



Becoming...

A five-week pastoral reflection series

Pastoral Reflection #2

The Stories We Tell

Over the years, ministry has taught me something simple yet profound: the questions we ask determine the things we notice. I've discovered there's another truth that follows close behind. The things we notice shape the stories we tell. I didn't always understand that. In fact, I had to learn it the hard way.

Early in my synodical ministry, while serving as Bishop's Associate, I created a series of maps that categorized congregations across our synod. Using information like worship attendance and pastoral staffing, we identified congregations with different colors to help us understand where support and resources might be needed.

At the time, it felt like good leadership. And in many ways, it was. Leaders need good information. We have a responsibility to understand realities on the ground, steward resources wisely, and make thoughtful decisions.

I don't regret wanting better data. I do regret the story the data slowly began to tell. Or perhaps more honestly...the story I began to tell. Without realizing it, I had begun seeing congregations primarily through the lens of what they lacked. Attendance. Financial capacity. Pastoral sustainability.

Those things mattered. But over time they became the dominant story. Congregations weren't simply communities seeking to follow Jesus. They became congregations that were succeeding...or struggling. Growing...or declining. Healthy...or unhealthy. The maps measured something real. But they didn't tell the whole truth.

Looking back, what humbles me most is that I should have recognized what was happening. Years earlier I had studied family systems theory, which taught me that the questions leaders ask profoundly shape the life of a system. Healthy leadership isn't about ignoring problems. It's about refusing to let problems become the only story.

Somewhere along the way, I forgot that. The pressures of leadership nudged me toward what was easiest to measure. And before I knew it, measurements had become narratives.

Eventually I realized I needed to begin asking different questions. Not because the old questions were wrong. But because they were incomplete. Instead of beginning with, "*Can this congregation survive?*" I began asking, "*Where is God already at work in this congregation?*" Everything started to change.

When I visited congregations, I noticed different things. I noticed the retired schoolteacher quietly mentoring young parents. I noticed a handful of members preparing meals every Tuesday for neighbors they knew by name. I noticed lay leaders who had never been to seminary but possessed extraordinary wisdom. I noticed congregations with shrinking attendance but growing generosity. I noticed joy. Hope. Creativity. Resilience.

The challenges hadn't disappeared. But neither had the Holy Spirit. For the first time, I realized that every congregation carries at least two stories. There is the story of its challenges. And there is the story of God's faithfulness. Both are true. The question is which story will become the lens through which we see one another.

I've come to believe that one of the most important responsibilities of a leader is helping communities tell truthful stories. Not optimistic stories that deny reality. Not pessimistic stories that deny grace. Truthful stories. Stories that honestly acknowledge struggle while remaining open to resurrection. After all, our faith is built on the conviction that death never has the final word. Why should our congregations be any different?

I think about Jesus. He never ignored suffering. He saw poverty. Conflict. Fear. Illness. Grief. Sin. But those realities were never the whole story.

He also saw people becoming. He saw disciples where others saw fishermen. He saw generosity in two small coins. He saw possibility in people others had already written off. Jesus refused to let brokenness become anyone's defining story. Perhaps that is one of the reasons people found hope in his presence.

These days, when I visit a congregation, I'm carrying a very different map. It has no colors. No rankings. No labels. Instead, it is filled with questions. Where is Christ already at work here? Where are people growing as disciples? Who is quietly emerging as a leader? Where are relationships being healed? How is this congregation blessing its community? Where do I glimpse resurrection?

Those questions don't erase difficult realities. They simply help me remember that God's activity is also part of the story. And that changes everything.

Maybe that is why Scripture tells stories instead of simply giving us statistics. Stories invite us to see. Stories shape our imagination. Stories help us discover who we are becoming.

As leaders, we will always tell stories. The question is whether our stories leave room for the surprising, grace-filled future that God is already bringing to life. Because the things we notice shape the stories we tell. And the stories we tell shape the people we are becoming.

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