

# *Grace by Heart*

A Cloud of Witnesses

Aug. 4, 2018

I love learning the scriptures by heart. It helps me to understand each one so well, and they are all then a part of me forever, even if I later forget some words.

I want to reach the listeners, to make the words of the Bible come alive for them. Concentrating on that keeps me focused, like I'm talking to someone, and if I'm Well Prepared, I have no fear.

The Grace By Heart community is so warm and welcoming and encouraging, and Tom Boomershine is the greatest advisor, helping us understand the most difficult passages.

As a layperson, being a storyteller brings a whole new dimension to my faith and gives me a much deeper understanding of the Bible.

Effie Sue Kemerley

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What comes to mind when I reflect on what it's like to be part of Grace by Heart for over ten years now is the early church: a small group of people bearing witness to God's Word. It's a group which has grown in grace over these years as each member has grown in his or her capacity to embrace and embody a biblical composition, and as we have grown in our appreciation for one another. Our love for God's Word has deepened as we come to know it more intimately. This is our service to God and to the congregation.

Something I have observed is how this ministry has empowered lay people. They learn the scriptures in all their details so thoroughly, and in deciding how to embody them they are motivated to learn about them. So they tell them with authority, power, and passion. Sometimes they preface their telling with explanatory words to set the context for their story. Sometimes they follow the telling with a brief comment which solidifies connection between story and congregation. Always in their telling they communicate how important scripture is because they have taken the time to learn it by heart and taken the risk of telling it by heart.

Amelia Cooper Boomershine

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I find it very spiritually and personally rewarding to learn and tell the scripture by heart. Learning a passage deepens my knowledge of the Bible, helps me find a connection with what is going on in the story and feels like a step forward in my spiritual journey. I consider it an act of devotion to keep practicing until I feel I know it well. Actually telling it is often exhilarating and a time for me to express what the passage says to me personally. I am always somewhat nervous but I keep reflecting on how God has helped me in the past and I ask the Spirit to fill me, help me let go of my selfish desire to do it well and not embarrass myself, and let the Spirit shine through. When I can relax and let this happen, my fear diminishes.

Being part of the Grace by Heart community is one of my greatest blessings! I love the others in it and I feel confident that they love me. We support each other always, when we do well and when we make mistakes. Having Tom and Amelia for leaders is so valuable to me.

I would tell someone who might want to be a storyteller to not give up. The nervousness will get better and the joy of reaching out with God's mighty stories has such great rewards, spiritually and personally. It is a challenge you will be glad you accepted!

Roberta Longfellow

It helps me to get deeper into the worship service.  
I feel like a messenger of God, sharing His Word.  
I get really nervous and shaky. I overcome it by praying.  
I like being part of a group that brings scripture to life during worship.  
It helps you learn the scriptures and make them your own, so your armor can be stronger.

Sarah Collins

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1. **What does it mean to you to tell scripture by heart in worship?**

It is a responsibility that I do not take lightly. It is a great honor to be allowed to tell scripture in worship. It means that I must spend a lot of time with a small bit of the Bible and learn it well enough to tell other people. It means that I get to go over and over the words until they make sense to me, until they sort of take on a life. I think that spending this kind of time with a few words, relatively speaking, lets me hear the voice of the person who wrote those words. I get a better understanding of the rhythm, the cadence of the language. I get to see the humor. I get to see real people in the story. Of course, it also means that the congregation is getting my personal understanding of the passage, which may or may not be a good thing!

2. **What do you feel when you are telling?**

I feel the eyes of the congregation on me. They give me their undivided attention. It's kind of weird to receive this attention, and if I think about it too much, I get self-conscious. I feel their love for me, as well, and I know that they trust me to share what I have discovered in the text as I tell it. I feel gratified, or grateful is maybe a better word, when they seem to "get" what I "got" out of it, when they laugh at the places that I thought were funny and take seriously the things that I do, as well. When I'm done telling, I often feel as if I did nothing myself. Emphases, gestures, vocal tones, and facial expressions that were not rehearsed happen as surprises to me, sometimes, and I realize that I really have internalized the story in a way I did not realize until I told it in worship.

3. **What fears did (do) you have to overcome? How do you overcome those fears?**

A big fear is that I will forget some part of the story. As with other kinds of performance, I have found that if I can say the first line, I'll probably be okay through the rest of it, so I often repeat the first line several times right before I start telling. If I focus on the story, I am also less apt to be afraid of embarrassing myself in some unexpected way. But really, when I look at how nervous I was about remembering the words when we first began this ten years ago and compare that to how much more confident we all are now, I am amazed. Slowly we started telling longer and longer passages. Slowly we stopped taking cheat sheets up with us. Slowly our confidence grew. I think that is in large part due to the encouragement that Tom gave us and still gives us.

4. **What does it mean to you to be a part of the Grace by Heart community?**

It's a safe place to discuss ideas about scripture and to learn historical and theological backgrounds. It's a loving group that is encouraging. It is an extremely talented group of people, and it's a pleasure to spend time with them. Our time together is always uplifting and enjoyable. It's also interesting and edifying to hear the different ways people have of telling and learning the words by heart. There are different experiences, personalities, and styles of expression, but they are all effective and meaningful. That's a great lesson.

5. **What would you say to anyone who might become a storyteller?**

Do it! It's a great way to enhance your memory, to explore your faith, to share your gifts with others, and to learn! The congregation loves you and wants you to succeed; they will be grateful for your contribution to their worship experience, and they will receive your gift with real appreciation.

Susan Bennett

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It's a way to relate the scriptures in a different way than most people experience. People have said they understand the stories better and that they mean more to them when they are told.

When it goes well, I feel a peace come over me when I am telling, as if God is guiding me through.

There's always nervousness before I tell, even if I am well-prepared. I feel as if I'm responsible for presenting the Word of God, and I don't want to mess up. I have performed on stage, done media interviews and broadcast on radio, but this is the most nerve-wracking. I just rehearse as much as possible prior to telling. If I am telling on Sunday, I try not to schedule a lot of events for Saturday. I also try to learn a story gradually over a period of days/weeks because I am not good at cramming.

I experience new and strengthened friendships, camaraderie among the group because we all have the same struggles learning the stories, and a great support systems. Learning more about the stories is also a benefit.

Try it! It's not easy, but you can learn how to do it, and there are lots of people to help you. You will also learn more about the stories meaning and context as you learn to tell them.

John Bennett