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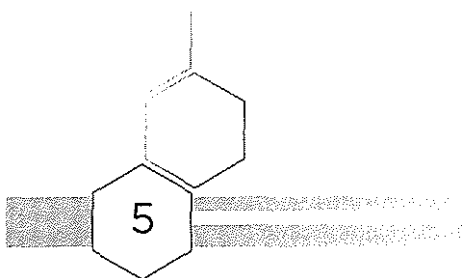
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the child and the story of faith

I was sitting in the balcony of a big, old church in downtown Minneapolis. The place was packed on this dark, cold winter evening. The event was a debate between a friend of mine and the pastor of this church about the “theology” of the emerging church movement. The situation had become almost like a sporting event, with fans cheering their preferred debater and theological viewpoint. At one point in the evening, the presenters took questions from the audience that had been written down earlier on index cards. My friend was asked something like, “Have you been washed in the blood of Jesus?” Now it’s true that’s not the kind of language my friend has ever used around his faith story or anyone else’s, but what happened next had a lot to say about how we react to other people’s stories of faith.

After the question was read, my friend leaned forward in his seat, looked out at the audience, and said something like, “Let me tell you a story.” At once I could feel the large

audience collectively move closer to the stage. The crowd became quiet as everyone waited to hear what he had to say. He went on to tell the group his own story of faith. He told of watching a passion play and becoming enchanted with the figure of Jesus. He told of responding to the "altar call" at the end of the play and of going backstage thinking he was actually going to meet Jesus. He told of praying that night for the first time in his life and asking God to show him God's reality. At the end of the story, it seemed he had brought even the staunchest skeptics of the veracity of his faith over to his side. They may not have agreed with the way he understood God's working in the world, but most people there walked out having no doubt that my friend was a man who walked in the way of Jesus.

I love to tell this story as an example of the power of our personal stories of faith. It's easy to judge someone's orthodoxy on the basis of a list of propositions or axioms or rules that one believes and follows or doesn't believe and follow. It's easy to question the sincerity of someone's faith when he or she doesn't seem to fit in the "Christian" box we've created in our minds. But it's a lot harder to do those things when we are dealing with a person's personal story of faith. How can we question someone else's powerful experience with God? Once we've shared our stories with each other, we are in relationship with each other. This makes it a lot harder to apply litmus tests of who is in and out of God's kingdom, because we've now seen Jesus in that other person. Our personal stories of faith have the ability to transform us and others. We are transformed as we learn to put language around God's presence and activity in our lives. We are transformed as that language helps us to recognize God's presence and activity in our lives. We are transformed when we see how our personal stories intersect with the biblical story, giving us a powerful sense of being loved and embraced by God as well as allowing us to see that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Others are transformed by our faith

stories when they see our embrace of faith in a God we may not understand, and hear of our hope in God's future of abundant life. Others are transformed by our stories when they see how our story intersects with theirs and discover a place for God in their own story.

But over the last several years, as I've worked in both conservative and mainline churches, I've discovered that most people don't know how to put words to their stories of faith. I was on the phone with a woman just a few days ago who told me as much. She said she knew she had faith, and that she spent time each week reflecting on her faith, but she knew she didn't have any language at all to describe that experience. Some people don't even know they have a story of faith because they have no language or frame of reference with which to tell it. And my sense is that if the adults have trouble articulating their stories of faith, then their kids won't know what it means to have words to frame their experience of God and Jesus, either.

Sometimes we limit our stories of faith to what some traditions call "testimonies." These are stories people tell about how they came to faith in Jesus and how their life has changed because of it. The "testimony" can be part of one's story of faith, but what I am calling for here is a much broader definition. When I speak of being able to articulate one's story, I am speaking of the ability to identify where the Spirit of God breaks into one's life on a daily basis; being able to speak to a foundational belief or understanding about how God works in the world and, more specifically, in one's own life; and being able to frame explanations of why one lives the way one does because of one's encounters with God and God's story. Often testimonies end with that decision to become a person of faith and never take the story any further into the highs, lows, and tedium of everyday life. But those are the stories we really want to hear; those are the stories that help us all pay attention to God's presence in our daily lives.

Telling Our Stories

I think the ability to articulate one's own story of faith is important, because telling our own stories is a means of establishing our own identities with God and with God's story. It's the way others get to know us as people and as people of faith. A major part of my own life story—a part of my story that always gets told to people who know me—is the story of my college and seminary years in the Boston area. For several of those years I lived in the city while I worked at Park Street Church. I was a young adult, the prime time for human identity differentiation and development, and my experiences in Boston shaped greatly who I am as a person, who I am vocationally, and who I am spiritually. When, through the years, I've felt I'm losing a grip on my own personal story, on my own identity, I travel back to Boston and stand on the corner of Park Street and Tremont Street as a way to reacquaint myself with who I am.

Most of us who have developed healthy adult identities have no trouble finding secular language to describe our own life stories, our own journeys through life. Some of us are more eloquent about it than others, and there are always cultural and ethnic nuances to our stories. But the bottom line is that we all have the ability and the language to communicate our own identities and life stories to others, and do so often.

The difficulty we have with framing our own stories of faith is that we may be uncomfortable with the language of faith or have such spotty biblical and theological knowledge that we don't think we know the right words to articulate our life experience with God.

Teaching Children to Tell Their Stories

When I talk with parents about the home being the center of spiritual formation for children, I often find them agree-

ing with me but still reluctant to take on that responsibility because they are afraid they don't know enough about the Bible or theology. They don't have the words to talk with their children about God and Jesus. What they don't understand is that they don't need to be Bible scholars or theologians to nurture their children in the Christian faith. In fact, it might be better that they aren't. They do need to be able to articulate their own stories of experience with God and how that they extend themselves into their family values to their children. Many parents have no idea how to do this.

I chatted on the phone last week with a mother of twin eighth graders. This is a family that values church attendance and values involving their children in a faith community. Yet, as we talked about our church's confirmation requirement of asking our eighth graders to write two statements of faith, I could tell she was having trouble helping her children, because she couldn't articulate her own story of and reflections upon faith. As she struggled to put what she thought into words, she finally said, "Well, I love listening to the sermons and I do think about them during the week." She had faith, but the words of faith, the language of faith she needed to pass her story on to her children, had somehow escaped her even after all these years of churchgoing and teaching in the church. And I don't think she is atypical of many parents in our churches of all stripes. Karen Marie Yust writes in her book *Real Kids, Real Faith* that "much of our children's development as storytellers is dependent on our own comfort level with religious conversation."¹

A few years ago I met with a middle school pastor to talk about her church's confirmation program. As part of the confirmation experience she asked parents to write a letter to their children describing their own experience of faith. She told me that she was amazed at the number of phone calls she received from flummoxed parents telling her they didn't think they could do this. They'd never been asked to put their faith story into words before and didn't seem to

have the tools to do it. And they'd never had those kinds of conversations with their children.

So first, in order to have children who are able to tell their own stories of faith and understand their own identity in God, we need parents and the other important adults who surround them to be able to articulate their own stories of faith and find their own identities as adopted children of God. This, as with everything we talk about in spiritual formation, is easier said than done.

One church I served had a segment called "Faithstory" as part of the weekend worship services. This was a five-minute monologue presented by a member of the faith community and included stories of how that person came to faith or about a major milestone in his or her own faith development. We discovered that we couldn't just ask people to stand up and talk. First, the strict five-minute boundary needed to be rigorously maintained, and we found that most people couldn't do that without their story being scripted and rehearsed. But we also found that people couldn't always easily articulate their own faith stories without help. So each person who participated in this part of the worship service had to work with one of the pastors in order to hone and frame the story. Now, I suspect this exercise was helpful to these people in putting words to something they knew they'd experienced but had never been coached in how to talk about it. And I suspect that each week as members of the congregation heard these "faithstories," this modeling began to give them language with which to describe their own experiences of faith. That's one way to begin to train a cadre of people, who are often also parents, to talk about their faith.

Another helpful practice is to put parents and kids together in an intentional situation where they have to talk about faith in God with each other. In some ways that's what the middle school pastor was attempting to do. Confirmation is all about getting recalcitrant teens to understand and articulate that understanding of faith, so it made lots of sense to bring par-

ents, as the primary models for their kids, into the process. However, it is important for kids to start hearing stories of faith from their parents at an age earlier than fourteen. We need to be intentional about getting kids together with their parents to talk about faith from an early age. The earlier parents begin to have these kinds of conversations with their children, the easier and more natural it becomes for kids to talk about their own understanding of God and faith.

At Jacob's Well, an emerging church in Kansas City, they held a series of evening events with families where the focus was "Our Stories of Faith." At these events, parents explored together their own stories of faith and their own spiritual heritage.

The Youth and Family Institute in Minneapolis has a resource called "Faith Talk." These are several sets of cards that include age-appropriate questions to lead families into discussions about God and faith. This is a great resource to use at the dinner table or on vacations or other long automobile trips. While using these cards, kids can ask their parents things such as "What does the phrase 'In everything give thanks' mean to you?" or "How did your family prepare for Christmas?" These kinds of questions enable parents to talk about faith and faith traditions with their children in nonthreatening ways, and in ways that don't require an extensive knowledge of the Bible or theology. The required answers grow out of the parent's own experience of living a life in faith and of long-held family traditions and rituals. Then parents can turn the tables and ask the same questions of their children, helping them to experiment with talking the language of faith in a safe environment.

I've had some success with parent-child educational events where the activities force parents and children to talk about faith together. I offered an event for preschoolers and their parents around the subject of prayer. We played simple games to teach about the different aspects of prayer, and we read a story together about another child's experience of prayer.

We learned some simple prayers that could be replicated at home. Each family left with a copy of these prayers and prayer activities they could do at home. Both the parents and children enjoyed the activities, and some requested the title of the storybook I read to the group. However, my sense is that parents often hang back in these types of settings, acting as observers rather than real participants with their children. Any facilitator of these types of experiences needs to be aware of this and plan for it.

I mentioned earlier that I held a similar event for preschoolers and their parents about how to tell and talk about Bible stories at home. The last activity of the event called for the parents to sit with their child while he or she drew a picture of his favorite part of the Bible story. The parents were armed with questions about the Bible story to help the child draw the picture and think about the story as they drew. No one hung back during this activity—they couldn't. The preschoolers' pictures were insightful, and the parents had actually spent a few minutes talking with their children about a Bible story.

Keep parents informed in a concrete and tangible way about what the kids are learning and talking about in their classes at Sunday school. This information gives parents a starting point for talking about faith with their kids, which helps kids learn faith language and practice using it. At Jacob's Well they publish a monthly *Home Connection* parent page, which details the Bible stories for the month and the different ways the children will be experiencing and exploring the Bible story. This one-page newsletter also includes a section called "Conversations around the Table," which offers examples of questions parents could use to interact with their children around the topic or the Bible story. I write a column in my church's monthly newsletter in which I talk about ways parents can talk about faith in their home. It offers quick, simple, practical tips for parents to use with their children to talk about faith at home.

A New Kind of Sunday School Story

There are other ways to help kids tell the story of their own faith besides giving parents the language to define their own faith experience and those of their children. Those of us who are professional religious educators have a responsibility through the experiences we offer them at church programs to help children frame their stories of faith. We should always be conscious of those opportunities that present themselves in the course and context of church educational experiences to shape both children's language of faith and their ability to speak of their own response to God and attempts to live in the way of Jesus.

We need to always seek to use the correct language and to define those terms that may be unfamiliar and unusual to our children—as most religious language is. As we seek to define this language and give life to it for our children, we need to relate it to everyday life as much as possible. We always need to define and enlighten in ways that are age appropriate.

For example, years ago as I was preparing for a workshop on teaching young children to pray, I remember reading that it might not be the best idea to ask young children to name the things they are thankful for to God in prayer. This suggestion was not advocating unthankfulness in children. What the author was saying was that young children may not "get" the abstract concept of being thankful to God for all things. However, they can tell you the things that happened in a day that made them happy or the things they did that were really enjoyable. After asking them to name those things, then pray, saying thank you to God for the chocolate ice cream cone or the trip to the zoo. With young children one always needs to start with the concrete and move to the abstract. And this is especially true as we work to give children words and language to express their own faith experience.

Another great way to get kids to understand and use language to define faith or an experience of God or Jesus is to

ask concrete questions around the concept, idea, or experience you want them to talk about. For example, if you want children to describe a time they felt the presence of God in their lives, you might suggest such prompts as, "Describe a place you like to go that helps you feel close to God" or "Describe a time in your life when you felt like God protected you from something." These kinds of prompts require the child to focus in on concrete experiences and relate them to God and God's presence. And they help the child to identify those places and events where God meets them. They help the child recognize God's presence in their lives. Children are better able to respond to these specific and concrete kinds of questions, which ultimately get to the heart of the abstract issue of God's continuing presence with us through the Holy Spirit, than more general, religiously worded questions.

With the Faith Talk cards mentioned earlier comes a packet called "Faith Talk for Children." The questions on these cards are all age appropriate, and it would be fun to use them in a classroom as a means of encouraging the children to ask each other the questions in order to learn to talk with each other about their faith. Questions such as, "What do you think about when you see a cross?" or "If God came to your house, how would you say 'hello'?" help children to use and think about faith language, and define and refine through language their own experience of God and Jesus.

At my church, we require our eighth-grade confirmands to write two statements of faith. The first paper is to be a reflection upon the biblical stories we've explored in the first semester of the class. We also ask them to reflect upon the Bible as the story of God. The second paper is to be a reflection upon the topics of the second half of the class, which includes the story of the church universal and the story of our church in particular. Many of these young teens struggle with this assignment. The language of faith is a foreign language to them, even for those who were reasonably active in the church as children. But as we see them progress through

these reflections, we do see growth in them as they become better able to express what they think about God, Jesus, and the Bible. Asking kids to write down on paper how they understand faith and what they actually believe is a good exercise in providing them with the language to express their own experience with God. A more creative way to get to the same result would be to ask these young teens to create projects—written, musical, or in some other sort of creative medium—that express their understanding of God and God's presence in their lives.

Another church I served had a similar requirement of its confirmands but carried it one step further. During the confirmation ritual, as each teen came forth to be confirmed, a short portion of her statement of faith was read as the confirmation prayer. The teen heard her own words turned back on her, and the rest of the congregation heard a bit of her faith story—instructing them just a little bit more in the language of faith.

The middle schoolers at Jacob's Well are often allowed time to process their own stories within the context of whatever is being taught during a particular learning event. For example, recently they have been studying different types of psalms. After the group reads a psalm together, the kids participate in a time of silence during which they either write down different words or phrases from that psalm that resonated with their own story or something in the psalm they just didn't connect with. They have the opportunity to share some of these discoveries with the rest of the group.

Some communities have the children keep a journal about their learning experiences. As the children participate in a particular Bible story through a variety of activities, they are asked to write down and reflect upon what they learn. Journaling has long been understood to be a way toward personal revelation, healing, and transformation. Teaching kids this skill at an early age and centering the practice on their spiritual transformation is a wonderful path to lead them

down and a great help toward teaching them to articulate their own stories of faith.

When we learn how to tell our own stories, we learn about ourselves and grow as persons as we reflect on our activities, victories, goals, and losses. We learn more about who we are, what we value, and what we believe to be truth. The same thing happens when we are able to tell and reflect on our own stories of faith. We discover what we really believe about God and Jesus. We notice the dissonance between how we sometimes live and the values of God's kingdom, causing us to grow to be more Christlike. We learn to spot the inbreaking of God's Spirit into our stories and to find God in our lives, even on their darkest days. And we are better able to tell our own faith stories to others, both to introduce them to the way of Jesus and to grow closer in community with other people of faith. When we can do these things with the stories of our life with God, we are walking down a path of positive spiritual formation.