

Whenever a child is born, an irreplaceable individual comes into the world with gifts to give and a voice that is uniquely their own. But each of us is also born into a web of stories, myths and legends that provide the context of our life history within the setting of larger family and cultural stories.

Some stories carry specific expectations for behavior. Most of my family is of English and Scottish descent; people who came to this country two short generations ago to make their living on the Montana prairies and mountains. As such, the men in my family are not the most expressive people you will ever encounter. One of the stories from our family lore finishes up with a Forman man saying, after a considered silence, "I had an emotion once. I didn't care for it." My elders didn't tell young men directly not to express their emotions. They handed that tradition down in a story.

Other stories convey expectations about education, financial or athletic achievement. And whether we are aware of these larger stories or not, they have powerful influence over how we see the world and our place in it. A group of people will often center their tales on extraordinary and dramatic events. Our elders hand down tales of important events until they are woven into our explanations of the human condition and our expectations for the future.

As time goes by, we rearrange and refine or embellish here and there, or we plump up some of the details, and we often clean up the smudges. And along with the embroidering, our traditions influence the formation of who we understand ourselves to be and our place in the world. The stories that we pass on to our children are important vehicles for teaching values, providing moral guidance, and steeping them in a sense of belonging. Or of *not* belonging, not really and truly.

For that reason, the church has been repairing some of the embroidery work done on some of our treasured stories. You may have noticed that when I proclaimed this morning's Gospel, I read the pronouns referring to the Advocate

as feminine. I did that because in the earliest Greek manuscripts, Jesus always uses either a feminine or a neutral pronoun to refer to the Advocate. The male pronouns were stitched in centuries later, but John's Jesus didn't use them. The disciples would have heard something more like: "When the Spirit of truth comes, *that one* will guide you into all the truth..."

In the ritual welcome of two young women into full membership in the Christian body, I think it is essential that they hear that Jesus held women and the feminine in all of us to be essential to the Christian story. I think these young women need to hear Peter say in our Epistle that in the last days, our sons and daughters will prophesy and that the Spirit will be poured out on both men and women. I think it is essential because our stories are not simply speech patterns, they are life patterns. Our collective Christian stories are more than a part of our experience and our heritage, they form the premise for our experience—the basis for our Christian identity.

At the same time, each newborn child is a new and unique creation—a miraculous life that we need to nourish, cherish and protect. And we watch for those moments when we must liberate our children, let them go, because their stories will be different than ours. Their individual lives will begin to shape our collective lives. They may pursue relationships that we will not approve of, seek knowledge and experiences that we will not understand, or challenge us with ideas and perhaps even ideologies that may be hard for us to accept. To love our children is to rehearse letting them draft their own story and to invite them to co-author ours in ways that honor both.

We bring life into the world for the purpose of giving it away.

This morning we heard Jesus talking to his friends about the coming of the Advocate and the work that the Advocate will do in human hearts. "I still have many things to tell you," Jesus says, "but you cannot bear them now." The disciples cannot bear what Jesus has to tell them because there is an event that must enter history first. Before they can lift up and carry the rest of what Jesus has to tell them, Jesus himself, must be lifted up: crucified and resurrected.

Only after the death and resurrection can we begin to grasp the enormity of God's forgiveness and reconciliation. Only in the context of the death and resurrection of Christ can Christians seek right-relationship with God. Christ came into the world for the purpose of giving his life away. That event was the dawn of a new reality that kindled a collective response, an organic bonding of lives that share in Christ's death and resurrection. The same bond that we make with one another in baptism and as we break bread and in the lives we live that carry Christ to a world in search of meaning and hope.

The collective life of the church relies on sacramental bonds between God and individuals; individuals restored in the Holy Spirit bearing the seal of the new reality, both already present and yet to come. John's Gospel stresses a unique aspect of the Holy Spirit in a deeply personal role involving one-to-one relationships with people. The living presence of Christ speaks in each of our hearts with such love that we gather together as God's own children to bring to our loving God our hopes, our fears, our mistakes, our generosity, our despairs and our joy. We come together to weave our stories with God's stories.

That means, Ari and London, that your parents and the rest of us are here to welcome you into a new relationship with God and with us. We trust that the God who already loves you more than you will ever understand—the God who loves us *unconditionally*—that God promises to be with you *no matter what*. You will be washed with holy water and marked with holy oil as the way that God says "You, child, are mine. You, child, are a truly beloved child of everlasting life." God will be with you forever. As you struggle for self-identity and for self-worth, for faith and especially for meaning in the face of death, God will be with you.

Your baptisms, Ari and London, are gifts that God gives to you, but they are also gifts given to us. Each baptism reveals God's invitation to become immersed, not just in water, but in a community of faith. Each baptism reveals God's invitation to join with others on a life-long journey of on-going renewal. As you begin to find your way on that journey, the meaning of your baptism will

continuously unfold. On this day, your baptisms mean that the communion of saints will be forever changed.

It's hard sometimes to trust and accept that we have been made children of God like Jesus and through Jesus in our baptisms. People will gladly offer you evidence to the contrary. From time to time, you will trip over yourself or make decisions that prevent you from living into your best, highest selves. It's hard for all of us to remember that we are a daughter or a son of God when we notice how far short we sometimes fall.

But even when it is the very hardest, you never have to be alone. We will also always be with you. By "we," I mean the entire communion of saints—all of the people who have lived the faith before us, all those trying to live it now and all who will ever live it in the years ahead—all will forever be with you living out the unfinished story of Jesus. The communion of saints that welcomes you as full members of the body of Christ.

If you learn the stories that we share with you here, we can help each other to seek faith, rather than freedom from doubt. If you let the stories we tell about God become the context for your life, we can help each other to watch for God's presence in all things, rather than for distractions that spare us from learning patience and constancy.

We will remind each other of God's outpouring of love in the Spirit of truth, rather than to let each other be deceived by desires or ideas that lead us away from God's love for all creation. We will help each other work for the liberation of all beings, rather than to insist on the free reign to chase after self-centered agendas. We will help each other to seek and share holy joy until we can feel it through all the tears and laughter, all the painful disappointments and the delightful surprises of a life lived in fullness.

And this I promise you, little ones: for the remainder of your life, the Advocate will be present with you when you pray. Not *because* you pray, but simply because God loves you. The Spirit that will blossom in your heart will always be with you—sometimes gently, sometimes like a great wind and

sometimes unnoticeably—but *really*. And truly. And your story will become a new story about God's grace.