

Faith Story – Terri Lynn Friesen

Joining in Membership – February 26, 2017

Good morning, I've decided to share some of my story by way of picking some symbols of seasons and things that have been especially formative in my faith journey – how I have experienced God's presence, and how I have been formed to this point along the way. It's not entirely linear or comprehensive, and I want to give the disclaimer that it's a little longer than anyone else would be expected to share, but this way Patty didn't have to preach, and I didn't have to compress it too much, so here we go.

Intersection 1: the wilderness.

Growing up going to camp was the first season of my spiritual journey. Our family attended the local United Church, where we involved in music and Sunday school; our involvement was broad but not deep. Faith at home was quite private and what was learned at church wasn't often discussed around the dinner table. But my mom had attended Bible camp when she was little, and thought that we should have the chance as well.

I jumped at the chance: I loved everything about camp – being outside, swimming, canoeing, singing, making new friends. But there was something particularly special about my counselors and the staff that I was drawn to; something that I wanted. I concluded it was the Jesus that they were talking about, so I wanted to know Jesus like that too. So I waited until bedtime, and crawled into my sleeping bag, and prayed whatever 8-year-old words I had to invite Jesus into my heart and my life.

Looking back since then, I'm not sure if I would share the Good News in the same way that it was shared in that particular camp setting. But they also did a lot of things right, and I consider it part of the mystery that God would use that place and that those people to draw me to Godself. I went back to camp every year – it felt like an oasis in my fairly desert-like spiritual habitat – I had so many questions and unbounded enthusiasm. Meeting Jesus in this environment has undoubtedly influenced my connection to the Creator by way of God's creation.

I think these early years were also influential in the disciplines of Bible reading and critical thought that I developed as a kid: my faith was my own – no one really reminded me to say my prayers, or read my Bible. Sometimes this felt lonely, but I am grateful for the very tangible way I felt the real-ness of God, and how I have never had to decide if my faith was my own, or simply a by-product of my heritage. So this is also a reason why I was drawn to my position here at OMC – because I think that pretty young kids can have really profound spiritual lives, and it's wonderful to invest in that.

Intersection 2: driving around in the back of a Landrover – discovering the complexity and beauty of the world

Beginning my studies at U of S right after high school was a welcome transition. University was everything Foam Lake wasn't; most of it good. I relished in my freedom, and the ability to choose how I spent my time, and who I wanted to be. My freedom was muted slightly by having

my first chemistry midterm returned after thanksgiving, to find I'd almost failed. Shocked, I was determined that this wouldn't happen again, and I began to take my studies more seriously. Though I did develop meaningful relationships, the next 3 years were dedicated foremost to academics.

I took myself very seriously, and imagined a career in research & development in tropical agriculture, so although I would rarely lift my eyes from my textbooks, I went on two term abroad classes in Cuba and Ethiopia. Ethiopia was particularly formative. Though being on a new continent surrounded by new cultures was eye-opening, so were the conversations amidst the group of fellow students that happened as we spent hour after hour driving in landrovers together, eating all of our meals together, and sharing hotel rooms. Many conversations were unsettling to me – the black and white constructs that I had arranged to simplify life were being challenged. As well as some of the Biblical worldview that shaped my life. And all around us, as we traveled around the country, were different cultures of people whose lives looked quite different than our own. Poverty, hunger, inequality and happiness seemed more complex. This Ethiopian term abroad was generally a very good experience, but I returned less confident that I had the answers to the world's problems, but more interested in finding out what it meant to live well in my own habitat, and that's how I decided I needed just to learn how to grow food.

This season is significant because I think many people encounter similar experiences in their young adulthood that sometimes becomes crises of faith, or maybe become the turning point of losing faith altogether. I didn't – and I'm not sure what the formula is as to why. But I do remember taking my questions to God, rather than assuming God wasn't big enough to encounter questions or doubt. This wasn't a season where my faith unraveled, but became more complex, became more about relationship with God and less about right answers, and probably gave me a better understanding of who God is.

Intersection 3: The garden

After University, I spend a few years on a couple of different farms: in Texas, and Guelph, in Florida and West Africa. These months, though they contained lots of mundane work – weeding carrots and milking goats and the like – were full of adventures and new experiences, and meeting issues and themes and authors and thinkers and friends that would influence my trajectory and path and the kinds of things that I would continue to pursue.

As I learned to garden, I realized that it was a very grounding act – that the physicality of using my body was a welcome counterpart to all of the time that I spent in my head – making sense of all these new experiences. Gardening, for me, is very spiritual work. Planting seeds and seedlings is an act of hope. Weeding is an act of lament, a time to release my frustrations and give over my concerns and the weights that I carry to God. Remembering to water, especially in the crucial stages of seed germination is an act of discipline, a reminder that good things don't just happen without work and dedication. Harvesting is an act of joy, a reminder of the goodness of Creation and of God's generous abundance. I would imagine I'm not alone in these things.

Growing food for me may always look like just a hobby, but it also always be a vocation – I’m not sure I could NOT do it. It compels me. It’s why working $\frac{3}{4}$ time works just fine – because the $\frac{1}{4}$ is needed to tend to my spiritual life in these ways.

Intersection 4: **The table.**

When I moved back to Saskatoon to begin grad school in the spring of 2012, I was deeply missing the friendships from school and from the church that I’d left behind in Vancouver. I eventually had lovely housemates – Kaytee Edwards – but I just wasn’t part of anything like the more intentional communities I’d lived in on farms or other cities.

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship is a student campus ministry, and I had a friend in grad school who lived in a house with 8 other young adults, most of whom were involved in the campus fellowship. Every Friday they had a potluck meal called “The Feast”, and their large house on university drive would be overflowing with students who came for food and fellowship. This gathering of folks was probably THE most diverse and genuine group I’d met to come together in the name of Jesus and of hospitality.

I spent a lot of time around the giant table in their huge house, befriending several people that lived there, including a man named Thomas. As a group, we talked about doing lots of things together: reading books, listening to podcasts, hosting celebrations, being a big group, people weren’t consistently available, but Thomas nearly always was. He also was available to help with car troubles, to go canoeing, to come to my thesis defense, and to stay to the end of parties and help clean up afterwards. He even happened to be available to visit a place called L’Abri, a Christian community of the coast of BC that welcomes seeking students to think about questions of faith and culture in a rhythm of prayer, learning, eating and working. So traveled there together, as friends. And it wasn’t until several months later that I realized it was a very good thing that Thomas seemed to be fairly available, because I would much prefer being in his presence than not. Thankfully, he accepted my apology for being oblivious for so long, and it didn’t take us too long to decide to get married and be permanently available to each other.

Thomas and I became friends and marriage partners for many reasons, but one of the biggest themes that unites us is our value of hospitality, and how we value table fellowship as central to communion with Jesus and with other believers (not big C communion, like we’ll share today, but communion as fellowship and intimate company). So many of my memories of community and soul-filling conversation have happened for me around a table – a bit of a slow transition for me since my first love is soil and vegetables and the by product is a garden full of produce that you need to do something with! But this unlikely cook has discovered a love for sharing food with others, and a new understanding of Jesus’ welcome of us to the banqueting table he has prepared for us.

Admittedly, we’re not as great at this as we’d like to be right now. The first year of marriage is about finding rhythms and honouring your spouses boundaries, and for me, remembering to check in before I open up our dinner table, and the first year of ministry is realizing that it’s

exhausting in different ways than writing papers or gardening. But I think part of sharing ones story is being able to say this is what I long for, and not just this is how I've arrived.

Intersection 5: **The Vineyard.**

The intersection I'll end with today is the vineyard – to tie back into the scripture that was read. I had never seen a grapevine up close until I was living in Florida, doing an internship in tropical agriculture & Development. Florida's climate grows muscadine grapes – they are bigger and a bit more tart than any of the table grapes we see here, and have seeds. They aren't for making wine -most people use them in preserves like we use chokecherries, but they grow like any other grape nonetheless. As interns we got to prune the grapes – which felt like giving the luxurious mane of grapevines a very calculated buzzcut. It was hard to believe that what we were doing was actually good for the plants: we removed armload after armload of branch-like vines, and what was left looked dead. But by the time July rolled around, it was clear that what we'd done was a very good thing after all. Giant clusters of grapes hung from each of the vines – I wouldn't have believed it was the same vineyard unless I'd been there myself.

Re-reading the John 15 passage where Jesus speaks about the vine and its branches after my first vine-pruning experience gave me goosebumps:

[God] removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes^[a] to make it bear more fruit...Stay connected to me, just as I long to stay connected to you]...Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ... My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become^[c] my disciples....¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This became a very real picture of how stark a vine....or my own circumstances...can look after a good pruning. Whether it's the result of my own lack of interest in Jesus' way of living, or just the more difficult seasons of life, I've had seasons of pruning, and they are uncomfortable, and often painful. But abiding – staying connected to Christ – is the best way to come through these seasons with the fullness of joy that I have only experienced in God. And this fullness is not necessarily just at the happiest of times...I would say that this fullness of joy is most real when things bottom out and the peace of Christ is what is left to cling to when the rest of the world leaves me with a very disquieted heart. And so, my hope is to continue to abide, and be open to seasons of pruning and of growth.

And so that is how I have come to Osler Mennonite Church: Abiding in Christ, because otherwise this branch is lifeless and fruitless. A year ago when I first heard about this position, I was already certain that my interesting but passion-less job at 4-H was fine, but I was ready for something that required more of me. And while I discerned, I felt the Spirit of God saying something like, "Look, this might be a big challenge, but you're supposed to be abiding in me anyways, so if you choose this you'll be a little more aware of that!".

I ask to be received into membership today as an act of obedience and an act of faith: In some ways I am a product of my generation that is transient, and suspicious of commitment, and is generally less enthused about rituals and formalities. Becoming a member of any church

institution in some ways is a countercultural act. And joining in membership is a chance to tell our stories – which I think is a great gift to the rest of the church. Becoming a member doesn't mean that we're all going to agree on everything – but that we think it's worth not giving up on the more important parts of following Jesus because we don't.

And lastly, during the season that I serve here, I also want to more fully identify with you – not only as I serve God and you through this pastoral position, but to show that I walk with you – as we learn how to follow Jesus together.