection. Is the story you chose a story about a role you play in a specific context or is it a story about who you are all the time and everywhere? If it is a story about a role you play, can you think of a story about who you are all the time and everywhere?

[One minute pause]

And now for a third question. Do you think your story is like the story of most of the people in this room, or like most of the people in your family, or like most of the people in your neighborhood?

[One minute pause.]

And now for a fourth question. Do you think telling your story to people in this room, or to the people in your family, or to the people in your neighborhood, would draw you into closer relationships or more likely lead to avoidance of relationships?

[One minute pause]

You have already done the heavy lifting for this sermon. Now I'm going to share a story to let you know why I've asked these questions.

After three years of high school and six months of active duty in the Army, I completed my bachelor's degree in psychology at Florida State University in six semesters. Back in that now dim past of fifty-eight years ago, I was able to include several counseling courses each of which was heavy on learning

to do verbatims. I also earned money in a perceptual psychology experiment electrically shocking gold fish to see if they had color vision. Doing verbatims was far more interesting and challenging.

In a verbatim, I would do a practice therapy session with someone for an hour and then write down the whole conversation from memory without note taking. That is a demanding way to learn to listen. After the verbatim had been read by the professor, I needed to tell him what I thought the turning points were in the conversations, what I thought they indicated, and why. In these verbatim training sessions, my task as a counselor was to help support the narrative of the person telling a story about a problem by saying insightful things like "uh huh" or "and."

As an undergraduate I identified what I would now describe as my central Christian calling, to master the three most general intellectual disciplines concerning people: psychology, sociology, and theology. My best single class as an undergraduate was a class in human physiology. I would rush over to the lab and eat my lunch sandwich sitting on a long low cabinet. One day I was curious about what was in the cabinet. I lifted the lid and saw a bagful of human arms in formaldehyde. I closed the lid and finished my sandwich.

I did not take philosophy courses and thought about philosophy as logical support for thinking about psychology, sociology, and theology. Along my path I've picked up a fair amount of philosophy and now John Morris and I are having conversations that help me deepen my philosophical understandings.

Focusing on just the psychological part of my journey, the next stop was Chicago Theological Seminary where I completed a four year degree program in three years with a major in psychology and religion. (Yes, I was in a hurry when I was young.) I took about a third of my courses in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. They were mostly courses

in training for hospital chaplaincy and pastoral counseling. That included more verbatims. That included three semesters of internships in the University of Chicago Hospitals and Elgin State Mental Hospital.

In seminary, I set myself the task of figuring out the logical groundings of psychological theory with reference to the philosophical traditions of Aristotle, Democritus, and the Sophists. This included reading every book Freud wrote that was available in English translation, and similar levels of reading of other authors. In addition I wrote a constructive chapter of my Master's thesis on Platonic psychology based on the psychological implications of the theology of Paul Tillich.

My thesis supported me in winning a four year full-ride fellowship from the National Institute of Mental Health to become a sociologist with a specialty in evaluative research of mental health programs. In turn, when I became a sociology professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I became Chair of the North Carolina Governor's Committee on the deinstitutionalization of the four state mental hospitals in North Carolina.

In short, one path of my career was in trying to understand psychology both up close and personally, institutionally in terms of the several disciplines claiming some version of psychological professionalism, and organizationally as regularizing various theories into structured practices. My written defense of the logic and practices of labeling theory applied to "mental illness" was published as a chapter in a book on sociological theory published by the American Sociological Association. If any of you are curious about how I fit all this together, I have put a few copies of my one page master model concerning so called "mental illness" on a table outside our worship space. I think of the area commonly called mental illness as distressed and unsatisfying thinking and feeling.

Another way to summarize my thinking about psychology, as it relates to what matters in human development and change, is to focus on the narratives we carry about ourselves. How many internal voices tell our stories and how well do they fit together? Which stories do we welcome and which voices do we tell to quiet down or go away. Do our voices fit together to provide a tidy well integrated sense of self or do we jump from one story to another as we move from relationship to relationship, from one circumstance to another. Which voices feel lonely? Which voices are angry? Which voices are bubbling over with joy and peace?

I understand the psychological aspect of salvation as salvation from anonymity with our stories untold or unheard; as salvation from confusion when our various voices pull us apart; as salvation from alienation in which we know our stories very well and know they separate us from other people, groups, organizations, and cultures. We cannot heal our stories, change our stories, add new chapters to our stories until we recognize them and welcome them. For salvation, we have to welcome our voices that we like and the ones we don't like. After all, our stories are our memories of what matter to us.

We remember what matters even though we sometimes lose track of exactly what was true in the events that were important enough to remember as our voices. When we block memories of specific stories and relationships, our rejected voices show up in our dreams, in unexpected outbursts, in stomach aches, and confusion – a sense that our world doesn't fit together.

I think the simplest psychological guidance for our paths to salvation is listening to our voices and asking what matters, what matters more, what matters most.

What do you want your name to mean if other people remember your name? What is your compass and what are your landmarks as you find your way through confusions? Do you have the courage

to face your personal tragedies, including knowing you will die? Can you listen with empathy to the terrible stories of broken and starving children in Yemen, stories that leave you broken-hearted? After acknowledging your anger at the unfair ways you have been treated, can you still claim the goodness of the life our Creator has given us to share with each other? If we are to be saved, we must be saved before everything has been made right.

Jesus answered such questions with the Great Commandments to love God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength; and then to love your neighbor as you love yourself. In psychological terms, The first commandment to love God, not just believe in God, will guide you to loving yourself. The commandment to love your neighbor is a reminder that psychology is not the whole story, not even close. Each of us are people in relationships and our stories are about living in relationships. We can't live at all without socially and culturally breathing in and out. There is more to salvation than our personal stories. Psychological salvation is only one aspect of salvation.

Listening to each other with the Great Commandments in mind often sheds light for listening to the different voices each of us carry. Which of our voices make room for sharing, welcome sharing, feel the implications of sharing? Listening to each other with the Great Commandments in mind is transformative listening and you don't need verbatim training to open yourself to transformative listening. The paths to salvation are commonly about well-intentioned clumsiness, about making mistakes in the right direction.

After we listen to our voices and more adequately introduce them to each other, we will probably be able to ask ourselves better questions. Do I really want more of this or that? Do I want to explore a different story path? Many of us in Seekers have spiritual guides or spiritual sharing partners with who we can share our stories in confidence. If you want a

spiritual guide you can ask about how that works in Seekers.

I offer you one story about psychological salvation guidance from Jesus. Matthew thought the story was important enough to include in his Sixth Chapter.

“Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.”

“You cannot serve God and money. ...Do not be anxious about food and drink to keep you alive or about clothes to cover your body. Surely life is more than food, the body more than clothes. ...Look at the lilies of the field. They do not work and they do not spin. Yet I tell you Solomon in all his glory was not as well dressed as they are.”

My salvation *self* story is, “I am a Christian.”

My current salvation *relational* stories include the following.

I am happily married to Trish.

I am thankful for 5 children and 11 grandchildren.

I am a transgender person.

I work out regularly, well pretty regularly ... except when I don't.

I am actively engaged in the Eyes to See Mission Group.

I am incontinent.

I am actively engaged in Seekers.

I am a writer, a scientist, a philosopher, a theologian, and I like to play Pandemic.

I like to make recycled cards.

I enjoy garden yoga – meditative paced yard work including a lot of stretching.

I am a policy advocate and I was politically active in 2018.

I was born club-footed and my feet often hurt.

I am a pastoral counselor.

I've made a list of questions that might help you work with your salvation story. They are available on a table outside. They will also be available as an attachment to the published sermon. Please return my pens in the buckets on the table.

I hope you will take the time to exchange stories with someone before you leave this morning.

[The following questions were available to those present on a table outside the sanctuary. They were not part of the sermon as given – ed.]

Questions as Prompts for Working with your Salvation story

Which of your stories is most precious, most important to you?

Which stories do you like to tell other people and which stories do you keep secret, or seldom talk about?

Which stories do you know are inside you and you don't want to dig them out to look at. Which stories about yourself are you trying to forget?

If Jesus asked you to tell him a story, what story would you tell?

Who do you want to tell a story to?

How does your story relate to the stories you read about in the newspaper?

What story in Hebrew Scripture or Christian Testament is most like your story? Are you glad about that?

Are you willing to listen with care and concern to the stories that other people have to tell. Are there some people whose stories you don't want to hear, don't want to have to care about?

Are your feelings about Donald Trump an important story for you?

Does your story include caring about the United States, caring about economic fairness and justice in the United States, caring about immigrants, people with disabilities, lonely elderly, angry teenagers, or Sikh minorities?

Is your story all about you?