

## **A Christmas Tale: On the Air, “On Point”**

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*The first day of the ABS Master Retreat, a week before Christmas, brought quite a surprise. I realize it is well past the season of Christmas, but here in Dayton we still have snow on the ground and lights on the mantel. In any case, this remembrance about an unlikely occasion to highlight biblical storytelling (aka “scripture by heart”) is at least a little like finding a savior in a manger. So I’ve named it “A Christmas Tale.”*

Who would have thought that a radio show on “The Divisions in Christianity Over Sex” would be an occasion to discuss biblical storytelling? I sure didn’t, but it was. I’m convinced it happened through the power of prayer and the presence of the Holy Spirit, but maybe also because of some strategic interviewing.

A week before Christmas I was invited to be part of a panel on a National Public Radio show the very next day. I was told it was meant to be a conversation about how issues around human sexuality have divided the church.

It was an invitation I didn’t want. It was very inconvenient. Tom and I were in the middle of hosting a 4-day retreat at our home for Master level students of the Academy for Biblical Storytelling. Guess who was the chief cook and bottle washer? And did I mention, it was a week before Christmas?

But mainly, I was afraid. I don’t think fast on my feet and I don’t like being in the limelight. I’m prone to reacting like a deer caught in headlights when asked a pointed question. Sometimes I almost stutter.

Since seminary days back in the late 1980’s, I have held strong convictions about the Christian faith and human sexuality and have struggled with our denomination’s stance. Last year my daughter married a woman, and it became personal. I really care about this issue, but I felt like an inadequate spokesperson.

My internal complaint about being a poor spokesperson is what prompted the thought, “You sound just like Moses.” Then I knew my goose was cooked. I agreed to participate.

I recruited folk to pray for me and pray they did. I only have to look at my Facebook page for evidence of their prayer. One of our GoTell Board members, Larry Ramey, came over that night. He had volunteered to tell a story for the retreat group so one of them could demonstrate coaching skills.

Guess what story he told—the story of shepherds out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. Just like those shepherds, I was terrified and needed to hear angelic words of comfort. When Larry heard about the NPR show he gathered the others to lay hands on me and prayed.

Eleven o’clock the next morning “On Point” is live on the air, with guest host Tom Gjelten, who covers religion, faith, and belief for NPR News. About ten minutes into it Mr. Gjelten introduces

me as “Deacon-in-Residence at Grace Church, a Methodist Church, there in Dayton.” I muddle through a segment about the “Boston Declaration” which I had signed while attending the Society of Biblical Literature in November in Boston.

That was at least part of the reason NPR sought out my participation; that, and because they wanted a woman. The mystery to me remains: a lot of women with higher credentials than me signed that declaration. The producers had gone to some trouble to locate me. They found out I had published a book, called the publisher, then called the church secretary who notified me. Why me?

After the commercial break, to my surprise, Mr. Gjelten asked me to “tell us a little bit about your ministry and Grace church. Who are the people you try to address in your own ministry?” I had expected questions about ordaining homosexuals, same-sex marriage, or the Commission on a Way Forward and I’d done a little prep for those questions during the 24 hours I had before the show. I didn’t expect questions about my ministry at Grace.

My mouth did open and some coherent words did come forth. I started by explaining my vocation in broad terms, then narrowing to my specific call:

Well, as a Deacon I’m called to a ministry of Word, service, and justice, and to connect the church with the outer community. In the last five years or so I have been called to a ministry of people who are incarcerated and have developed a team of individuals at Grace Church who go with me into the jail, and also into the woman’s prison here in Dayton, to share the Word with them and to hear also the Word *from* them, as clearly the Spirit is present in all of these places, and as we work on learning the scriptures by heart we often encounter that Word.”

Lots of run-on sentences, but hey, Mark does that, too, in telling his good news.

We seemed to have drifted from the topic at hand, but our host took it even further afield asking, And what does that mean to you? What does it mean to meet people where they are in terms of a doctrine, in terms of your own beliefs? I mean, everybody brings their own beliefs to their faith, right?

Where was he going with this??? “Um...Yes,” I said, as it seemed like a safe answer to “Everybody brings their own beliefs to their faith, right?”

I was befuddled, but I knew I had to say something. Pauses are merciless on the radio. I stammered for time and then found myself speaking in the language of Godly Play that I learned for worship with children before addressing what I tell with conviction to women in jail:

God is present in all places with all people, and in all people, but so many folks don’t know God’s love, don’t know that they’re valued, and so one of the things we can do is to communicate that to them through the scriptures. We actually help them learn the scriptures by heart as a way of internalizing God’s kingdom, and experiencing it.

This led to common ground with Russell Moore—the person who represented “the other side” which was labeled as the “evangelical” position (I got labeled as “progressive”). After I spoke, Mr. Gjelten asked Prof. Moore, “I’m going to guess, because I know you, that you don’t have a lot to disagree with, with the way she interprets her mission.” He answered,

No, I think what she's said so far sounds really good. That's exactly what Christians are called to do: to minister to *all* people, and to be present with those who are distressed, those who are imprisoned, those who are impoverished, those who are in vulnerable situations. I think we could agree on that.

That moment of common ground was another surprise. On the other hand, I happen to think what we do through biblical storytelling in the jail, prison, or anywhere is very evangelical in the best sense of the word.

The whole radio program is worth listening to, but if you want to hear what I had to say about biblical storytelling with incarcerated women and Russell Moore's response, click on the link below, then click on the cloud beneath the red circle to the left of the program title and fast forward to 13 minutes.

Peter Marty, a Lutheran pastor who is publisher of *The Christian Century*, did mention our United Methodist quandary: "Obviously Methodists are struggling mightily..." which was all the reference the UMC got with regard to what may well split our denomination. I did take an opportunity to express my understanding in the last few seconds of the show (-1:22)—

When I was in seminary and studied various things around homosexuality it suddenly came to me that God is a God who loves diversity, even our doctrine of the Trinity supports that. And that for some reason, some people God made homosexual. And when we push away from them, or call them sinful, or insist that they should change, then we are really going against what Jesus would want us to do.

Mr. Gjelten closed the program: "That's Amelia Boomershine, she's Deacon-in-Residence at Grace Church, a Methodist Church in Dayton, Ohio." Thanks be to God, I lived to tell the story.

[Click here for the Dec. 18 "On Point" program](#) page with bios about the participants, links to the documents being discussed, and access to the program.