Learning From Each Other: Toward an Episcopal Understanding of Testimony

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the introduction of the practice of testimony in a congregation that does not readily understand itself as a community that engages in the practice. Testimony is an underutilized practice in the Episcopal Church and this thesis engages the questions of why it matters, what it looks like, and how to help implement it. Testimony was studied by introducing a program called Faith Moments that invited parishioners to share moments of God at work in their lives or in the world. The first two chapters lay out the foundational background material for the study. Chapter One explores the philosophy and theology of testimony. Chapter Two outlines the act of ministry that was implemented and studied, along with the methodologies that were involved. The subsequent chapters tackle the three questions of why, what, and how. Chapter Three looks at why testimony matters, exploring how testimony is critical to the formation of certain types of knowledge, and confirming the value of testimony found by others. Chapter Four analyzes what testimony looks like in the context of a congregation in the Pacific Northwest of the United States in a world marred by pandemic, racial injustice, political division, and wildfire, gaining a deeper understanding of how God works in and among particular people in a particular culture and time. Chapter Five investigates people's hesitancy to share their testimonies and ways that helped ease those concerns, while also exploring how those hesitations are not just barriers to be overcome, but speak to the real and legitimate dangers of testimony that can deform faith as easily as it can form it. Overall, the thesis opens up questions about Episcopal identity and helps point a way forward for an Episcopal understanding of testimony.

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Dedication

To my father,

Frank Neff Powell,

who testified to me and countless others

of the love of God,

which is greater than we can ask for or begin to imagine

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Inevitably, I have left people out. I beg your forgiveness. Please know that I am grateful for you as well.

Introduction

"Hey, Suzy, did you get my e-mail? You going to be able to make it later today?" I asked when I ran into Suzy before church on Sunday morning.

"Yeah, I don't know," she said hesitantly. "I'm not really into testimony." I paused. Her response took me by surprise. I had not used the word testimony, but the concept must have shined through the thin veneer of calling it "Faith Moments." I had been advertising my Faith Moments project and Suzy had e-mailed me earlier in the week asking me for more details. I responded but had shied away from the word testimony, just as I had in the original advertisements. Several months earlier, I had used the term in a small group and received strong negative reactions. My Project Thesis team and I worried that using the word testimony could undermine the project, so we decided to brand our work "Faith Moments." This will be an opportunity to "share and hear our faith stories with the hope that our faith will be deepened in the process," I told her in my reply.

Suzy and members of that small group are not alone in having preconceived notions regarding the word testimony. For some, religious testimony conjures up the idea of sharing a conversion story in front of a congregation or evangelizing door-to-door. But testimony broadly understood is simply sharing something with someone else. Testimony is frequently used as evidence in court trials where a witness shares information related to a crime or a civil wrong. In a court of law, the purpose is to find legal truth. In religious testimony, the information is related to God's work in the world and the purpose is to find religious truth. Sometimes the word testimony does have a particular technical meaning, like in the Wednesday night prayer and testimony service of some churches where it is a part of the regular liturgical rhythm of faith communities. But testimony does not have to be limited to

a particular embodiment of the practice. As Thomas Hoyt, Jr. writes, "In different ways, testimony happens in every vital Christian community. It also happens, as we shall see, in the midst of daily life and in the life of society… It appears in different forms, ranging across a spectrum from the highly technical procedures of the courtroom to the familiar exchanges of everyday life."[1] He argues that testimony is the words we offer, but also our actions. The content, purpose, venue, and audience of the testimony are all variable.

The purpose and content of the testimony are varied. One purpose could be faith formation. For instance, testimony can strengthen the audience's faith as they hear the testimony. Another purpose could be proselytization as one shares with the intention of bringing someone to the faith. The content could be as dramatic as a conversion story, but it could something more mundane, the subtler workings of God in one's life. The testimony could be long or short, spanning from a book-length testimony to a short "elevator pitch" vignette. It could be testimony spanning decades of a life, like Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions*, or it could be recounting a very specific singular event, like Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*. The testimony could be autobiographical, as when Paul shares about his own conversion in 1 Timothy 1. Or the testimony could be something witnessed in someone else, as Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and others offer in Acts 15 when they share about the work of the Holy Spirit that they have witnessed in the gentile believers.

Testimony does not even need to include words. The Greek root of the word martyr means witness. A martyr is one who offers testimony through the giving of life. There are certainly less extreme versions than martyrdom in which one offers non-verbal testimony. The witness of many non-martyred saints to the power and grace of God is not primarily

[1] Thomas Hoyt, Jr. "Testimony," in *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 89-91.

through their words, but through their lives. In The Episcopal Church, we often call the saints the Great Cloud of Witnesses. They are witnesses, testifying through their lives, to the light of Christ. The baptismal covenant of the Episcopal Church implores members of the Body of Christ to proclaim by word *and example* the Good News of God in Christ. Just as proclamation does not have to just be verbal, neither does testimony. Hoyt argues for work in the soup kitchen and liturgical acts like baptism and Eucharist as testimony.[2]

The practice of testimony could mean sharing an experience in front of the congregation or on a street corner, but it also means testifying in other venues: in a small group, to a friend over a cup of coffee, in a social media post, or to a child at home, to name just a few. Audiences may vary for the testimony. The audience could be full of acquaintances or strangers. The audience could be made up of people receptive to the message or people hostile to it. It could be an audience of one or multitudes. The audience could be oneself. Testimony could be for the one listening, or testimony could be for the one sharing as the speaker's faith is deepened in the process of preparing and giving testimony. The process of simply speaking words out loud can help you work through what you understand and believe. Tom Long argues that testimony is the best way to figure out what you believe. "Saying things out loud is part of how we come to believe," he says. "We talk our way *toward* belief." [emphasis original][3]

This doctoral thesis intended to explore testimony in a community that does not understand itself as one that offers testimony. This community is my community where I have served as a priest for fifteen years: St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Eugene, Oregon. As we will see, when we understand testimony a broader sense like Hoyt does, the people of St.

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[2] Hoyt, 99.
[3] Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 6.

Mary's already offer testimony. But I specifically wanted to focus on an element of testimony that is limited in the congregation: testimony to the ways that parishioners see God at work in their lives or this world. This thesis blossomed from my experience as their priest for a decade and a half. Over the years, I have heard many stories of God's working in the lives of the people I serve, usually shared in one-on-one conversations in my office or in the hospital. Occasionally these stories have been shared in small group settings like a bible study or a small alternative worship service that involved sharing time in place of the traditional sermon. These stories have nourished my faith over the years.

There is a section in the middle of Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* that has helped me make sense of this experience of my parishioners deepening my faith by sharing their stories. In the middle of the book is an interlude on the life of Father Zossima, which we are told was written from Alyosha's recollection of Zossima's words. In this section, Zossima gives a sweeping testimony to his life and faith, interspersed with pieces of advice and wisdom. In part of an exhortation to overworked and underpaid priests, he encourages the clergy to draw close to the people and trust them, and in doing so, the priest will find God as well. In a line that echoes the man crying out to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief,"[4] Zossima says, "One who does not believe in God will not believe in God's people. He who believes in God's people will see God's Holiness too, even though he has not believed in it till then."[5] It would be a vast exaggeration to say that I did not believe in God before then, but hearing my parishioner's stories, believing in them and the ways that God was at work in them, deepened my own faith. I more clearly saw God's Holiness, as Zossima puts it. I wondered if parishioners, having greater intentional opportunities to share their stories with

[4] Mark 9:24.
[5] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans. by Manuel Komroff (New York: Signet, 1957), 269-270.

one another, would be nourished by such stories from their fellow parishioners as well. My hypothesis was that they would.

I had three questions going into this project: why, what, and how. Why does testimony to God's actions in the world matter? What does it look like in this context? And how do I help people engage in it? This thesis addresses these three questions. Chapters One and Two lay the foundation for the analysis of these questions. Chapter One explores the meaning of testimony from philosophical and theological perspectives to lay out the broader understanding of testimony, with a particular focus on religious testimony. We will see the breadth of testimony and the ways that it is and is not present in the Episcopal tradition. Chapter Two explores the methods and methodologies of my research, and the act of ministry I implemented and studied. Using action research, practical theology, and Bakhtinian dialogism, I implemented and researched a three-part program called Faith Moments. A global pandemic interrupted the work, requiring adaptations that impacted, but did not derail the work.

Chapters Three through Five explore the three primary questions I had in order. Chapter Three explores why testimony matters. We will see how a particular evening of testimony at a Vestry meeting underlines the value of testimony by generating hope for participants. Certain forms of knowledge are only discoverable through testimony, and the type of knowledge that participants learned that evening constituted such knowledge. Chapter Four explores what testimony looks like in my particular faith context by exploring the content of the testimonies shared. We will see how testimony is contextually conditioned, creating a dialogue between the testimonies and the context. Testimonies dialogued with the events of the time, including a pandemic, protests for racial justice, and wildfires. The testimonies also dialogued with the wider culture such as testimonies based in

nature, a deeply held value for people in the Pacific Northwest. We will also see in this chapter how testimonies were not only event-driven, but image-driven. Chapter Five explores how to help the hesitant to testify. All of the research for this thesis was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the adaptations needed to complete the thesis most affected this chapter, leaving us with more provisional conclusions than initially planned. Even more than the other chapters, this chapter ends up serving as foundational work for future research. In it, we will see some of the reasons for people's hesitations and some thoughts on how to help people overcome them. In their hesitations, we also see some dangers of the practice of testimony, the way that a holy practice can de-form instead of form someone's faith. We will explore these risks and the need to minimize them.

Instead of testimony being an incidental part of life and faith, we rely on it every day of our lives. Testimony is necessary to our lives and to our faith. So, when Suzy says that she is not that into testimony, she imagines a specific and narrow understanding of testimony. Her understanding is of a practice that is not too common in the Episcopal Church. In response to Suzy's statement that she is not really into testimony, I replied, "You're not alone. Not many Episcopalians are. I haven't really been that into it myself; I'm pretty reserved, but I think it's important. That's why I wanted to do this project. It's designed for people like us who aren't too comfortable sharing about our faith."

Chapter One

What Is Testimony?

What comes to your mind when you hear the word testimony? A witness sitting next to a judge in a courtroom during a murder trial? A Supreme Court nominee sitting before the Senate Judiciary Committee? A parishioner standing up before a congregation and sharing their conversion story? Opening the door to see a couple of people holding pamphlets?

Religion and law have traditionally been the primary fields concerned with testimony. However, philosophers have more recently identified testimony as a regular occurrence. The study of this broader understanding of testimony took off with the publication of C. A. J. Coady's *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*. He effectively argues that testimony is something we rely upon daily as a source of knowledge; we would not be able to function as a society without it. He divides testimony into two types: formal and natural. This work set off something of a revolution in epistemology – the study of knowledge – to the point that there is now a consensus on the ubiquity of testimony with disagreements related to the precise relationship between testimony and the formation of knowledge. Coady's work has also influenced religion, with several scholars arguing for a more expansive view of testimony in the church.

This thesis rests upon the foundation of this broader understanding of testimony, understanding that testimony is not just the formal styles that typically come to mind. To understand the project and its analysis, we need to first review the concepts of this more expansive view of testimony. We will do so in this chapter by reviewing the types of

testimony and the necessity of testimony, with a particular eye toward its use in the church. These concepts are foundational for subsequent chapters.

Formal vs Natural Testimony

In this section, we will explore two types of testimony: formal testimony and natural testimony. We will start by reviewing some formal types of testimony, the kinds that typically come to mind when we hear the word, before moving onto a newer, more expansive concept called natural testimony. The classical understanding of testimony is in a legal setting, typically in the courtroom or more recently before a legislative committee. Testimony is evidence in a case or an investigation. There are agreed-upon criteria for this sort of testimony. Some of these include: 1) the person must have relevant information to the case or investigation, 2) the person has some semblance of authority on the matter at hand, 3) the person has been invited to share this information, 4) there are standards for what can be shared and how it should be evaluated, and 5) the information is shared in a particular context with particular people present. Law students can take classes on these standards. There are often penalties in these environments for offering false testimony. Coady calls this formal testimony. There are rigid definitions or formal structures around testimony in this understanding.[1]

Coady acknowledges, but does not explore, another type of formal testimony: religious testimony in the church. We might think here of testimony in the Black Church.[2] Theologian James Cone gives a good definition of this form of testimony:

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[1] C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 25-38.

[2] The Black Church is an umbrella term that can either narrowly refer to a group of seven historically Black denominations in the Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal traditions or broadly refer to those plus the traditions of Black Christians within other denominations, including Black Episcopalians among others. Among and within these denominations, there is a diversity of practices. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Black Church: This is*

> [Testimony] is the occasion in which a believer stands before the community of faith in order to give an account of the hope that is in him or her (I Peter 3:15). The character of the testimony is always deeply personal as the believer tells his/her story of how he/she has been able to "keep the faith" in the midst of the "trials and tribulations of this unfriendly world." Through the act of storytelling, the storyteller receives a "little extra strength" to "keep on keeping on" even though the odds might be against him or her. Testimony is a spiritually liberating experience for the believer wherein he/she is empowered by God's Holy Spirit to stay on the "gospel train" until it reaches the kingdom.[3]

There is much in Cone's definition about the formal structures that constitutes this testimony: 1) it happens in front of the whole church community, 2) it is a personal story, 3) it contains both challenge and hope, 4) it involves a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and 5) it is an act of liberation. Traditionally, the person testifying offers spoken testimony before the local community, though Cone presents this definition in a book in which he offers his written testimony to the wider church. He is taking that traditional understanding of testimony in the Black Church as the foundation for what he is going to do in written form in the book.

Often this type of formal religious testimony is included in particular liturgical practices such as those Bishop Thomas Hoyt, Jr. describes in recounting his childhood experience of testimony in the Christian Methodist Episcopal church. The testimony of his childhood took place on Wednesday nights at the "prayer and testimony meeting." During this service, Hoyt describes a rhythm of song, prayer, and testimony that was followed even if the only people present were the pastor and his kids.[4] While still a part of the Black

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Our Story, This is Our Song (New York, Penguin Press, 2021), 9. It is not always clear in the literature which understanding authors are using when talking about the practice of testimony in the Black Church. Although frequently stated as being a practice of the Black Church, it seems likely that its prominence and manifestations vary in different strains of Black Christianity in America; however, I was unable to find literature that explored such distinctions or differences. Further research on testimonial practice among predominantly or historically Black churches within denominations that do not traditionally have a strong practice of testimony such as Black Episcopalians and Black Roman Catholics would be invaluable.

[3] James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 6.

[4] Thomas Hoyt, Jr. "Testimony," in *Practicing Our Faith*, Second Edition, edited by Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 89.

Church tradition in United States, there is some indication of decline in the practice. Mona Odom in her doctoral thesis for Wesley Theological Seminary argues that the rise of megachurches in the 1980s led to a corresponding decline in the midweek testimony services in smaller Black churches. Her project was to reinstitute such a practice in a congregation.[5]

Diana Butler Bass talks about another example of formal testimony in the New England Puritan church. Those seeking membership in the church were required to offer a public testimony to the power of God in their life. This practice has been lost among the Congregationalist descendants of New England puritanism. She goes on to share the story of a Congregational Church in Connecticut that tried to reclaim the practice of testimony.[6] The pastor did this in Sunday morning public worship services and created a singular criteria for the practice: they must incorporate God into their talk.[7]

There is another type of formal testimony common in the church: testimony in the white evangelical church. Butler Bass tells us that this form of testimony comes out of the eighteenth and nineteenth century revivals and was highly disapproved of by white mainline Christians. One of the primary purposes of this testimony is to convert. It is sometimes offered in church services and sometimes offered door-to-door. It typically involves a conversion story: here is how I came to believe in Jesus. This is the form of testimony that the Presiding Bishop Michael Curry of the Episcopal Church describes as a foil in a sermon: "We are at home minding our own business, having a cup of coffee, when the doorbell

[5] Mona Odom, *The Genre of Testimony the Scriptures* (DMin Thesis, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC, 2011).
[6] Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 129-142.
[7] Lillian Daniel, *Tell it Like it is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 11-12.

rings. At the door are two nicely dressed people with little bags and copies of the *Watchtower* magazine. And we want to hide."[8]

Curry's example is about Jehovah's Witnesses, but other than the name of the magazine, this is similar to the experience one of the participants in the Faith Moments project described of his understanding of testimony. Let's call him Tim. Tim participated, but was quite hesitant about the project. When we explored his hesitation, he said that it reminded him of his evangelical upbringing. Without having heard me say the word testimony, he figured that I was introducing testimony to the congregation, and for him testimony and evangelism were inextricably linked. Tim described being forced to go door-to-door when younger to bring the Gospel to strangers. "To just knock on somebody's door, not asked for, always felt very intrusive to me," he said. He called this his "baggage," but he just could not shake it. One-third of our interview was spent talking about evangelism. At one point, I pointed out that my project was not about evangelism and he seemed surprised.

> Tim: "Well, it's sharing your faith, right?"
> Me: "Yeah, so why does that immediately go to knocking on the doors of strangers?"
> Tim: "Well, that's how I grew up."

Tim was not the only one with this form of testimony in mind. Several of the participants that I interviewed brought up the connection to their evangelical background. And several more parishioners pulled me aside to tell me that they were uninterested in participating in the project and would go on to briefly describe their experiences with this type of testimony in the evangelical community that they had left. This type of formal testimony – white evangelical testimony for the purpose of conversion – seems to be the primary type envisioned by parishioners who had a preconceived notion of testimony.

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[8] Michael Curry, *Songs My Grandma Sang* (New York: Morehouse, 2015), 41.

In reviewing these types, we can see similarities between the formal testimony found in legal and religious settings. First, the testimony is a piece of evidence. It may be evidence to convince a jury about the innocence or guilt of a defendant, persuade legislators to enact a piece of legislation, encourage a stranger to follow Jesus, or reassure a fellow parishioner's faith during a rocky time; but no matter the precise purpose and venue, it is a piece of evidence. And there are generally agreed-upon criteria in place: whether those are legal criteria laid out by laws and statutes for the courtroom or the traditions and practices of a faith community. When we understand testimony in this formal way, testimony is rare in most Episcopal churches. This understanding of testimony leads people say "We don't do testimony" when they hear that word.

While one of these types of formal testimony is likely the first thing that comes to mind when we hear or see the word testimony, Coady challenged this reduction of the word testimony to these formal structures. He asked if the word testimony could be stripped from the formalities and criteria in which we have traditionally understood it. Coady argued that it can: the key issue, he argued, is that testimony is a piece of information given from one person to another, not just "an arcane procedure restricted to the lawcourts."[9] He calls this broader understanding of testimony "natural testimony." He effectively demonstrates that we use testimony daily in informal or as he says, natural ways, as a source of knowledge. Do you want to eat at a good restaurant near your hotel while traveling? How do you know where to go? You are not going to go to each restaurant in a two-mile radius, order some food and do a double-blind study on which is the best. You are going to rely upon reviews and recommendations – internet reviews, the hotel clerk, a local newspaper food critic. Those are forms of testimony. One person has a piece of knowledge – the quality of

[9] Coady, 54.

restaurants in this region – and they pass that along to another person. They have testified to the information that they hold. Think about taking a trip by car to a new place. How do you know what roads to take? You trust the testimony of the mapmaker. Take the simple act of eating. How do you know which foods are safe to eat and which are poisonous? Do you know because you tried to eat a poisonous mushroom and became deathly ill or died? I would guess not. The likely answer is that you know to avoid certain plants or fungi because an adult in your life told you as a child that they were dangerous, and they likely knew that because an adult told them as a child. Testimony is something we utilize every day, probably multiple times per day.

Bishop Thomas Hoyt, Jr. argues that this sort of natural testimony exists in the church as well. After describing his experience of formal testimony as a child, he goes on to argue for a broadening of the concept of testimony to include other elements of a religious life. He specifically focuses on the sermon as testimony, music as testimony, and our actions as testimony.[10] By actions as testimony, Hoyt means that our activities in the world give testimony to our faith. The Greek root of the word martyr is witness; the martyrs were witnesses not by their words, but by their deaths. Hoyt explores less dramatic forms of witness that we can make in the world, like serving in a soup kitchen or offering a kind word or smile to a stranger. These are all testimonies to our love of neighbor. He also argues that our rituals are testimonies: gathering for the Eucharist is witnessing to the story of Jesus, a baptism testifies to our boundedness to one another and God, passing the peace witnesses to reconciliation. Jesus suggests that such actions can be testimony when he tells a leper to

[10] Hoyt, 89-102. Tom Long also makes the case for an expanded understanding of testimony, encouraging people to see testimony as something that expands beyond Sunday morning to every day of the week. Tom Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

go show his healing to a priest "as a testimony to them"[11] and when he argues in John's Gospel that his works testify to him.[12]

Testimony without words could even extend beyond actions to objects. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur argues that objects can offer testimony. He calls this "unwritten testimony," distinguishing it from oral testimony and written testimony. He notes that archeology is a field that is especially focused on these unwritten testimonies as researchers examine coins, ruins, and potsherds.[13] We see Jesus talk about this sort of unwritten testimony in Luke's account of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem in his retort to a request to silence his disciples: the stones would cry out if they did.[14]

Despite protestations that "we don't do testimony," we do. Testimony is inescapable. I doubt that anyone is a religious *tabla rasa* whose entire understanding of faith is formed through perception and inference. This is definitely true of anyone who belongs to any established faith tradition. As Christians, to know that Jesus Christ existed and that there is something about him that matters to our faith required us to have received testimony at some point. The question is the form, content, and purpose of that testimony.

Testimony as a Source of Knowledge

From the preceding section, it sounds like natural testimony should be a given. And in a sense, it is. For philosophers, the regular and common use of testimony in our lives – natural testimony – has become a relatively clear and accepted concept. However, there are remaining issues that we turn our attention to now, the primary one being the place of testimony in the knowledge economy. Is testimony a unique source of knowledge or is it

[11] Mark 1:40-45; Matthew 8:1-4, NRSV.
[12] John 5:36.
[13] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), Part II, Chapter 1.
[14] Luke 19:40.

simply the sharing of knowledge that we have from other sources? Prior to Coady's work, epistemologists had typically argued that there were three sources of knowledge: perception, inference, and memory. Perception is the knowledge we discover by what we experience with our senses: that which we see with our eyes, hear with our ears, taste with our tongue, and so on. Inference is the knowledge we create by reason, by logic, by thinking through an issue and working out an explanation. Memory is stored knowledge that we can later retrieve. Different philosophers may combine some of these, subdivide them even more, or use synonyms, but these were considered the basics. Going back to Plato, philosophers typically ranked these sources of knowledge, with rationalists prizing inference and empiricists prizing perception.[15] And then there was this rarely discussed fourth thing called testimony, which many understood as simply the sharing of knowledge, not an epistemological category unto itself. Coady argues that this is inadequate: we rely on testimony to such a degree that it should be considered a source of knowledge on its own, not subservient to other sources of knowledge. And not only is testimony a source of knowledge, but it is the main source of most knowledge that we hold.

While many philosophers rank the sources of knowledge like a pyramid with either perception or inference at the top and the other two below, Coady advocates for a flatter model. For Coady, perception maintains centrality, but not supremacy. Inference relies upon perception for its inputs, memory is stored perception, and testimony is the transmittal of perceptions, justifying the centrality of perception, he argues, but each also having unique value that prevents privileging perception above the others. Perhaps the best image for Coady's understanding is a wheel, not a hierarchy. Perception is the center point, and the other sources – inference, memory, and testimony - are the spokes coming out. Though

[15] Axel Gelfert, *A Critical Introduction to Testimony* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 55-57.

flatter than traditional hierarchical models, there is still an implied hierarchy with perception as most important.

Coady, however, hints at taking this idea a step further: not only does perception influence the other three, but he suggests that the other three influence perception, saying "what one perceives is often a partial function of what one expects to perceive, of what one already believes, and of the concepts one has… If there is no perception so pure that it is uncontaminated by testimony, memory, and/or inference, then the idea of making pure perception some kind of epistemological foundation-stone for any or all of the other three is absurd."[16] Recent advances in cognitive science back Coady up on this point. Our perception does not tell us what is objectively out there. For instance, we often say that the sky is blue, but that is not objectively true. The sky is not blue. Color is made up of four elements: the light's wavelengths, the conditions of the lighting, three kinds of color cones in our retinas, and the complex neural circuitry that connects to those cones. It is in the relationship between the light itself hitting the atmosphere and our bodies perceiving and processing the information that the color blue is created. These four elements vary so much throughout the day that in order to keep a semblance of stability in the color, our brains are constantly compensating to help keep the blue color that we are used to seeing.[17] Or to use the categories of the epistemologist: our memory purposively and constantly influences our perception in order to achieve cognitive stability.

A personal example: I have a chair that I called the blue chair. It was my grandmother's chair and eventually it ended up with me. Early in my marriage, whenever I

[16] Coady, 147.
[17] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 23-25.

called it the blue chair, yet my spouse would look at me askance and claim that it was white. I did not understand. It was light blue, similar to a sky blue or a Carolina blue. I saw the blue with my own eyes. I would ask others and they would surprisingly agree with her. Why did I see light blue while she and others saw white? My memory was influencing my perception. When I was child, the fabric of the chair was light blue. I eventually found that blue still preserved between the cushions where the sunlight had not faded the color. My memory of that past blue was influencing my perception of the color in the present. After I found the old blue hidden in the preserved areas, I was able to reason (infer) my way into understanding what happened, and eventually I stopped seeing the chair as blue. My perception had been contaminated by memory and was transformed by testimony and inference.

Rather than the image of a wheel or a pyramid, I would argue that the relationship between the sources of knowledge is a web with each source of knowledge connected to each of the others, without any hierarchy and without a center, but rather the tension between the different sources holding the web together. Or to move out of physical objects, another metaphor might be a dialogue among these different sources, each source conversing with the others. They influence one another, and yet each one is also distinct with its own unique characteristics and value.

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of testimony as a source of knowledge is that it is the only communal source of knowledge; the other sources are individualistic. This communal value of testimony makes it possible for humanity to have the vast wealth of knowledge that it possesses. Basic limitations of time and access would prevent us from ever getting sufficient first-hand knowledge through perception or inference, so in order to grow in knowledge as a society, we must rely upon testimony. Take a chemist working in a lab.

The chemist does not personally do experiments on every topic in chemistry. Rather, the chemist relies on testimony of other chemists and then does new experiments to build on the base of knowledge. Afterward, they share via testimony to other researchers so that those researchers can build from there. Researchers gain knowledge from the testimony of other researchers. If the chemist had to personally run every experiment to learn the results with their own perception, scientific discovery would come to a standstill. In many cases, it is impossible for one researcher to do the research anymore: data sets are too large or require specialized technology from different locations. For instance, the recent research that captured pictures of black holes required two hundred astronomers using the Event Horizon telescope, which is a virtual telescope comprised of eight other radio telescopes working in cooperation with each other.[18] One particularly fun example of the necessity of testimony for basic science is the Pitch Drop Experiment at the University of Queensland in Australia, which measures the fluidity of a material that appears to be solid, but is not. The pitch moves so slowly that the research began in 1927 and three physicists have served as custodian of a project of watching and measuring this pitch slowly drop, which has only happened nine times as of now. The current researcher is relying on the testimony of those two previous researchers, and future researchers will rely on his testimony.[19] If we relied upon every person to use their own perception to figure everything out, we would never get past the basics in life and certain things would never be discovered. It is through the knowledge gained from testimony that we can expand our base of knowledge.

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[18] Jennifer Chu, "Working together as a 'virtual telescope,' observatories around the world produce first direct images of a black hole," MIT News, April 10, 2019, accessed July 5, 2022, https://news.mit.edu/2019/mit-haystack-first-image-black-hole-0410

[19] For more information, see "The Pitch Drop Experiment," accessed July 5, 2022, https://smp.uq.edu.au/pitch-drop-experiment. For an entertaining exploration of the research, check out the RadioLab podcast episode on the experiment: https://radiolab.org/episodes/pitch-drop-live-feed , accessed July 5, 2022.

Although the communal nature of testimony as a source of knowledge makes it uniquely valuable, Coady demonstrates how many have prioritized the other (individualistic) sources because of this very communal quality. They question the reliability of the testimony because they do not trust others. The concerns of these epistemologists are fair, but overstated. "How can you trust yourself? Why trust self over the other?" would be fair responses to their doubts. The individualistic sources of knowledge have reliability concerns as well. Self-delusion is not uncommon. Neither is mistaken perception, such as I experienced with the "blue chair." In the blue chair example, the testimonial evidence was more accurate than my perception or memory. Coady also gives us an example of how testimony can trump perception as a reliable source of knowledge. He tells the story of a man who sees an old friend across a corridor only to learn from multiple other friends that what he saw could not possibly have been their friend because the friend supposedly seen was out of town.[20] The philosopher Sanford C. Goldberg argues that the epistemology has a traditional predisposition towards individualism that needs to shift to a more interdependent model that appreciates and values others in the formation of knowledge.[21] We will explore this question of testimonial reliability more fully in chapter three.

Testimony is a unique and independent source of knowledge that interacts with the other sources of knowledge. This interaction of the sources of knowledge is congruent with our current understanding of cognitive science and the ways that our perception of the world does not reflect objective fact, but is mediated by our brains as described earlier. The interdependence of the sources of knowledge is not unlike Paul's understanding of the identity of the church as a body. Each member of the body is unique - an eye is an eye, a

[20] See Coady, 148.
[21] Sanford C. Golberg, *Relying on Others: An Essay in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

foot is a foot, a hand is a hand - but each member of the body is a part of the greater and each member needs the others for its wholeness. The seemingly weaker and insignificant members are just as important, and perhaps even more so. Each source of knowledge is unique, but they all need each other. And the ones that have historically been considered weaker are not.

As an important source of knowledge, it should not be surprising that testimony is a critical source of religious knowledge. In ordinary testimony, we share knowledge we hold of something in this world achieved through perception, inference, memory, testimony, or a combination thereof. We might call the information shared the testimonial object. The object is passed from one person to the next. Religious testimony occurs at the intersection where the testimonial object meets the divine. Or as Paul Ricoeur puts it, "a moment of history is invested with an absolute character" in testimony.[22] This absolute character requires that religious testimony be hermeneutical. To be able to identify the presence of God in a moment requires interpretation. For Ricoeur, all testimony is hermeneutical, because all testimony intrinsically invites the listener's interpretation when they receive the testimony, but even more so when the issue of the divine comes into play.[23]

The Acts of the Apostles shows us that testimony was critical to the identity and decision-making of the early church. In Acts 1, Jesus says at his ascension that the disciples are witnesses to him: they are to testify throughout the world once the Holy Spirit descends upon them. Testimony was understood as the vocation of those disciples. The word apostle comes from the Greek for sending forth. Apostles are the ones sent forth to carry their testimony of the power of Jesus. In Acts 15, we see how influential testimony was in

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[22] Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation,* edited by Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 112.
[23] Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 112-113.

decision-making. When debating the inclusion of Gentile believers, the main argument used in the decision is testimony. First, Peter, Paul, and Barnabas testify to the role of the Holy Spirit they have witnessed in the lives of the Gentile believers. Then, James shares the testimony of scripture that Gentiles can be called by God. The combination of these testimonies leads James to say that Gentiles can be included in the church without converting first to Judaism. Hermeneutics are involved here in Peter, Paul, and Barnabas' initial testimony, and in James' reception of their testimony and the testimony of scripture.

Within Anglicanism, when we talk about how we determine religious knowledge, we often refer to the three-legged stool of scripture, tradition, and reason.[24] This stool is an epistemological heuristic designed to help us come to know things. And these three legs of the stool can fit into the categories of the philosophers. Reason is inference and possibly perception. Some argue that reason is purely inference and so you need a fourth leg of experience, as in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral,[25] to achieve that role of perception. The other two legs – scripture and tradition - are testimony. Tradition and scripture are the testimonies of our ancestors in faith. Scripture is testimony: the words commonly used to describe the first and second parts of the Christian canon - the Old and New Testaments – speak to this. Testament and Testimony both spring from the same Latin root *testis*, which means witness. Scripture is a testimony to the life-giving and liberating power and love of God at work in

[24] It should be noted that while the three-legged stool comes out of the ideas of Richard Hooker, he never referred to a stool. The stool metaphor came later. Hooker would not have used a stool metaphor, because the three legs of the stool would not have been equal for him. As Ross Kane puts it, "While contemporary Anglicans often associate Hooker with the three-legged stool of scripture, tradition, and reason as sources of authority, Hooker would not put it this way. Hooker sees scripture as the principal source of theological knowledge, with reason and tradition being interpretative warrants." Ross Kane, "Reforming tradition: Anglican spirited continuity," *Anglican Theological Review* 104, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 180.

[25] Just as Hooker never used a stool imagery, Wesley never talked about a quadrilateral. This was a concept that later generations derived from his writings.

this world. The psalms are rich with testimony.[26] One example is Psalm 107, which contains the testimony of four groups of people in difficult situations – those out in the desert, those imprisoned, those who have rebelled, and those out on a stormy sea – and each one concludes with their salvation, which they attribute to God. The psalmist witnesses to God nourishing those in the desert, breaking the bonds of oppression, saving those near death, and stilling the storm at sea. In the testimony offered in Psalm 107, we see something similar to Cone's earlier definition of testimony to help someone "keep the faith" during the "trials and tribulations of this unfriendly world."[27] This sort of testimony lies at the intersection of memory and hope: remembering an event with the purpose of inspiring hope in another. Tradition is the testimony of other Christians from previous generations other than those whose works went into the canon. The writings of the Church Mothers and Fathers are testimony to what they experienced and understood; when we read these writings, we are receiving their testimony.

In these past two sections, we have been exploring how testimony is a critical and ubiquitous part of life and faith. We now turn our attention to the implications for the Episcopal Church.

Testimony in The Episcopal Church

When we say "we don't do testimony" in the Episcopal Church, this is not correct. We do testimony. We may not go door-to-door to convert or invite people up to offer a story of hope during a service. We may not have the rhythms and rituals of the Wednesday prayer service that Hoyt describes, but we certainly have the informal action-based testimony

[26] We will look at Psalm 107, but see also Psalms 18, 21, 30, 40, 65, 75, 92, 103, 116, 118, 124, and 138 for excellent examples of testimony in the Psalter.
[27] Cone, 6.

that he outlines. Every Eucharist is a testimony. The various acts of service and justice that parishes do are testimonies. At St. Mary's, for instance, every meal served at the Saturday Breakfast to feed our hungry neighbors in need is a testimony. We have unwritten testimony in our architecture and artwork. We have verbal testimony when we recount the stories of the saints on the feast days. We use testimony when we teach classes on theology and we share the testimony of those theologians through the theological positions for which they argue. We rely upon testimony whenever we use the three-legged stool to figure something out.

And we even have verbal testimony in liturgy, the most regular being through the public reading of scripture. When we read scripture in public, we are offering verbal testimony, but it is of a different kind than sharing directly what we have witnessed with our own eyes or figured out with our minds. Our reading of scripture is not eye-witness testimony, but what Coady calls extended testimony,[28] and although extended testimony also has its unique questions of reliability, extended testimony can we very reliable, even more reliable than eye-witness testimony.[29]

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[28] Coady, 48-52.

[29] Extended testimony is sometimes pejoratively called hearsay, and it is often considered a lesser form of testimony. John Locke asserted that "any testimony, the further off from the original truth, the less force and proof it has… each remove weakens the force of the proof." Quoted in Coady, 199. This probably makes intuitive sense to us: it is the concept behind the children's game Telephone. The idea of the game is that as a word passes from one child to another, somewhere along the chain, someone mishears or misspeaks and the word changes. This may be true in the constraints of the game, but this is not how the world always works. In the real world, we rarely are constrained by having to whisper, say the word only once, and have no corroborating evidence. Coady gives us a scenario in which three ornithologists independently see a very rare bird at an unlikely time in an unlikely place. This information gets passed independently by all three of the ornithologists to the editor of a bird magazine. Given the likelihood of seeing this kind of bird at this time in this place, the eyewitness testimony of any one of them should be taken with skepticism, but the extended testimony of the editor, since it is corroborated by three sources, should probably be considered more reliable than the individual eye-witness testimony of any one of those observers. That does not mean that extended testimony is always more reliable, and certainly the transmission chain can weaken, but it is say that this is not intrinsic to extended testimony. All eyewitness and extended testimony needs to be evaluated on its own to consider its reliability.

What is lacking in the Episcopal Church is not testimony per se, but oral testimony to a specific thing: the ongoing work of the spirit of God in our midst, whether in our lives or in the world. This type of testimony is not completely lacking. Some may do this over coffee with a friend. A church might offer a book club on a spiritual memoir or occasionally include this sort of story sharing as an element of formation classes or a bible study. Maybe there is an annual "stewardship moment" that turns into this form of testimony. Some preachers will incorporate this form of testimony into their sermons. And while there may be exceptions, it is typically limited. We do not regularly practice testimony of this type in the Episcopal Church. As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, "This much I know: If you want to really strike terror into the heart of an Episcopalian—or, for that matter, a Presbyterian, a Lutheran, a Roman Catholic, and so on—tell them they have to go and witness. Worse, tell them they have to testify."[30]

As we will see later in the thesis, there is a strong thread of this type of testimony in the history of the church: testimony was practiced in the early church, as in Augustine's *Confessions,* and in the medieval church, as in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*. In the sixth volume of his sweeping history of mysticism, Bernard McGinn even uncovers a thread of the theology that underpins such testimony in early reformation Anglicanism. He points to its emphasis on an incarnational theology and union with God, especially in the poetry of the era that points to an intimate, personal connection with God.[31] But during the Age of Reason, there was a move away from this sort of emphasis on personal experience within Anglicanism that is necessary for this type of testimony.

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[30] Curry, 42.
[31] Bernard McGinn, *Mysticism in the Reformation (1500-1650, The Presence of God, Vol. 6, Part 1* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2016), 214-262.

One reason for this move away from personal experience during this time was the growth of deism, which argued against revelation and the supernatural, denying the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.[32] But even short of the deist denial of the ongoing work of God in the world, there was growing skepticism of personal experience and an emphasis on reason. Or to put it in the language of philosophers, there was a fight between the rationalists and the empiricists, and the rationalists had the upper hand. Reason does not need be opposed to experience, and many at the time, including John Wesley, argued for both. Wesley was an empiricist who emphasized experience over reason, but he made forceful defenses of reason.[33] For others, this was too much; personal experience was too likely to lead to "enthusiasm," an eighteenth-century charge of zealotry or extremism. Samuel Johnson, author of a popular dictionary of the era, said that an enthusiast is one "who vainly imagines a private revelation; one who has vain confidence of his intercourse with God."[34] Bishop Butler of Bristol condemned enthusiasm by saying "the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Spirit is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing."[35] Wesley was frequently accused of being an enthusiast, despite his own criticism of enthusiasm and emphasis on experience tempered by reason. This eighteenth-century fight left a mark on the Episcopal Church. The Wesleyan strain that had more interest in emphasizing experience ended up leaving Anglicanism. This likely impacted the Episcopal Church, leaving us as a

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[32] Frederick Quinn, *To Be a Pilgrim: The Anglican Ethos in History* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 150.
[33] Rebekah L. Miles, "The Instrumental Role of Reason," in *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation*, eds. W. Stephen Gunter, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 78-99. See also Jeremy Gregory, "The long eighteenth century," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley,* eds. Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), *37*-39.
[34] Quoted in Miles, 81.
[35] Quoted in Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 209

church that with a greater emphasis on logic and reason and with less emphasis on our personal experiences. In a sense the rationalists won out over the empiricists.

And yet, experience and testimony have never gone away. The popularity of Evelyn Underhill and C. S. Lewis speak to this. Evelyn Underhill was a well-known 20th century Anglican writer on mysticism who emphasized the importance of religious experience. C. S. Lewis, also a well-known 20th century Anglican writer, wrote about his experiences of conversion, love, loss, and pain.[36] Many contemporary Anglicans have authored popular memoirs, including Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, Barbara Brown Taylor, and Rachel Held Evans, among others. These are religious testimonies in which events meet the absolute; the authors witness to the work of God in this world.

As I reflect on this broader understanding of testimony, I have come to realize that even though I grew up as an Episcopalian, a member of a denomination that has been historically skeptical of testimony as a religious practice, I know about Jesus and much of my faith because of testimony. There were specific and dramatic moments of testimony that had an impact upon me. It was in the profound spoken testimony of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in February 1994 that I first had an experience that I identified as encountering Christ. During the Good Friday service that same year, one of my youth group leaders testified with his tears while he sat in the pew that evening. And then there were the less dramatic and regular testimonies that taught and shaped me: the week in and week out testimony offered by lectors reading scripture in worship, preachers offering sermons, and presiders at the altar offering the eucharistic prayer. There was the testimony of my father who told me Bible stories at bedtime; the testimony of Sunday School teachers and youth group leaders in their

[36] Quinn, 240-245.

classes; the testimony of my grandparents, offered not with words, but through their faithful and regular attendance in church that spoke volumes to me about the importance of faith.

Conclusion

Despite protestations that "we don't do testimony" in the Episcopal Church, when we understand testimony in this broader sense of natural testimony and extended testimony, every church engages in the practice of testimony. Even Anglicanism. In the great epistemological three-legged stool of Anglicanism – scripture, tradition, and reason - testimony is central. Two-thirds of the stool are testimony: scripture and tradition, leaving one leg to carry the weight of inference and perhaps perception. In terms of oral testimony, we mostly have extended testimony in the Episcopal Church as we hear scripture read. The limited verbal eye-witness testimony we have is usually relegated to a sermon or a stewardship moment during a pledge drive. In terms of eye-witness testimony, that is mostly shared through our actions as in our liturgies or our ministries feeding the hungry or sheltering those without housing. We do not lack testimony in the Episcopal Church, rather most of our churches lack a particular type of testimony: the sharing of eye-witness experiences to God's ongoing work in this world. As a result, we lack the knowledge that this type of testimony brings. This is the work of this the project I did in my parish, as I will lay out in the next chapter.

Chapter Two

Methodologies and the Act of Ministry

In the liturgy for the ordination of a priest, the bishop says to the candidate, "you are called to the work as a pastor, priest, and *teacher*" [emphasis added]. Teaching is a fundamental part of the priestly vocation to which I have been called; but as a priest, I have found myself over the years being taught as much as I have been teaching. I set out to teach my parishioners about faith, and they have taught me as much along the way. A few of them are academics who have taught me something in a traditional sense, but even more so, the teaching has been though the stories people have shared with me about their relationship with God. These stories showed me the importance of faith and the presence of God in people's lives. As discussed in the previous chapter, the kind of testimony in which people share these stories with each other is pretty limited, and so it is at St. Mary's.[1] As a result, people have not had the opportunity to learn from each other as I have been privileged to learn from them. This chapter will review the project I designed to start trying to create an environment where people can learn from fellow parishioners as I have learned from them through the practice of testimony. The chapter will also look at the methods and methodologies employed for the research. None of these three methodological frameworks are systematic. Rather, these are approaches or stances that underpin this research from design through implementation, and on to analysis and writing.

[1] This sort of testimony shows up in sermons occasionally. It is an element of the annual stewardship moments. It occasionally is a part of a formation program or a bible study. It is sometimes an element of our alternative Saturday evening services. But it is infrequent enough that multiple people interviewed for the project noted the lack of this sort of sharing in the parish.

Methodologies

In this first section, we will primarily explore the methodologies used in this project, with some brief notes on methods. The methodological approaches are action research, theology, and dialogism, and data were collected through the methods of observations, recordings, surveys, and interviews.

The first methodological approach of this research project is *action research* as outlined by John Swinton and Harriet Mowat.[2] Broadly, this approach involves researching an action intentionally implemented in a context with the anticipation of a positive outcome for the betterment of the group being researched. The goal of action research is not to simply gain knowledge, but to gain knowledge for the sake of transformation. Even if there is not time to fully implement and measure transformation, this model of research always has an eye toward that transformation. In this case, the project was designed to help facilitate the transformation of the spiritual life of parishioners at St. Mary's Episcopal Church and of the parish body as a whole. Although there is insufficient time in to measure transformation in a project of this scope, the design and implementation and research questions were all geared toward that transformative goal.

In this model of action research, the distinction between researcher and subject blurs, with the participants invited to engage more fully, more deeply in the process than with more traditional, objective approaches, even to point of making them fellow "co-researchers."[3] In this project, parishioners were engaged in the process, given options, and the action modified in relationship with parishioner/participants. As will be explained below,

[2] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research,* Second Edition (London: SCM Press, 2016), 235-259.
[3] Swinton and Mowat, 236.

a team made up of parishioners was formed to help guide me in implementing the project. Feedback along the way from the team and other participants helped me design, modify, and tailor the intervention. Swinton and Mowat's action research model involves a four-step process that moves from exploration, planning, action, to reflection. The research is cyclical and iterative with the researcher moving back to exploration. This cyclical process is a spiral as the exploration is not simply repeated again, but rather builds on what was learned in the previous iteration.

Action research typically uses qualitative research methods, as in this project. Data were gathered using observations, recordings, surveys, and interviews. During all parts of the project, I kept notes of my own observations. Questions were asked and the answers privately collected after Part I of the project. Following Part II, participants were offered a survey (Appendix A) and the Vestry was offered a survey following Part III (Appendix B). Additionally, one-on-one interviews were conducted with a cross-section of Part III participants who were willing to be interviewed. There was not a common set of questions for each interviewee; rather, we went deeper into their survey responses and the testimonies they shared. I had originally planned to do interviews following Part II as well, but with COVID-19 interrupting research (outlined below), the distance between Part II and the interviews was too great. Although I did not formally use focus groups in this research, there is a sense in which my project team served as a focus group during the creation and implementation of the project, and a sense in which the small group testimonies were like a focus group. And while this project is not an exercise in ethnography precisely, there is a sense in which it utilized ethnographic listening in the collection of the data.

The second methodological approach is *theology*. To say that theology is a methodological framework means that this research attempts to say something about God

and humanity that is different than both constructivism and positivism. To risk oversimplifying: a positivist methodological approach says that there is objective truth; a constructivist one says that truth is constructed. Theology as methodology acknowledges divine truth while recognizing the limits of humanity to fully know it, and is open to the way that God is continuing to form and transform the world. It also has a *telos* or goal of drawing us (humanity) ever closer to God (the divine) until that eschatological moment when we are fully, finally reunited. More specifically, the form of theology is practical theology, which is not applied theology, but rather theology that begins with practice, or how the faith is lived/performed by people. It exegetes the lived experience of the faith community as critically or faithfully as it exegetes scripture. Practical theology is an embodied or incarnational theology that explores the enfleshment of the faith.[4] This approach is not unlike Clemens Sedmak's understanding of local theology, which is also a theological approach that is grounded in the world, learning theological truths discerned from the local situation. Sedmak argues that this is how Jesus did theology when he used the metaphors of the rural and agricultural context of his listeners.[5]

Ben Quash gives us a helpful metaphor for the type of theology I will be doing in this thesis. Quash asks us to imagine ourselves on a hike. The things in our backpack are the theological givens that we have taken on our journey and the things we find on the path are our theological finds. We need both the givens and that which we find along the way: God is in both.[6] Givens can be understood as things of the past like creeds, scripture, and liturgies; found objects are the new ways that the Holy Spirit is showing up to us now. This

[4] Swinton and Mowat, 3-26.
[5] Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).
[6] Ben Quash, *Found Theology: History, Imagination, and the Holy Spirit.* (London, Bloomsbury, 2013), xiv.

distinction between given and found is a helpful conceptual frame, but it is not always precise; there is no bright line between a given and a found object. Liturgy is a great example: the liturgical forms are a given and yet they are embodied in the present inviting the Holy Spirit to show up, making liturgy both a given and a found object. Scripture is another example of something that based on the context can something given or something found, as Quash so helpfully demonstrates in his chapters on scripture and translation.[7] He also points out that all givens were found at some point, that found objects quickly become givens, and all things found are given by God, so ultimately everything is both a given and a found.[8] And yet, there is value in keeping this contrast as a heuristic device. For this theological journey, we have a lot in the backpack; some might even be used without my explicitly intending to do so. Certainly things related to my Anglican/Episcopal background are givens that are always there in my backpack and I will take out and use from time to time, sometimes even unintentionally. There are some specific things that I am going to intentionally throw into my backpack for the journey of this thesis. Several historic Christian writers, including Augustine, Julian of Norwich, and Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, will be packed in the bag. We are going to also put a copy of the Bible in our backpack with the Psalms, Jonah, Gospels, and some of Paul's epistles dog-eared. Working at the intersection of the faith and the world, the divine and the material, practical theology is typically a multi-disciplinary approach that brings in the social sciences or humanities. The primary field for my conversation partners in this practical theological research will be philosophy – focused mostly on epistemology – with occasional interlocution from other fields, such as psychology. The three main conversation partners will be Paul Ricoeur, C. A.

[7] Quash, chapters 2 and 3.
[8] Quash, 6.

J. Coady, and Mikhail Bakhtin. These philosophers will add something of value to our theological task, so, in the backpack they go as well. The path of this hike is the project or intervention: Faith Moments. The religious experiences of the participants are the theological finds. The theological analysis takes both these given and found objects in the search for the Holy Spirit at work.

A third and related methodological framework of this project thesis is *dialogism*. My understanding of dialogism is mostly based in the philosophical work of Mikhail Bakhtin, but dialogism is a concept that extends beyond him, both in the sense that other twentieth-century thinkers, notably Heidegger and Buber,[9] worked on related concepts, and in the sense that Bakhtin's theories of dialogue have been worked and re-worked by other thinkers to develop and refine this concept of dialogism, a term that he never used himself.[10] At its heart, dialogism makes an ontological claim about our being: self is always relational to other selves; being is co-being.[11] This ontological claim has epistemological implications: it is only through multiple voices placed in dialogue with one another that we can grow in knowledge. Acknowledging that this process is intrinsically unfinalizable – it never ends, the dialogue will continue with new voices always coming in and adding, subtracting, verifying, or transforming our knowledge, at least as long as we live in this already-and-not-yet moment between creation and the eschaton – there is value in reflecting on where we are in the dialogue in this particular moment. We see a similar concept to unfinalizability in Quash's theology as outlined in *Found Theology,* with his concept of the constant process of givens and founds, abduction, and provisionality. He even calls his Conclusion an Inconclusion, which

[9] Lynn Ross Bryant, *Imagination and the Life of the Spirit* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 123-128.
[10] For more about dialogism as a concept that starts with Bakhtin but extends beyond him, see Michael Holquist, *Dialogism,* 2nd Edition (London: Routledge, 2002).
[11] Holquist, 25.

echoes this concept and word unfinalizability. Using dialogism methodologically requires looking at many voices – voices from different texts (the ancient and modern testimonies), voices from different surveys and interviews, voices from different fields (biblical studies, theology, philosophy, and social sciences) – and seeing them as in conversation with each other. Dialogism would understand Quash's theological method as placing the givens and the found objects in dialogue with each other and seeing what new knowledge was created in the process. The givens speak to the found objects and the found objects to the givens, illuminating both in the process.[12] These voices do not need to know of each other for us to put them in dialogue with each other. As Bakhtin says:

> Two utterances, separated from one another both in time and in space, knowing nothing of one another, when they are compared semantically, reveal dialogic relations if there is any kind of semantic convergence between them (if only a partially shared theme, point of view, and so forth). Any survey of the history of any scientific question (independent, or included in a scientific work on a given question) also produces comparisons (utterances, opinions, viewpoints) of the utterances of scientists who did not and could not know anything of one another.

The methodological task is to take these different voices and create opportunities for them to dialogue with each other to see where new knowledge is created. The iterative process of action research is intrinsically dialogical, so certainly dialogism as a methodological approach is present in the project design and implementation. However, for me, dialogism as methodology was most relevant in the analysis, in taking the different voices of the various testimonies and putting them in conversation with each other to see what we have learned, and then also putting these voices in dialogue with others. Specifically, the voices from the testimonies of the project will be placed in dialogue with three historical figures from

[12] For instance, Quash says, "The presumption that the givens of Christian faith will help to order and illuminate newly encountered experience or challenges can work the other way too: found things, conceived as gifts of the Holy Spirit who unfolds all the riches that are in Christ, can and must reconfigure, unlock and amplify what is already held true by the Church." *Quash*, xiv.

different eras of the church who provided their testimony in their time. As noted above, dialogic relations can exist even when separated by time and place and when the voices have no knowledge of each other. In each chapter, the voices from St. Mary's will dialogue with a different person: Augustine (Chapter 3), Julian of Norwich (Chapter 4), and Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (Chapter 5). I did not start the project realizing that these were the three figures that would dialogue with these modern testimonies. Rather, as I analyzed these testimonies, I found the presence – the dialogic relations – of these conversation partners, and intentionally drew them forward to go deeper into the dialogue.

The Intervention: Faith Moments

In this section, we will now move from the methods and methodologies to the project itself, outlining in more detail what I did to help people share their faith stories with one another, and some initial results. The project began with the assembly of a project team that helped design and implement the project, which took place in three phases. As we will see, Part III was interrupted by a global pandemic and the scope of the project was reduced from its initial vision, but enough data were collected to continue the research.

Following approval of my Project Thesis Proposal in the summer of 2019, I put together a team – some co-researchers in the language of the action research methodology – with whom I could consult and reflect, and who might also be available to help me implement parts of the project. The team was composed of seven parishioners, an intentional cross-section of the parish that included diversity of gender, age, race, sexual orientation, professional background, and which weekly worship service they regularly attend. It included two staff members who were recruited not only for their perspective and wisdom, but to help integrate this project into the life of the parish. We held our first

meetings on September 11 and September 15, 2019. One of the primary concerns that quickly arose in our initial conversation was the issue of safety; we were concerned that some parishioners might not feel safe in sharing their stories. One dynamic was simply the word testimony. When I had shared with a small group about my Project Thesis Proposal in the spring, I heard negative reactions to the word testimony. As I explained more about the project to that group, those anxieties lessened. Whatever image the word testimony had conjured up was not the same as what I was describing. Though not as intensely, some team members shared similar anxiety upon hearing the word testimony. We wanted to avoid misunderstanding by calling it something different. We quickly decided upon calling the act of ministry Faith Moments. This sort of responsiveness of the team is part of the action research methodology.

The safety concerns, however, went deeper than that. The moments themselves, regardless of what we called them, could be intensely personal experiences that might open up unexpected emotions. What if in the sharing, a painful memory was triggered that was beyond our capacity to address? What if someone shared a deeply meaningful experience and it was not received well? What if people held back in their fear of how their story would be received? What if people felt forced to share a story that they were not comfortable sharing with another person? We needed to create some boundaries around this work to help those sharing their Faith Moments feel safer in doing so. One way was by creating and communicating clear participation expectations, such as length of time for stories, requirements of confidentiality, and need to respect the experiences of others. We would also make it clear at every stage that participation was optional and the participant could refuse to share any story. Additionally, we decided that one way to help create a safer environment was to start small and allow people to slowly open up more over time. We

developed a three-part plan to accomplish this. Part I would be a large introductory event in which I would share about the project and we would invite people to share answers to some related questions anonymously. Index cards and boxes would be set around the room. In essence, it was anonymous, written testimony that would only be read by the Project Thesis team. Part II would then be one-on-one story sharing. None of these would be recorded; only the other person would hear these testimonies. Finally, part three would be the sharing of prepared Faith Moments to a larger group. At each stage, options were given to help people avoid any story that was too intense or difficult.

The second issue the team wrestled with during that first meeting was how to get people to select a moment of God at work in their lives or this world to share. The team believed that an open-ended question – Where have you seen God at work in your life or the world? - could be overwhelming for participants without any practice at answering this type of question, which we assumed would be the case for the majority of participants. We decided that a series of prompts would be helpful and explored what kind of prompts might help get at this issue. First, the team discussed what it means to have witnessed God tangibly at work. Did it need to be a burning bush moment that seemed to have defied the laws of nature? Did it need to be an Annunciation-like moment in which an angel spoke to you directly or a miraculous healing in which someone could suddenly walk or see again? Our clear consensus was no. While parishioners have occasionally shared big, dramatic, even miraculous stories with me over the years, it seemed very unlikely that many had experiences in any way similar to those. Based on the team's own experiences and informal conversations about faith with others, we assumed that God's work in most people's lives would tend to be subtler. In *Seeing God in the Ordinary: A Theology of the Everyday,* Michael Frost argues that God does not just show up in the spectacular, but in the ordinary. He argues that God is present

in everyday acts of love, awe, and serendipities.[13] This is similar to the Ignatian theology that underpins the examen, a process which intentionally reviews one's day trying "to see our everyday life through God's eyes."[14] We discussed as a team where we each experienced God. Members of the team shared that they encounter God in church, in nature, and in other people. We then discussed how it feels to experience God in a moment and created a list of words to describe such experiences: serenity, peace, awe, wonder, disbelief (the unexplainable), clarity, epiphany, focus, hope, comfort, renewal, joy, harmony, serendipity, acceptance, holiness, connection, gratitude, presence, love, recognition, forgiveness, justice, cleansing, atoning, redemption, grace, mercy, eternity, and immensity. This exercise reminded me of the poem "Who has seen the wind?" by Christina Rossetti.

> Who has seen the wind?
> Neither I nor you:
> But when the leaves hang trembling,
> The wind is passing through.
>
> Who has seen the wind?
> Neither you nor I:
> But when the trees bow down their heads,
> The wind is passing by.[15]

The Anglican poet Christina Rosetti is comparing the wind to God. People do not see the wind nor God directly. Rather, people see the leaves and branches moving and know that the wind is there; the same is true for God: we are more likely to see the effects of God than God directly. Team members were expressing that these above-mentioned words are the moving branches and leaves.

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[13] Michael Frost, *Seeing God in the Ordinary: A Theology of the Everyday* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000). For a discussion on God in acts of love, see pages 23-24; in awe, see pages 64-82; in serendipities, see pages 111-123.
[14] Jim Manney, *A Simple Life-changing Prayer: Discovering the Power of St. Ignatius Loyola's Examen* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2011), 25.
[15] Christina Rossetti, "Who Has Seen the Wind?" Accessed September 18, 2019, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43197/who-has-seen-the-wind

Part I

We scheduled Part I of Faith Moments for October 8, 2019. We provided food to encourage attendance and increase comfort. We hoped not only that this would be a chance to introduce people to the project and start building comfort, but that we might also be able to collect more data that might help shape further parts. Could we get a broader sample of those leaves and branches moving? This was part of the iterative process of action research. Food was in the middle of the room. Around the perimeter, there were six questions with pens and index cards on tables to write answers and boxes to collect the responses. In one case, there was both a box and a white board, in case people wanted to write down answers for others to see as well. We hoped that as the board filled up, it might provoke other answers. With these questions, we asked people questions to help start exploring where, when, and how people have felt the presence of God in their life or this world. For the full list of questions, see Appendix C. These prompts were not designed to elicit complete stories, but just to begin to get people to think about the concepts and to offer short brief, concrete details about things that they have witnessed. During the event, I briefly introduced the project, but the majority of the time was to allow people to interact with the questions and with each other, with the possibility that conversation might occur related to the questions.

Responses to these questions were varied, but certain ideas came up more frequently. For instance, in question three about prayer, the Lord's Prayer was named eleven times, while the prayer attributed to St. Francis and Psalm 23 were both named five times. All or parts of Compline were named five times. *The Collect for Quiet Confidence* was named twice, with each respondent referencing the part of the prayer about return, quiet, and rest. In

question two about location, the specifics were more varied, but themes emerged that were similar to the responses to the team's initial discussions: in church, in nature, and in other people. For instance, although worded in different ways – "a wooded path in sunshine" or "on the McKenzie River" or "outdoors while walking" – sixteen people named nature as the most likely place that they feel holiness. Eighteen named something related to being in the church, whether that was something we do, like praying, receiving communion, singing, or something about the space, like stained glass windows or the architecture. Other common responses included praying at home, being quiet, being with others, and serving others. Two named everywhere and one named nowhere/never.

The answers to these questions were primarily intended to start getting people comfortable with sharing their experiences of faith. But, in congruence with action research, we also hoped that that the responses might give us some insights for the second part. They did. The responses influenced the prompts we used, sometimes inspiring one and sometimes confirming the value of one that we were already considering. For instance, the team had come up with peace and wonder as two words to describe our experience of encountering God, but the frequency with which those two concepts came up in Part I meant that a prompt about those would likely be helpful to participants coming up with their stories in later parts.

At the end of the event, people were invited to sign up for Part II.

Part II

Part II expanded the sharing a little bit beyond Part I. We invited people to share with one other person. Participants were not required to attend the first part in order to attend Part II, but many signed up who had. We offered multiple events for people to be

able to participate. Between October 20 and November 17, 120 individuals participated in one of nine Part II events. These events ranged from two to twenty-two participants. There was one event held immediately after each weekly worship service (five events) and several other weekday events (four events). Additionally, two more specialized events were held later: the 10th – 12th grade Sunday School class participated in a slightly modified version at their December and January gatherings and the Vestry did Part II at their annual retreat in February. There was some overlap in participation between the original nine offerings and the two specialized offerings, making for a little over 130 people participating in total. At all eleven of these events, people paired off and went through a series of guided prompts to help them practice sharing their stories of God at work in their lives or in this world. A member of the project team was present in case we had an odd number of people. Following Part I, the team had gathered to look over the responses; taking those responses along with our own experiences and background reading, we developed the prompts for participants in Part II. We started what we felt was a warm-up question: What is your earliest memory of a sense of faith? A "sense of faith" was intentionally vague to keep the prompt as broad and easy for people. We tried various ways to prompt stories of God at work in people's lives or at work in this world. For instance, we asked a question in which they had to pick a prayer, hymn, piece of music, and then tell a story about what they selected. Similarly, we asked the participants to select another person who exemplified faith and share about them. In another approach, we gave words that described that sense of the presence of God that the project team and the participants in Part I identified, and we invited the participants to tell stories related to those words. We also offered selections from the Psalms and asked them to select one that elicited a story from their lives. There were other approaches as well. See Appendix D for the complete list of prompts.

Many of these prompts had multiple options. We did this for two reasons. First, we wanted to avoid a participant feeling trapped into telling a story that they did not want to tell. Back to our concern about safety, the team was especially concerned with the questions about difficult moments like being distanced from God or being trapped in a metaphorical pit. Those questions were important to offer, but we also recognized that they might be some of the emotionally riskiest questions. Offering options helped give people a safe out from a story that they did not want to share in this moment. Second, we wanted to reduce the risk of someone not having any story that they could think of in the moment. More options increased the likelihood of a response.

The Part II events began with thanking the participants for coming and participating in the event and reminding them that this work was for my doctoral studies at Virginia Theological Seminary. I disclosed that observations might be used in my doctoral thesis, that confidence would be maintained, and that any quotes would be anonymous or use pseudonyms, with other identifying information removed. I reminded them of their ability to refuse to participate at any time or to withdraw at any time. After this, I shared that the intention of the project "is to share experiences of God at work in our lives and in this world." I acknowledged that this might be difficult for some and included the above poem by Christina Rossetti to help explain the concept. Then I shared some ground rules for our time designed to make people feel comfortable and safe (Appendix G). After sharing these ground rules, I passed out the prompts. I or a team member served as timekeeper and guided the participants through the prompts. Participants were given one minute to think of a story and then they each had two minutes to share. Pens were passed out in case somebody wanted to write a note for themselves during the minute of thinking, but people were told

not to take notes of their partners' stories. Along with having a sheet with prompts, I read each one out loud as we went through them.

We did not record these story sharing experiences, but we presented a survey to participants at the first nine sessions to learn more about the experience. The response rate of the survey was 60 percent. The survey offered us some limited information about what was shared. For instance, of those that handed in the survey, 45 percent selected a story about a hymn in the second prompt, 30 percent selected a story about listening to other music, and 25 percent selected a story about prayer. Some participants let us know what the selection was, even though we did not ask. So we know that participants shared stories related to hymns like *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*, *Amazing Grace*, *I sing a Song of the Saints of God*, *On Eagle's Wings*, *Just as I am*, and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* among others, but we do not know the content of those stories and we do not have a comprehensive list. In prompt four, we did ask people if they would share who they selected that exemplified a life of faith. Thirty percent selected someone from history and 70 percent selected someone they personally knew. Historical figures included biblical characters like Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene down to the modern-day figures like Jimmy Carter, Desmond Tutu, and Billy Graham. Of those that selected someone they personally knew, 40 percent of those people were family members, with a grandmother being the most frequently named. Approximately 30 percent selected someone they knew from church – with about half of those being a member of the clergy and the other half being a fellow parishioner. Twenty percent named a friend. Other responses included people like "a neighbor," "a confirmation guide," or "a spiritual teacher." In prompts with multiple options, responses generally were fairly evenly distributed among the options, with some notable exceptions. In the final prompt, half of the participants told a story about joy and a third told a story about light.

Only one-sixth of participants told a story about being in the pit. In prompt nine, nearly three-quarters of participants shared a story elicited by the positive words "home" or "joy," while fewer than one-sixth told stories related to the words "redemption" or "mercy" that would be more likely to necessitate a negative component to the story. This is not to suggest that people completely avoided negative stories – one-third of participants shared a story about being distant from God in prompt eight – but few dwelt on those stories that were more likely to have a negative context. The other place that was unbalanced was in prompt six. People resonated significantly more with the language of Julian of Norwich and John Wesley than with the language of Augustine. Only one-sixth of participants told a story that his phrase elicited, while Julian and Wesley were evenly selected among other participants.

Part III

Part III was intended to give participants the opportunity to share a prepared story with a larger audience. This is what I had intended to be the heart of the project; in a sense, everything else was leading to this moment. As mentioned in the introduction, I had intended to share in different-sized groups. I wanted to have people share in small groups – the Vestry, Men's Club, and upper high school Sunday School class had all agreed to do this. I had also wanted to have people offer their testimonies to even larger groups, including sharing at a parish-wide dinner, in worship, and in the parish newsletter. The intention had been to launch Part III in mid- to late January. Unfortunately, due to the busyness of Advent and Christmas in the parish, that was not possible, and our launch was set back to mid-March. Although we allowed people to do Part II without having done the first part, we decided not to permit people to share in Part III without having gone through the second part. We found participants for these larger group settings based on the surveys. Each participant indicated on the survey whether they were willing to consider sharing a prepared

story in a larger venue. Forty-one people indicated some level of willingness, some only in certain venues while others were willing to share in any venue. Some of these were "maybes" and one backed out when asked. Twenty-two were initially willing to share in a worship service, but those willing were not proportionally divided among the parish's five weekend services, complicating the creation of a rota for sharing. Some would only share in small group settings, some only in writing. In the end, the team decided that the parish dinner did not make sense as a venue for sharing, given the number of willing participants. Instead, we would try to get three people to share during their regular service on Sunday, March 15, 2020. We would then use that moment to circle back to another offering of Part II for those that had not yet done it, and see if we could get more people willing to share. We had hoped that seeing their fellow parishioners share in a worship service might help some get over their hesitancy and try out Part II. In essence, the sharing for Part III was the goal of Part III, but it also served as an advertisement for us to loop through another iteration of Part II with the hope of then having more people willing to step forward for more Part III offerings. The project was no longer a simple linear process; it was becoming circular or iterative. We also planned to launch a series of parishioner-authored Faith Moments in the April and May editions of the parish newsletter. As to small group sharing opportunities, the older youth would work on preparing their stories in Sunday School class, share at their May meeting, then be invited to share in the worship service in June. The Vestry participated in Part II on February 28, 2020 at start of their annual retreat; they were slated to offer their Part III testimonies at monthly Vestry meetings. The Men's Club was going to have two or three members share a story each monthly meeting starting in March. Given the number of willing Men's Club participants, this would have gone on for at least three months. Each person sharing a story for Part III was given a handout with the original prompts for Part II,

along with additional ideas to help spark stories of God at work in their lives or in the world (Appendix F). After the Part II event with the Vestry on the evening of Friday, February 28, I checked the news and read about the first diagnosed COVID-19 case in Oregon. By Friday, March 13, 2020, the Senior Warden and I decided we had to shut the church building down and move online immediately.

When we shut down for the pandemic, I knew that this was a disruption to the Faith Moments project as planned. Due to the needed adaptions in the wake of COVID-19, I had to cancel many elements of Part III. The Vestry and Men's Club each had one in-person meeting before shutdown in which they had started Part III. We heard twelve Faith Moments stories in those two sessions. The Vestry began to meet online, and the Sunday School figured out quickly how to meet online. In consultation with my advisor, I decided to shrink the scope of my project and move forward with the data I had from the Vestry and Men's Club, while collecting more data from the youth and Vestry who were meeting on Zoom. The youth met in May of 2020 to share their stories, and the Vestry shared monthly at their meetings through November, with only one month off in May. This shift affected the type of data I could collect as well as the data themselves. The changes reduced the data set, which affected the why-it-matters and what-it-looks-like questions, but the impact was felt most strongly on the how-to-help-people question. It prevented the collection of data to do the type of comparative analysis I had wanted to do for that question. Yet there were still rich data for analysis on all three questions.

In the testimonies people shared in Part III, we heard stories ranging from a harrowing, life-changing, near-death experience to the subtlety of feeling peace and interconnectedness in nature. Participants shared stories of gratitude for people in their lives and the joy of prayer being answered. We heard about serendipitous moments and kindness

offered. We heard about good medical outcomes, the birth of babies, and music that touched a soul. People also shared about struggles in the midst of difficulty, honestly voicing their pains, doubts, and fears. Many of the stories were deeply contextual to the moment we found ourselves in, experiences of God at work in this world and in people's lives in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic that was declared in March, the Black Lives Matter protests that started in the wake of George Floyd's murder in May, the local wildfires that threatened Lane County in September, and the election in November. While the pandemic certainly forced changes in the project, including reducing the scope, it opened up the possibility of analyzing testimony that occurred in the middle of crisis.

After collecting and transcribing the testimonies, I read and re-read them, looking for insights to the three questions. Using a methodology of practical theology, I used scripture, systematic theology, philosophy, and psychology to explore the testimonies in light of these questions. And following a dialogic methodology, I asked myself which voices from the testimonies were dialoguing with others and considered which figures from Christian history these voices were intentionally or unintentionally in dialogue with. In that process, I found that these voices dialogued with the testimonies of Augustine of Hippo, Julian of Norwich, and Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, and I explored the dialogue between them.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the act of ministry I implemented in my parish, and the methodologies underpinning the work and methods used to collect data. From Fall 2019 through Fall 2020, I implemented a project designed to help people share their stories of God at work in this world with each other. Using the methodology of action research, the project had several iterations that brought parishioners/participants into the creation and

implementation of the project. In the middle of the project, a worldwide pandemic interrupted it, but there was still enough work and data to analyze with a few adaptations. With surveys, interviews, and observations, I collected data that allowed me to analyze, using the methodologies of theology and dialogism, the three primary questions I had going into this project: why, what, and how. We now turn to these questions.

Chapter Three

Arousing Hope in the Hearer's Heart: Why Religious Testimony Matters

Within a few years of his ordination to the episcopacy, Augustine published what has become one of his most famous and influential books: *The Confessions*. Despite his framing of the work as a prayer to God and despite his claim that the work is addressed to God and not "some man who would mock me,"[1] Augustine was also writing for a broader audience. His publication of the work during his lifetime should be evidence enough, but we see further evidence in the text itself. In Book X, he explores the issue of who will be reading his account and why they might trust him.[2] He shares his hope that this work will "arouse the hearer's heart." He wants people to see God's "loving mercy" and "gentle grace," strengthening "every weak soul."[3]

While Augustine does confess sin in *The Confessions,* the work is more broadly a testimony.[4] It is not a testimony to a singular event, but a reflection on the first thirty-three years of his life, with the narrative climaxing in his baptism and the death of his mother. While ostensibly about events in his life, it is religious testimony about God. James O'Donnell puts it beautifully when he says that *The Confessions* are not ultimately a story about Augustine, "who keeps fading away like the Cheshire cat (leaving behind not his smile

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[1] Augustine, *The Confessions*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding, Second Edition (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), I, 6, 7.
[2] Augustine, X, 3, 3.
[3] Augustine, X, 3, 4.
[4] James O'Donnell speaks of the broad consensus that the title *Confessions* refers to a broader understanding than simply confessing sin. James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), Chapter 2. He also points us toward Gary Wills' account of Saint Augustine in which Wills argues that the work would be better titled *The Testimony*. He suggests that the term better encompasses the breadth of *Confessiones* than the simple transliteration as Confessions, points to the use of the term *testimonium* in the Latin text of Augustine's *Confessions*, and makes a case for the interchangeability of confess and testify in Latin. Gary Wills, *Saint Augustine* (New York: Penguin, 1999), xiv – xvi.

but his preacherly voice), but about god [*sic*]. The human story is gradually erased, with all its confusion and mystery and perplexities and contradictions; and the divine story, serene and bland and bright, emerges behind it."[5] *The Confessions* are Augustine's testimony to God at work in his life, shared with others to encourage them to see God at work around them.

In this chapter, using the methodology of practical theology, we will explore the question of why religious testimony matters through an exploration of scripture, theology, philosophy, psychology, and the project. Using the methodology of dialogism, we will place Augustine in dialogue with the testimonies of my parishioners during the Faith Moments project. We will also bring in testimonies from two other conversation partners: Psalm 38 and a poem by Dan Albergotti. We will begin with an account of a particular evening of the Vestry Faith Moments exercise followed by an analysis of dynamics at play in the subsequent sections: how knowledge is formed, the undercurrents of trauma, and finally the centrality of trust. Each of these sections will weave theology with philosophy or psychology. Like Augustine sharing his testimony to arouse the hearts of his readers and himself, we will see the power of testimony as it aroused hope in the hearts of listeners in the middle of a traumatic time.

The October Vestry Meeting: Swallowed with Hope

In this first section, we will review a particular evening in the Faith Moments project that took place at a Vestry meeting in the Fall of 2020. Seven months into the pandemic, after a summer of political unrest, during a divisive political campaign, in the wake of wildfires that threatened the entire community, following dashed hopes for a re-opening of in-person school, despair lingered in the air. Exhausted, disappointed, and anxious, we came

[5] James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 72.

to our virtual Vestry meeting in October. Our first speaker told a story about an encounter with a friend who had shared a poem entitled "Things to do in the Belly of the Whale" by Dan Albergotti.[6] Alluding to the story of Jonah, the poem talks about passing time in the midst of difficulty. The speaker implied that this moment is such a time, a sentiment that resonated around the room. Then, the speaker shared this line from the poem: "Be thankful that you are here, swallowed with all hope, where you can rest and wait." In the midst of the challenges of this time, this first speaker was sitting with that hope.

The second speaker expressly said that she was going to build on the theme of hope from the previous speaker. She shared about a birth in her extended family, concluding "There's still joys that we can find in the midst of these hard times… And I think that's what brings us hope is that there are still good things, there are still things to look forward to and life will continue and light will continue in this world." Several more speakers shared stories of seeing other people in person, a successful surgery, the experience of reading a spiritual reflection from Merton, and finding good in a difficult work situation. Most of the stories came quickly, with each presenter speaking almost immediately after another finished, but finally there was a pause.

After a long ten seconds of silence, a member of the Vestry who had not shared much at previous meetings unmuted his microphone. Let's call him Sam. Sam had participated in our February Faith Moments activity at the Vestry Retreat, but he had kept silent throughout the spring and summer, speaking for the first time the previous month. During that September Faith Moments time, he said that he had felt alienated, distanced, and lost; in the wake of the violence in society and the wildfires, his faith had been weak. That

[6] Dan Albergotti, "Things to do in the Belly of the Whale," Auburn University Website, 2016. http://poetry.auburn.edu/featured-poems/things-to-do-in-the-belly-of-the-whale.html. Accessed 10 November 2021.

was the entirety of his sharing for that month. There was no concrete moment of something that happened. Unlike many others, there was no silver lining, no gratitude found, no hope, no mention of God's work, just the raw emotion of his pain. It was a testimony, but a testimony more akin to God's absence than God's presence. One month later, here at the October meeting, he began in a similar way by expressing the difficulty he has had with faith given everything going on in the world, but this month, he said that he finally had a moment to share. It took place at a national park, "seeing these majestic mountains and somehow feeling a connection, that nature is a part of us and we are connected with nature, and we are all intertwined. All this greatness, this beauty in nature … gives you a perspective that just goes beyond what worries us right now."

Following this sharing, there was now an even longer 15 second pause before the next person spoke. Let's call this person Rory. Rory was a member who had shared at only half of the meetings and had not shared in months. Rory agreed with Sam that it had been really hard to see God at work during these difficult times and that they had been feeling stressed and lonely with the upcoming holidays. But they recently had an encounter and conversation with some neighbors that shifted their perspective, giving them optimism that they would find a way to be able to find some joy this holiday. They found themselves even looking forward to it.

The next speaker – Jan – referenced the preceding moments from Sam and Rory, agreeing that she, too, had been having a really hard time in the midst of so much stress, especially with school not reopening for in-person classes, and the strain of working from home and pandemic-induced homeschooling. She said that in all of the difficulties, she had been struggling with her faith. She went on to share about a moment of feeling peace while out on a nature walk with her children: "To be able to kind of hear and feel the wind and of

that biting fall … cold … I just felt this overwhelming sense of peace in the middle of it." And that although she had felt very "blocked" lately, she felt connected to God in that moment of peace. She continued, "I said, 'Okay, God, we can talk.' And I did that. So that's my faith moment."

Another speaker shared an unrelated story about friendship. Following that story, almost everyone had spoken, so I said "Anybody else wanna go tonight?" After a brief pause, Tom unmuted and said, "Well, I was gonna pass, and then my faith moment happened here, with you guys." He went on to talk about the difficulty not only of this immediate time, but of the past several years with so much anxiety-inducing political news. "These faith moment exercises have been increasingly challenging for me," he said. But tonight, he went on to share, he had a faith moment when he heard Sam, Rory, and Jan share their stories. These three people that he so deeply respected, three people he saw as being exemplars of faith – three people "near the top of my list" of people with strong faith, he put it in a later interview – honestly struggling with faith themselves made him feel less alone and gave him hope. "Hearing people say that 'It's hard, but I'm seeing, I'm still seeing', it gave me a little hope," he said. Hope, that word that began our Faith Moments time, returned. Tom came into the October Vestry meeting in the whale's belly, but as it turns out, he too was swallowed with all hope.

Encouraged Hearts

Augustine shared his observation that "it is cheering to good people to hear about the past evil deeds of those who are now freed from them."[7] Teresa de Avila had such

[7] Augustine, X, 3, 4.

encouragement when facing her own sins after reading Augustine's *Confessions*.[8] We hear something similar to the observation of Augustine and the experience of Teresa in this experience of the October Vestry meeting. Obviously, this is not a direct parallel: the stories at the October Vestry Meeting were not about individual sins, but rather difficult times outside of one's control. But we see something that resonates between Augustine's observation and Tom's story. Both types of situations – those that we stumble into through our own fault and those that happen to us - can be understood as moments in which we are in the whale's belly. And in both, we can find hope by hearing another's testimony. In hearing the difficult experiences of his fellow Vestry members, Tom's heart was aroused as he felt connected and hopeful in his own spiritual toil. In this section, we will explore how testimony operates to create this sense of encouragement in order to see why testimony matters in generating hope in this type of situation.

Recall what C. A. J. Coady says about the epistemological necessity of testimony: in some situations, testimony is the only way to ascertain certain kinds of knowledge. Coady makes this argument about historical knowledge: most historical knowledge depends upon testimony. Historians do not completely rely upon testimony – archeology provides non-testimonial evidence[9] that historians use and they use inference to work through the evidence to make historical reconstructions – but the field is heavily dependent upon testimony.[10] One of Coady's favorite examples is Napoleon: none of us have memories of Napoleon's existence; we cannot reason ourselves into Napoleon's existence; and without a

[8] Teresa de Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus, of the Order of our Lady of Carmel* in *The Complete Works of St. Teresa* (Omaha, NE: Patristic Publishing, 2019), Chapter 9.
[9] Though as mentioned in Chapter 1, even so-called non-testimonial evidence of archeology could be understood as non-verbal testimony.
[10] C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 233-248. One could make the case that most of the archaeological evidence is still testimonial as discussed in chapter one of this thesis.

time machine, we cannot perceive Napoleon's existence. We must rely upon testimony.[11] Much religious knowledge is this way: How would we know that hundreds of witnesses saw Jesus resurrected[12] if they had not shared that with others, and if people had not continued to share that testimony over the years? We may use other sources of knowledge to confirm or deny the validity of such information, and we may use other sources of knowledge to give greater meaning to that knowledge, but testimony is foundational. We could not know much about faith without testimony.[13] Whether that was a parent, a Sunday school teacher, a priest, a friend, or a stranger, someone or multiple someones along the way shared the faith with us. They testified and we accepted it.[14]

Tom's story points to another type of knowledge that is completely dependent upon testimony: knowledge related to the interior life of others. Tom had been feeling alone in his inability to see God at work in his life or the world. He never would have realized that others felt the same if Sam, Rory, and Jan had not shared that they, too, were having similar feelings. Without testimony, Tom would not have known that others were struggling as he was and would not have subsequently experienced hope in hearing their stories. These types of knowledge are hidden from us without testimony because of what has become known within Bakhtinian dialogism as the law of placement: we can only see things from the location where we find ourselves; people in different locations see different things; through dialogue, we can learn a fuller picture of reality by hearing about what they see. Even if we

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[11] Coady, 7. For a humorous take on this, see Archbishop Richard Whately's satire doubting the existence of Napoleon. Richard Whately, *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte*, *New Edition* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1865), https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/18087/pg18087-images.html. Accessed 10 November 2021.

[12] 1 Corinthians 15

[13] This is a similar argument to the one that Augustine makes in the prologue to *De Doctrina Christiana*. See Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2014).

[14] For a further exploration of this concept, see Tom Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2004).

share what seems like the same space, each person is distinct and has a slightly different angle and therefore sees things differently. Imagine two people looking at each other. They share the same space, but each can see different things in the space. As Bakhtin says:

> I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the world behind his back, and a whole series of objects and relations, which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him. As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes. It is possible, upon assuming an appropriate position, to reduce this difference of horizons to a minimum, but in order to annihilate this difference completely, it would be necessary to merge into one, to become one and the same person.[15]

In the example of historical knowledge, the locational difference is temporal and it is utterly impossible to eliminate that difference in location. The example of learning about someone's interior feelings is the quintessential example for Bakhtin's argument. Two people might seem to be in the same general physical space, yet they are not precisely so; they are still distinct entities, therefore things are hidden from them. Unless we have Spock's Vulcan mind meld capabilities, two distinct selves cannot get close enough to hear and feel the other person's interior thoughts without annihilating each other. It is only through dialogue, therefore, that we can grow in this kind of knowledge; only through dialogue that we learn what is happening from the other person's viewpoint. Words become "bridges" between us.[16] Each "utterance" is a part of the dialogic process that builds understanding and meaning.[17] Testimony is an utterance in that dialogic process: a person sharing what they can

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[15] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays,* ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, Austin, 1990), 85.

[16] V.N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,* trans. L. Matejka and I.R. Titunik, 1929, reprinted in *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, ed. Pam Morris (London: Arnold, 1994), 58. Volosinov is either one of several pen names that Bakhtin used early in his career – he claimed later in life to have written the works published under the names Kanaev, Medvedev, and Vološinov but there is scholarly debate on this issue – or someone working on similar ideas writing in a similar voice that has come to be understood as part of the Bakhtinian canon regardless of actual authorship.

[17] Volosinov, 35.

see from their location. This dialogue does not have to disagree to create or grow knowledge. Bakhtin calls attempts to limit dialogism to disagreement or argument as "crude"; he praises agreement as one form of dialogue that creates a "corridor of voices" that "augments understanding."[18] We see such dialogue in the testimonies of Sam, Rory, Jan, and Tom, a dialogic relationship of "agreement, affirmation."[19] These testimonies build on each other in this affirming relationship. We might say that Sam, Rory, and Jan created a corridor of hope for Tom to walk through. The hope that Tom shared was new knowledge that the dialogue built. None of the three people Tom mentioned used the word "hope." Two earlier participants had used the word at the beginning, so perhaps we could posit that Tom picked up the word from them, but not from Sam, Rory, Jan, or any other participant since those first two. Sam, Rory, and Jan did not say "I have hope" and Tom did not say "I agree with your hope." They told their stories; Tom heard their stories; a bridge was created that hope walked across as those stories resonated with Tom's own experience. This illuminates Ricoeur's point that all testimony is hermeneutical; testimony intrinsically invites interpretation. When you testify to something, you invite judgment that necessitates an interpretation.[20] The information shared can expand my knowledge as I receive new facts, but even more so in my interpretation. We learned the stories of these three people, the surface level of what literally happened, but through the interpretative process, hope was aroused.

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[18] Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analyis," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays,* ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, Austin, 1996), 121.
[19] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 184.
[20] Paul, Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation,* edited by Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 112.

Nomothetic truth, that truth of the scientific method that is falsifiable, replicable, and generalizable, can be passed along through testimony – and to gain any significant amount of such knowledge, testimony is necessary and used[21] – but such knowledge can usually be discovered through other ways. In contrast, idiographic truth – unique, non-replicable knowledge such as history or the interior reality of faith, hope, and love – can only be discovered through testimony.[22] To know that someone is in a painful situation or to know that they still have hope – to learn the sort of idiographic truth that they find themselves in the belly of the whale as it were – requires testimony. To learn this type of knowledge can help deepen that sense of belonging that participants identified, because it is a type of knowledge that helps pull someone out of their loneliness or isolation at thinking that they are the only one. In hearing the experience of others, Tom felt less solitary in his own experience, because he found out that he was not alone, and this encouraged his heart by giving him hope.

The October Vestry meeting was not the only incident of encouragement. In reflecting back on the whole experience, several people mentioned that they felt encouraged over the course of the months as they listened to the Faith Moments stories. Stories of hope were not the only way that people were encouraged. One Vestry member in a later interview noted that she found hope in the struggles themselves:

> I did find it really encouraging, there was that one Vestry meeting…where more than one person… said they didn't really have a faith moment, because they just felt like they were struggling. And that it had been a very difficult time to have faith…. I remember that, and I was like, "Wow. That's a big statement to say." I found that vulnerability was really... touching. I think it was encouraging in a sense, to think these people who are the people who I consider, I don't know, strong, to be strong people of faith are struggling, and admit that.

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[21] Coady, 10.

[22] For more on nomothetic and idiographic truth, see John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research,* Second Edition (London: SCM Press, 2016) 39-42.

This listener, reflecting months later, did not remember that there were often stories of seeing God at work that were shared alongside most of the stories of struggles. This participant only remembered the struggle, and yet was still encouraged by the honesty and vulnerability of the moment.

Another person said that as the pandemic went on, she felt fatigue – Vestry fatigue and Zoom fatigue – and found herself not wanting to go to some Vestry meetings. She would have to remind herself of her commitment, pull herself together, and hesitantly, perhaps begrudgingly, log in. But then the Faith Moments time would make it all worth it. She said, "We'd have a faith moment and I'm like 'Oh, that was really good. You are here for a reason.'" She also thought that the Faith Moments project helped build relational connection with her fellow Vestry members. She said:

> I think sometimes because I wasn't raised as a cradle Episcopalian, sometimes I think there's still some difference between myself and other people who have been in the church for a very long time … Sometimes I feel a little bit intimidated… And I think that [Faith Moments] was just a really great way to see people's hearts and know that we're all feeling the same things and faith in that connector so that was really helpful for me.

We hear echoes of the others: in hearing the Faith Moments stories, her heart was aroused as she experienced a sense of belonging. That belonging was only possible because she was having these connections through "agreement, affirmation" dialogic relationships. Testimony was critical for her to find that belonging.

In the testimonies provided in the Faith Moments experience, multiple participants found their hearts encouraged as they heard of struggles and hope, and built relational connections. All of this was only possible through testimony, because testimony is the only way to reveal this type of information and allow others to learn from it.

The Trauma Within the Whale's Belly

The hope that Tom discovered that night was not hope found when the difficult time ended, but hope found from within the midst of it. Part of the poignancy of Albergotti's poem that the first speaker shared that night is that hope is found within the belly of the whale. We are "swallowed with all hope," the poet says, not thrown up onto the shore with hope. Hope is not found when we leave the belly, safely waving at the whale swimming away from the shore, but while we are inside the whale. In this section, we will explore how this hope is possible with a trauma-informed reading of Psalm 38.

Psalm 38 is a testimony to an experience of hope in the midst of struggle. Like so many of the testimonies shared in my project, the testimony of Psalm 38 is missing details: we do not know who the psalmist is, their context, or how they have ended up in this difficult situation. And yet, we hear some specificity. The psalmist shares a long list of psychological and somatic symptoms: shame, numbing, social alienation, hypervigilance, hyperarousal, ailments in his digestive and reproductive systems, tonic immobility, depression, fear, and sense of failing. This is a psalm from deep inside the whale's belly. And yet, we find the psalmist swallowed with hope. After fourteen verses of expressing despair in a litany of ailments, the psalmist says "For in you, O LORD, have I fixed my hope; / you will answer me, O Lord my God." We know that the psalmist is not out of the whale's belly though, because in the next verse, the psalmist goes back to the litany for several verses until the psalmist is back at hope, asking for God's intervention in the midst of these difficulties: "O LORD, do not forsake me; / be not far from me, O my God. // Make haste to help me, / O Lord of my salvation."[23] Tom's experience is not the psalmist's experience, and unless his pain goes deeper than he is sharing, his is not as intense as psalmist's either; however, like

[23] Psalm 38, *Book of Common Prayer 1979* translation

the psalmist, Tom is still in the midst of his pain, but now equipped with the knowledge that these testimonies have given him, he is able to fix his hope back on God.

One way we can understand Psalm 38 is as an experience of trauma. The psalmist's symptoms align closely to the psychological and somatic symptoms of post-traumatic stress.[24] The Psalm begins with a superscription *lehazkir* (**להזכיר**). The meaning of this superscription is unclear. The root **זכר** (zayin – kaf – resh) is related to memory. The word is in the hiphil form, typically implying a causative action, so something or someone is causing a memory, but that someone or something is left unsaid. One translation suggests that it is about bringing us to God's memory,[25] some suggest a liturgical function of a "memorial offering,"[26] but most leave it ambiguous and simply translate it as "to bring to remembrance."[27] Post-traumatic stress is very much related to memory – both mental and somatic memory – being brought back up. Whether that is through overt flashback or the subtler ways that a traumatized person might not even be able to identify, post-traumatic stress brings the trauma to memory. Shelly Rambo calls post-traumatic stress "this enigma of the return of the past."[28] Babette Rothschild describes how during a traumatic incident, the automatic nervous system is appropriately activated for survival. This is normal and good -

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[24] For two examples of lists of somatic and psychological symptoms of post-traumatic stress, see Peter Levine with Ann Frederick, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1997), 145-149, and Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2000), 6-7. In comparing these lists to the symptoms shared in Psalm 38, we see: shame (verses 3, 4, 5, 18); numbing/mental blankness (verse 8); social isolation/alienation (verse 11, 16, 19, 20); hypervigilance (verse 12); abrupt mood swings (the move from such overwhelming despair to hope and calm); psychosomatic illness (verse 5), including ones in the digestive and reproductive parts of the body (verse 7); constant or recurring freezing/tonic immobility (verses 13-14); depression (verse 6, 8, 10); hyperarousal, including racing heart (verse 10); fear of dying, collapsing, and failing (verse 17).

[25] *New English Translation.*

[26] *New Revised Standard Version*, *Common English Bible* and *English Standard Version*

[27] *King James Version, American Standard Version*, and *English Revised Version*, and Robert Alter's similar "to call to mind" in Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2007), 134.

[28] Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 4.

the body has a mechanism for coming back out of this - but in post-traumatic stress, something goes wrong and it cannot come back down. Instead, the individual gets triggered time and again, being activated, but unable to normally and naturally come back out, shake it off, and move forward.[29] The traumatized person becomes stuck; the work of recovery is the work of getting unstuck. Serene Jones argues that one of the places this stuckness is occurring is in our imagination, so part of the healing process requires telling new stories to help expand the imagination beyond its stuck traumatized story.[30] Jones' book *Theology and Grace* is about how theology and the church can help in this process of imagining paths forward. I do not think that Jones is trying to say that the church is an alternative to trauma-informed psychological care, but rather that the church can be a helpful companion on the healing journey by helping reframe stories to help people find new ways to look at their experiences and move through them.

Trauma studies show that trauma does not only affect individuals; communities can experience trauma, as in the experience of war, natural disasters, enslavement, racial injustice, and so forth; this trauma can be passed on through the generations.[31] We are very early in the study of the current COVID-19 pandemic, but it seems to be traumatic[32] and given what we know about other collective traumas, this will likely come to be understood as such. It is not quite accurate to say that we were experiencing collective *post*-traumatic stress, because we were still in the midst of the trauma at the time of the Faith Moments project. The context of this October Vestry meeting is a context saturated with the traumatic stress of

[29] Rothschild, 46-50.
[30] Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 19-33.
[31] Jones, 27.
[32] VME Bridgland, EK Moeck, DM Green, TL Swain, DM Nayda, LA Matson, et al., "Why the COVID-19 pandemic is a traumatic stressor." *PLoS ONE* 16(1): e0240146. https://doi. org/10.1371/journal.pone.0240146

pandemic, injustice, and destruction. I do not want to suggest that any of the people in the Vestry meeting that October night were personally experiencing traumatic stress or post-traumatic stress symptoms. I do not know and I am not qualified to make such a diagnosis. Rather, we are experiencing this collective trauma that is influencing all of us and might eventually manifest in personal or collective traumatic stuckness.

Jones sees trauma mirrored in the cross.[33] Rambo sees trauma as Holy Saturday, that space between life and death.[34] The image of the whale's belly that one of the participants shared in the October Vestry meeting is another image that resonates with this stuck imagination of trauma. It is an uncertain and scary place. When you are in the whale, you do not know how or when you will possibly get out. You can feel stuck. The first line of Albergotti's poem points to the stuckness: "Measure the walls. Count the ribs. Notch the long days." These are tasks of someone trying to pass never-ending time, or time that is repeating. The trauma we are experiencing in the pandemic resonates with all of these images that Jones, Rambo, and Albergotti offer us. It is not surprising that these are related images. Jesus links all of these images together: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth."[35] Each of these images has a path out if we can find the imaginative way forward. The cross leads to the empty tomb; Holy Saturday leads to Easter; the whale's belly gets emptied onto the shore. But the hope in these stories is not just found

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[33] Jones, 75-83.
[34] Rambo, 34.
[35] Matthew 12:40, NRSV. This connection between Jonah, the whale, the crucifixion, and the resurrection was important in the early church. In an examination of pre-Constantinian Christian artwork, Robin Margaret Jensen notes that imagery from what we would today call the Old Testament and Apocrypha is more prominent than imagery from what we would now call the New Testament (four to one ratio), and that Jonah is far and away the dominant image used. She argues that through the parts of the story chosen to portray and other artistic visual clues, the Jonah iconography clearly points to the death and resurrection theme. See Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 64-79, 171-178.

in the destination; there can be hope within. In Psalm 38, hope is declared while the Psalmist still suffers. Jones points to a multitude of ways to understand the value of the cross without the resurrection.[36] The Holy Saturday liturgy of the Episcopal Church links Holy Saturday to Sabbath, a link that reminds us of rest and justice. And, as mentioned earlier, the Albergotti poem points us to being swallowed with hope. Albergotti's poem offers a rich interpretation of the second chapter of Jonah, which despite the troubles of the time is ultimately a poem of thanksgiving. The theologian Allan Aubrey Boesak reminds us that hope can only be found in woundedness, and yet when it is found, it can "empower us to find the liberating and hope-giving God."[37] Hope from the midst of suffering is such a powerful reframing of trauma because it points beyond the moment, showing a place out on the horizon that is beyond this stuck place we find ourselves in. Testimony in the context of this trauma helped members of the Vestry to find new pathways of hope. The dialogue created through the sharing of stories became the environment in which the traumatic story could be reframed from one of isolation and despair to connection and hope.

Trusting one another

If Tom and others are gaining knowledge of hope that is generated through testimony, how can we be confident that this information gained through testimony is trustworthy? As we explored in a previous chapter, testimony is one of four sources of knowledge, and these sources of knowledge all interact with and influence each other. One of the ways that we can have confidence in a testimony is because we have other evidence from other sources of knowledge. Take a simple example: My parents and others testified to

[36] Jones, 90-91.
[37] Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 24-42.

me as a child that the sun rises every morning, but I also later verified their testimony with my own perception by waking up early enough to actually watch the sun rise. I triangulated their testimony with my perception so that I have a reasonable confidence in what they say. But, in what cases can we rely on testimony alone? In the October Vestry meeting, we are exploring knowledge that can only come through testimony and cannot be triangulated with other sources of knowledge. How can I trust testimony that is not otherwise verifiable? Sometimes people make mistakes in their perception or memory, undermining the reliability of their testimony. Sometimes people make mistakes in their inference. Sometimes people lie. Why should I trust another's testimony? Or more relevant to our exploration, why should Tom trust the other participants or why should they (and we) trust him? In the philosophical literature, this is understood as the question of testimonial reliability. In this section, we will explore the issue of testimonial reliability in light of the Faith Moments program.

Most philosophers throughout history, going back to Aristotle, have been skeptical of the reliability of testimony. This issue of reliability is one of the primary debates regarding the value of testimony as a source of knowledge. In the contemporary debate, there are two main perspectives: the reductionists and the anti-reductionists. Reductionists have a lower view of reliability and the anti-reductionists have a higher view of it.[38] We can imagine their viewpoints on a spectrum with reductionists on one side and anti-reductionists on the other. At the far end of the reductionist side, some say that testimony is only reliable if you personally verify it through another source of knowledge. This poses a problem, as Coady points out, because 1) there is knowledge that can only be determined by testimony and 2)

[38] For a good introduction to the issue of reductionism and anti-reductionism, and which "camps" various scholars fit, see Axel Gelfert, *A Critical Introduction to Testimony* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 95-123.

we all, including reductionists, rely upon testimony to a degree that time limitations prevent us from verifying all of it. Reductionists who do not go so far as saying that everything needs to be verified through another source of knowledge (closer to the middle of the spectrum), want us to personally verify that the witness is reliable. This is an issue of character. In his classic work *Rhetoric*, Aristotle explores "modes of persuasion" for a speaker to consider in order to convince people of their position: *ethos, pathos,* and *logos*. *Ethos* is the mode related to the speaker's character. As Aristotle says, "We believe good [people] more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided."[39] We trust people that we consider as having a strong *ethos*. When we trust the character of a person, the likelihood increases that we trust the words they share. Testimony is not necessarily persuasive speech; for Aristotle testimony is a subset of the issue and not a particularly important one at that. But yet, in this question of reliability, there is an argument always at play in the reception of any testimony: is it trustworthy? And in that sense, Aristotle's framework is helpful to understand the role of *ethos* in the reliability of testimony. The reductionists have a point: if we cannot rely upon triangulating testimony with another source of knowledge and have to rely upon testimony alone, then the reliability of the testifier is important. Coady does not disagree with this, but thinks that they go too far. He points to the absurdity of thinking that we can actively verify each person's trustworthiness. And phenomenologically, he shows that that is not how the world works: we do not verify the reliability of each person who shares with us, and yet hundreds of times every day, we rely upon testimony. In a sense, Coady is saying that sure,

[39] Aristotle, *Rhetoric,* Start Publishing LLC, 2013, Book 1, Chapter 2.

while it might be nice to verify the character of the witness, we do not *and* we do not need to, unless there is an obvious reason to doubt the testimony.[40]

I do not think that Coady is exactly wrong here, but he is underplaying the role of verification in the acceptance of testimony. While we may not and may not need to explicitly or intentionally verify the veracity of the testifier, we implicitly verify testimony by a subtle and likely subconscious evaluation of their *ethos*. Coady gives us two examples of not verifying the reliability of a witness: 1) I call the telephone company to find out my most recent charge because I cannot find my bill, and I trust the voice on the other end without any further verification; 2) I find a stray dog and call the number on the tag and the person who answers says that they are not the owner, but they give some information about the dog that I trust.[41] Coady is right that we do not explicitly verify the character of the witness, but that does not mean that *ethos* is not at play. In the case of the telephone company, it seems reasonable to assume that the number I called is the telephone company, and that the employee has access to the information and is speaking on behalf of the telephone company. The *ethos* of the voice is transferred *ethos* from the telephone company, whom I trust because my parents trusted them before me and because of my own experience over the years of receiving correct information. I do not need to personally verify the veracity of the speaker; rather, I am relying on the transferred *ethos* from the company. I find Coady's second example a little strange as I am not sure that I would fully trust the voice who says that they are not the owner; however, any sense of trust I have comes from the fact that they have access to the phone of the owner, transferring trust to them by the owner through the owner's willingness to give this person access to their phone. What we see in both of

[40] Coady, 145.
[41] Coady, 143-144.

Coady's examples is that although we are not proactively investigating the character of each person, there are still reasons of *ethos* to trust the person. There may not be an active investigation of the reliability of the witness; the reasons may be subtle, unexamined, and even unconscious, but they exist. We can think of a counter-example in which I go out to check my mail after getting off the phone and find a bill from the phone company – it turns out that I could not find it earlier because I had not yet received it! – but there is a different charge than the person on the phone told me. My trust in whatever voice I heard the next time I called would be diminished and I would be less likely to trust the testimony received and would not hold that knowledge learned as confidently.

In the Faith Moments project, we see the matter of *ethos* at play. Remember what Tom said: these are people he admired, who he later said were "near the top of the list" of people whose faith he saw as strong. In one interview I conducted after the project was complete, the interviewee was asked which stories were the most meaningful during the project. She could not remember any specific stories, but remembered three specific people, and she remembered the general sense that their stories regularly encouraged her. When pressed on why their stories were the most meaningful, she named different reasons, but each reason came back to a matter of *ethos.* In one case, the person had a huge heart; in the second, she saw herself in the person because of similar backgrounds; and in the third, the person was well-spoken. Aristotle's framework suggests that who is speaking and their standing in the mind of the listener makes a difference to the listener's acceptance of the reliability of the testimony; this explanation resonates with the participants' experience of the Faith Moments project. That reliability was important to whether a heart was encouraged by the story.

Augustine points to another reason to trust someone's testimony that applies in the context of the Church: we are bound to each other in love. Relying upon Paul's writings in 1 Corinthians and Colossians, Augustine says:

> When they hear from me about myself, how do they know that I am speaking the truth, since no one knows what goes on inside a person except the spirit of that person within him? … Yet charity believes without stint, at least among those who are bonded together by charity, and so I also confess to you, Lord, in such a way that people to whom I can offer no proof may discern whether I confess truthfully. I cannot prove it, but all whose ears are open to me by love will believe me.[42]

We are members of the Body of Christ, knitted together in love, who see love as the highest ideal.[43] Within the Church, therefore, Augustine is saying that there should be a presumption of trust in our fellow sojourners in faith. Love creates a corporate *ethos*. We see this concept of a communal *ethos* of love in Jesus' teaching in John 13:35: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The community carries the *ethos* of love and this character of the community justifies the reliability of one's testimony.

Though they rarely used the word "love," time and again, participants expressed that sense of community relationship being the reason that they could do this project, to share and to listen, and to find meaning in the project. Without using the word, there was a sense that *agape* was underpinning their willingness to participate in and the value received from the project. Several said that they were willing to do this because Faith Moments involved members of the St. Mary's community; they would not have been willing with others. There was an exception that proved the rule: one person who expressed concerns about the project said their participation would have been easier with some of their friends that do not go to church because those relationships are deeper. *Agape* was already present for many

[42] Augustine, X, 3, 3.
[43] 1 Corinthians 12-13; Colossians 2:2; Matthew 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28; John 13:33-38.

participants, but also deepened as they engaged in the project. One person said that it was a connecting experience because it was "a great way to see people's hearts." Another said that the Faith Moments created a "sacred experience of community" and that the stories were "sacred moments of connection" that drew us closer together. She continued, "That's God and that's connection and that's love." If we take Ricoeur's understanding of religious testimony mentioned in Chapter One seriously (testimony contains an absolute character, it is the meeting of the historic with the absolute) and we take God's identity as identified in 1 John 4 seriously (God is love), then we see how integral love is to the matter of religious testimony. It is not just a feel-good wish that Augustine had that people who love him will trust him, but the theological conviction that those who are bound together in love will also recognize that love in the words they read or hear that reveal something about the God who is love. This is a matter of the community's *ethos*.

In this section we explored the reliability of testimony. Testimony is reliable because the testifier is reliable. While we cannot individually verify the veracity of every testifier's testimony, we do not need to in many situations because we can trust the testifier. In many cases, individual and communal *ethos* is a sufficient warrant. Within the church, that *ethos* is ideally of love.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we explored the "why" of testimony. In order to understand why it matters, we examined how testimony increases knowledge, and how the character of the speaker and the community plays into the reception of the testimony. Augustine desired to arouse the hearer's heart when he shared his story, and I desired for the participant's faith to be deepened or enriched by engaging in the Faith Moments project. We explored a moment

in which the Faith Moments project accomplished that through the sharing of testimony. On this particular October evening while we shared our testimony with one another, we saw Augustine's and my desires come to fruition as people shared their stories and the hearts of several hearers were aroused. The vulnerability and openness expressed in the stories in October are the type of testimonial confession that Augustine offered. Bakhtin says that this type of confession is an "encounter of the *deepest I* with *another*."[44]

This is not to say that it will happen in every situation of testimony. There were subtler experiences throughout the project, but October's meeting was the most obvious and concrete example for the Vestry in the nine months that we did this activity. While most of those willing to be interviewed expressed finding value in the project, we do not know what people thought who were not willing to be interviewed. But in this particular case, we saw a group of people in a time of communal trauma find hope through the sharing of stories of God at work in their life. Like the psalmist in Psalm 38, hope was found within the difficulty, not on the other side of it. We saw a community bound by multiple existential threats, but also bound by love, honestly and vulnerably sharing and hearing their stories. The people trusted each other by the bands of love connecting them, offering reliability to the stories that were shared. Love was further deepened in the process. Individual relationships and the community *ethos* of love helped us trust the truth in the stories. It aroused their hearts. It aroused my own heart as well as I heard of people seeing glimpses of God break through the darkness. I, too, was swallowed with hope that day.

[44] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book," in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 294.

Chapter Four

Hazelnuts and Peanut Butter: What Testimony Looks Like

"All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." These oft-repeated words come from the 14th and 15th century anchorite Julian of Norwich's famous work *Revelations of Divine Love*, the first text known to be written by a woman in vernacular English. Written during a difficult time of political turmoil, war, and pandemic, Julian's work is more than a collection of pithy, comforting sayings; rather it is a rich and complex theological reflection shared to help people in their faith. Julian's *Revelations* is often considered a work of mystical theology; however, more fundamentally, it is a testimony. Julian shares her experience of a divine encounter during a life-threatening illness and an interpretation of that event. She did not write this in a private diary, but for others in order to strengthen the faith of her fellow Christians. As we saw earlier, testimony is the sharing of knowledge. In both the original Short Text and the later Long Text, Julian shared both her knowledge of a personal experience and her knowledge of its meaning. Julian's testimony was both descriptive (here is what happened) and interpretive (here is what this means). Her work does not just contain a testimony: it is testimony. This testimony, however, was not shared in a vacuum; it dialogues with larger issues in society. Julian's testimony shares a difficult personal experience, but she shared it against the backdrop of larger challenges in society and was culturally conditioned to the moment in which it was shared.

Julian's medieval English testimony is not the same as the testimony shared in the 21st century by Episcopalians in Eugene, Oregon. Most of the testimonies shared were not as dramatic, and given the project, certainly none were as long or as crafted as hers. Yet, in the dialogue between Julian's testimony and the testimonies that parishioners shared in the Faith

Moments project, we find a helpful conversation to understand better the contours of what testimony looks like. We will see how, like Julian, the Faith Moment testimonies were deeply personal and yet also shaped by larger societal issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Black Lives Matter* protests, and the Holiday Farm wildfire. We will see how the testimonies were shaped by a cultural background that emphasized the environment as a locus of divine action. We will see the importance of images as well as events, and how description and interpretation weave together to create testimony. Overall, we will get a picture of what testimony looks like in particular contexts that goes beyond our standard understanding of the concept.

Testimony as a Response to Adversity

In this first section, we explore the contextual grounding of testimony. As we explore Julian's testimony and the testimony of the Faith Moments project, we will see how the testimonies come from personal experiences, yet larger issues in society and culture shape the testimony. The testimony is both personal and corporate. In terms of Julian, the personal context was an illness and the larger context was the suffering of the "age of adversity" that included pandemic, war, famine, and poverty. In terms of the Faith Moments testimonies, the personal contexts were varied in the 88 testimonies shared, including illnesses, nature walks, engaging in the practices of the church, and interactions with people, among other personal experiences. The larger context was pandemic, protests against racial injustice, and wildfire.

When we think about Julian's testimony, specific revelations she received probably first come to mind, like the image of the hazelnut, her description of Christ as our mother, or God's assurance that all shall be well. However, these revelations happened within the

context of a particular illness that she experienced, and help make sense of that personal experience of pain, suffering, and her concerns over sin and salvation. According to her testimony, Julian was thirty and a half years old when she became deathly ill. She was sick for three days when a priest came to offer her the rites of the church because she and those with her believed that she was on the verge of death. She says that she was not expected to live until morning, but she did, and her illness lingered for several more days until it worsened even more. Believing again that she was about to die, she asked for her priest to come be with her. He placed a crucifix before her so she could meditate on it. While gazing upon the crucifix, she had what is often described as a mystical experience, in which she understood that God was revealing holy and divine things to her. Those revelations make up the bulk of her testimony, but it is within this context of personal pain and the expectation of sudden death that this experience occurred.[1]

Julian's personal suffering is not the only context of her testimony, for there were related larger challenges in the world as well. Julian's lifetime was considered an "age of adversity." Fourteenth century England was a time of political instability, violence, famine, plague, and poverty. Kings Edward II and Richard II are generally considered ineffective, while Edward III was distracted by foreign affairs. War was endless during what eventually became known as the Hundred Years' War, a period of time that covered the entirety of Julian's life. Famines were common during this century. The Black Death, a bubonic plague, first hit England in 1348 when Julian was a child and then returned in the 1360s and 1370s. Norwich's population may have shrunk from 25,000 residents to 8,000 after the plague. Heavy taxation to pay for war combined with the economic toll of mass death from war and

[1] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love,* trans. Barry Windeatt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4-5, 42-43.

pandemic was devastating to the economy. This led to what has been called the Peasants' Revolt just a few years after the events of Julian's illness. Religiously, the emphasis of much teaching and preaching during this century was on sin, suffering, and eternal punishment. Even though Julian does not directly reference these situations, scholars have identified "echoes" of the larger context in her text.[2] Julian's testimony is deeply personal, yet it has this larger corporate context. Like Julian's testimony, the testimonies shared in Part III of Faith Moments were both personal and corporate. People shared deeply personal experiences, yet most of them were shared during a time of pandemic, protest, and natural disaster. The testimonies were shaped by and spoke to that larger context, sometimes overtly and sometimes more subtly.

Throughout the Faith Moments exercise, people shared deeply personal stories of presence and healing, serendipities and hope, wonder and blessing. At the first Part III session, someone shared about a feeling of "lightness and warmth" that felt like "God's presence" when she had let go of "some things" in her life that she "had been very stubborn about" for several years. Another person shared with us over the course of several months at Vestry meetings about moments of God's presence and a sense of prayers answered as a family member struggled with cancer. Another shared a moment of God at work in the midst of addiction. Most of the stories were recent experiences, but not all of them. One man shared about a near-death experience that had happened nearly three decades earlier and had led to his baptism. Another shared an experience earlier in his life of coming back to church, kneeling down at his pew, and talking to God after the death of a colleague.

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[2] Philip Sheldrake, *Julian of Norwich: In God's Sight, Her Theology in Context* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), chapter 1. For more on Julian's context and the impact on her writings, see Julia A. Lamm, *God's Kinde Love: Julian of Norwich's Vernacular Theology of Grace* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2019), chapter 1.

But like Julian's testimony, these stories were often not just personal experiences. Many of the stories were shared in a larger, collective context of adversity. Other than the first Vestry Faith Moments time at the March Vestry meeting, all of the Part III testimonies – the rest of the ones with the Vestry, as well as the ones with the Men's Club and the high school youth Sunday School class – were shared after the World Health Organization had declared COVID-19 as a pandemic, and nearly all after the stay-at-home time had started. COVID-19 was the context explicitly or implicitly for all of the Faith Moments testimonies at the April Vestry meeting. Expressions like "the current situation" and "darkest of times" and "social distance" were abundant in the stories. One of the testimonies at that April meeting was about a Covid scare: a college-aged nephew was in the hospital on oxygen. The Vestry member and spouse prayed that it would not be Covid and the result came back negative and the nephew was continuing to get better. They felt God at work in this. Another Vestry member shared about a role model who had recently died from Covid and the inspiration that the person had offered to the world. Several people shared about finding joy, little glimpses of grace that they had experienced in the midst of the challenges of Covid. One shared about the joy her son was bringing her during this time. Two of them talked about friends randomly stopping by who (while keeping distance) were able to share the gift of presence, conversation, and joy at a time of so much loneliness and isolation. Two talked about the gift of being able to take walks outside during the lock-down, and finding moments of peace and uplift being out in nature. Each of these were deeply personal expressions of ways that the individual had experienced God, but each was also set in this corporate reality of a pandemic. God's grace was manifested in unique ways as the particular met the universal in these testimonies.

Covid continued through the rest of the project – even at the final session, multiple people shared testimonies explicitly related to Covid, including several Covid scares and a sense of gratitude to God for the coming vaccine – but Covid was not the only challenge in the world during this time. At the end of May 2020, George Floyd was murdered, leading to worldwide protests in support of Black life. Several of the testimonies at the June and July Vestry meeting were related to *Black Lives Matter*. A few of the testimonies were about recent interactions or conversations with Black family members or friends and feeling God's grace in those moments. One shared about God giving her the courage and words she needed to have in a difficult conversation related to police brutality. Another shared about seeing God at work in the protestors. One person shared a story about transformation in his own thinking after hearing a presentation on bias and feeling like God was helping him to change. Another shared that her faith moment was Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's Pentecost 2020 sermon that addressed the murder of George Floyd.

The larger context was not always obvious, but as with Julian, the echoes were there. For instance, one can hear echoes of the pandemic experience in the only testimony at that April Vestry meeting that did not explicitly mention Covid. This participant shared a quote from the poet Rilke about living the questions and how you may someday find yourself living the answers. Then, she talked about looking back on her life and realizing that in moments of uncertainty she had found mercy and grace as God had helped her to live the answers. Even though she did not overtly say that this was related to the uncertainty of these pandemic times, there was a clear sense that this was very much about the pandemic. It did not need to be named, just as Julian did not need to name the difficult context of her world for the echoes to be audible.

Another larger context was the nearby Holiday Farm wildfire that took place in September 2020 near Eugene. This was one of the largest recorded wildfires in Oregon history. The fire started on September 7, and several parishioners who lived up the McKenzie River had to evacuate in the middle of the night, many more were in zones where they might have to evacuate at a moment's notice, and the rest of us were on high alert as the fire got closer and closer to town. The city was covered in very dangerous levels of smoke. Many of us packed bags in case we had to evacuate. We went into another lock-down because of the fires. The start of school was delayed. Most businesses closed. I had to leave my house briefly the morning after the fire started and the city seemed like a ghost town. The Vestry meeting took place on the second day of the fire. My recollection of that night had been that the Faith Moments time was all about the wildfire, and yet as I looked back at the testimonies to do my analysis, very few explicitly mentioned it. Of the ten Vestry members that shared that night, only three named the fire. Of those three, one mentioned it as an aside and one mentioned it in a list of difficult things going on in the world that were preventing him from feeling close to God at this time. Only one of the ten was a story substantively related to the fire. A parent shared a conversation with their child about what to pack if they had to evacuate. That conversation was a holy moment for them as their child shared what was important in life. But that was the only one.

Why was I remembering that the wildfire was such an important theme when a review of the transcripts showed few explicit references to the fire? One possibility is because the wildfire was my context as the listener. Context is not just for the speaker, but for the listener. Ricoeur calls this the "dual relation" of testimony – there is both a testifier

and one who receives the testimony.[3] Testimony always involves at least two parties, and the contexts of both matter. Julian had her context as writer and so did her readers; we had our context not only as speakers, but as listeners in the Faith Moments exercise. Ricoeur argues that testimonial description always demands and draws out our interpretative response as the listener; hermeneutics are the nature of testimony.[4] The fire was such an all-encompassing experience that I, as listener, likely heard all of the testimonies filtered through that context. As I heard the testimony that night and as it drew my interpretative response, that response was filtered by heavy smoke literally feet away from me in my home office; in my mind the stories were about the wildfire because I was so focused on the wildfire. Without that as my context when later reviewing the testimonies, I did not bring that context when re-reading the testimonies for my analysis. In the moment, I heard the wildfire even when it was not explicitly named; later, I did not because it was no longer influencing how I heard. That is probably part of the explanation, yet there is an argument that the wildfires did influence the testimony shared that night.

Half of the testimonies shared that night were about being out in nature or spending time with friends. Although nature was a consistent theme of people's testimonies throughout the project as we will see below, it was more present in this meeting than in others. Being out in nature was one of the great gifts that many were able to enjoy despite the pandemic; being with friends was something that many of us had only recently started doing more as the Covid situation seemed to be improving. Both of these were things that the wildfire was now preventing us from doing. We were homebound again, arguably worse off than at the start of Covid, for not only were we unable see others, we were unable to

[3] Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation,* edited by Lewis S. Mudge. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 123.
[4] Ricoeur, 111-112, 123-124.

spend time outdoors. One way to understand the testimonies that night was as resistance to the despair caused by the wildfires, as we named these holy moments in the very things that the wildfire was threatening. Through their testimonies, the speakers refused to let the wildfire take away the memories, reminding us of what we would have once again. It was too soon for many of us to have moments specifically related to the wildfires. The first pandemic and racial justice testimonies came weeks after the start of the stay-at-home order and the *Black Lives Matter* protests; we had time to have experiences within them and to process them. In this case, we had not yet had time – it was only day two – but we see connections that suggest that the wildfire was still influencing what was shared.

One of the testimonies hints at this understanding. As mentioned earlier, of the three explicit references to the fire, one was as an aside. This Vestry member's faith moment was about getting to spend time throughout the summer cycling with a friend out in the country through the beautiful surrounding countryside. These rides had become something of a ritual, a holy time as he spent time with a friend in nature. The wildfire-related aside was that he was supposed to go riding with the friend that day, but they had to cancel because of the smoke. While the story was not during or explicitly about the wildfire, it was connected in its own way as something that the fire had taken away. But this was not a bitter complaint, it was an aside. The important thing was not what was this one time that had been taken away, but holding onto the moments that had happened, almost defiantly. As I re-read through the testimonies, I was surprised to see how little we specifically named the fires, but I was most surprised when I got to my own testimony shared that night. I was sure that I had talked about the fires. I had not, at least not explicitly. Mine was an experience ten days before the fire of feeling the presence of God while alone on a little island in the middle of the Coast Fork of the Willamette River. Although chronologically before the fires, in my mind, in my

memory, it was related. Like Julian, there are echoes of the larger context even when not obviously stated.

The testimonies shared in Faith Moments were unique and intimate experiences that the participants understood to be experiences of God at work in the world, but the particularity was never far from the larger societal matters of pandemic, racial injustice, and wildfire. In a Bakhtinian sense, testimony could be thought of as a monologue – the words of the speech act come from one person directed other one more other people – but the presence of this larger context reinforces the intrinsically dialogical nature of testimony that we saw in the previous chapter. The particular words of a particular testimony are not a monologue, but one component of a larger dialogue. In the last chapter, I argued that the seemingly monological act of testimony was dialogic as the dialogue of the different testimonies spoke to each other, and created new meaning, new experiences, and new testimonies. In this case, the dialogic nature of testimony is revealed in the dialogue between the speaker and the larger societal context. Whether explicit statements or implicit echoes, the existence of a larger context illuminates Bakhtin's point in one of his later unfinished works: "I hear voices in everything and dialogic relations among them."[5]

The Creation Reveals the Creator

In the previous section, we looked at the influence of the larger societal issues; now we turn our attention to the cultural context. We will see how the religious atmosphere of fourteenth century Norwich and 21st century Eugene played a role in the respective testimonies. For Julian, that meant engaging in a particular form of mysticism and a focus on

[5] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, e*d. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern W. McGee. (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, Austin, 1996), 169.

the passion, crucifixion, and meditative visualization practices; for Faith Moments, that meant an emphasis on the environment.

Julian's testimony was not just in the context of adversity; her way of experiencing and sharing her testimony was culturally conditioned by the religious context of her age as well. Julian was part of a "new mysticism" of thirteenth through seventeenth century Europe. Throughout this time period, the number of mystical writings and their acceptance grew rapidly, with relatively widespread acceptance in the fifteenth century (toward the end of Julian's life). This new mysticism put a greater emphasis on personal experience, less citation of scripture, and was increasingly democratic, vernacular, and secular (secular in the old meaning of God being found in everyday experience, not only in the cloistered separation of the monastics). The mystical writings of this time can be categorized into various genres, and Julian's work is a form of "visionary recital."[6] In her testimony, we can see echoes of fourteenth and fifteenth century religious practices, especially the emphasis on the Passion; the prominence of the artistic representations of the crucifixion; and the meditative visualization practices of the Cistercians, Franciscans, and Carthusians.[7]

Julian's writing was shaped by the larger cultural religious context of the era in which she lived, and the testimonies shared for the Faith Moments project were equally shaped by their larger cultural religious context. Religion in the Pacific Northwest has not been defined historically by any single religious group that the majority belong to and the minority define themselves against. In most regions of the country, a particular denomination serves as a

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[6] Bernard McGinn, "The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism," *Church History,* Vol. 65, No. 2 (June 1996): 197-219. See also, Bernard McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism 1350-1550, The Presence of God, Vol. 5* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012), 491-494.

[7] Sheldrake, 37-38. For a more detailed look at the various medieval spiritual practices that influenced Julian, see Elisabeth Dutton, *Julian of Norwich: The Influence of Late-Medieval Devotional Compilations* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008).

"social mirror." There has never been a single large denomination that has dominated the Pacific Northwest to serve that role. The region has been and remains more religiously pluralistic than other regions of the country. The unchurched having always made up the largest religious demographic in the Pacific Northwest, far outpacing the proportion of people unchurched anywhere else in the country since measurements were first taken in 1890.[8] As a result, the Pacific Northwest has recently been dubbed "The None Zone" for there are more people who identify as "None" when asked their religious affiliation than elsewhere. Within the region, Oregon is less churched than the Pacific Northwest as a whole, and Eugene is the least churched metro area in Oregon.[9] In a sense, Eugene is the None Zone of the None Zone of the None Zone. If there is a social mirror for religion in Oregon, it is likely the natural environment – our mountains, forests, deserts, rivers, and ocean. Mark Shibley argues that nature is the central "cultural ethos" of the region and is a form of civil religion in a region where no singular religious group dominates. He says, "In the Northwest, where official religion does not pervade the cultural landscape, nature religion is ubiquitous – in regional literature, in the rituals of leisure, in environmental movement ethics, in Native American culture, *and even in official religious institutions*" (emphasis added).[10] James Wellman, Jr., in his study of evangelical and liberal Protestantism in the Pacific Northwest, argues that liberals are typically accommodating to the surrounding culture and evangelicals define

[8] Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk, ed. *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 25-77 and 139-184.
[9] See data from the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, "US Religious Census: Religious Congregations and Membership Study 2010," http://www.thearda.com/Archive/ChCounty.asp, accessed 5/17/2017.
[10] Mark A. Shibley, "Secular but Spiritual in the Pacific Northwest," in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone,* edited by Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 156.

themselves against it; but on the issue of the environment, both sides wholeheartedly embrace it.[11] The environment is the cultural air that people breathe here.

The Faith Moments project points to this importance of the natural environment in the religious landscape of the people of St. Mary's in Eugene, Oregon. In Part I of the project, when we asked "Where are you most likely to feel a sense of holiness?," 40 percent of the respondents listed something related to nature. Most were general, with responses like "outdoors" and "in nature," while others were more specific like "at the ocean," "on a wooded path in the sunshine," "on the McKenzie river," or "under the stars, planets, and moon." The Part III testimonies also point to the importance of nature. As already noted, several of the testimonies at the September Vestry meeting were about experiencing God at work in nature, but nature-related stories came up monthly, and it was a theme in many of the non-Vestry faith moments as well. These moments took place while on walks, by bodies of water, in forests, beside mountains, near wild animals, at sunrises and sunsets, and under the stars. Some were brief, like this one: "One of the things for me has always been seeing the Creator in things outdoors. I feel very blessed that I could still go outdoors and walk [during the Covid lockdown]. And the flowers and the trees and all of that just make me [realize] there is something always bigger than myself." Others were longer, like this testimony from a participant that we will call Julia about feeling God's presence looking out over the Pacific Ocean:

> I went to the coast last week … And I went down towards the ocean and I just walked along [the road], up all the way to the river, up and around, and I was just walking along the ocean, 7:20 in the morning probably and it was just beautiful, it was just calm, it was peaceful, the sun was just perfect… I was taking every little path … There was this pole and it was one of those peace poles, you've probably seen those. You know, "May peace prevail" and a bunch of different languages on it… Over looking at the ocean, that awe-inspiring

[11] James K. Wellman, Jr. *Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 246-249.

> scene of the Pacific Ocean, and I just had this overwhelming sense of peace, and it was really the first time [since before Covid]. It was just this utter peace, and I didn't know how much my soul had missed peace in that sense. I just really felt kind of a deep presence of God there with me in that moment.

Night and day served as the context for some of the testimonies. One of the participants – let's call him Jodie - shared about feeling God's presence while staring at the Milky Way while camping. Jodie described going to a body of water called Clear Lake, a lake created by snow run-off that is known for its clarity and cold temperature. He spoke about its remoteness and the lack of any light pollution. Then, Jodie shared about going out onto the lake late at night and staring up at the stars:

> We went out on this boat, this little rowboat, and I was looking at the trees and it was pretty cool, and then I started lean back and I kinda lied down to rest, and I looked up and I saw the stars, and I saw the Milky Way, clearer than I had ever seen it ever before. So now I was like, Wow. … And I guess the way that I described that is sort of feeling the "meat of life," I guess, if that makes any sense. And it's when I feel the meat of life that I'm closest to God. I think basically everyone has a moment where they are like "Well, is God really real? Does God even exist? Is religion, you know?" And I have had those moments for sure, but then when I look up at the Milky Way or when I look out at these lovely, lovely green pastures and these wonderful trees and this afternoon sun and the people all around me, I sort of think like, "Well, how can it not be there?" He might not be a guy with a white beard in the clouds, but I don't know, I feel like there just can't be nothing when you feel something so powerful.

Stories at dusk were more common than dawn, but one of the participants – let's call them Jessie - shared this sense of encountering the divine at sunrise. Jessie shared about a need to shift their schedule. Previously, they had stayed up late and woken up late, but because of some particular busyness and work that needed to get done, Jessie decided to shift their schedule: go to bed early and wake up early to get the work done. This change led to new routines of making a cup of coffee before the sun rose, and then going outside and watching the sun rise.

> I would take my cup of coffee and I would go outside and sit on my patio, and what's really cool is that the sun rises over the patio because the patio faces the

> east, which is pretty awesome. So as I'm sitting out there, since I'm getting up about 5 o'clock, I get up before sunrise. So what I'll do is I would sit out there right before sunrise and watch as the sun rises over the patio, and watch as the sky changes color, and it's just really pretty and kind of meditative in a way. It allowed me to slow down and kind of feel gratitude for the things that we might take for granted or gloss over every day when we're caught up in the busyness, and the incessant nature of deadlines and assignments and stuff. So it's kind of like moments like those where I feel the presence of God in a way, it's kind of that kind of feeling of interconnectedness and stillness, gratitude.

Julian's testimony focused on the suffering of Christ on the cross and used visualizations that were culturally relevant at the time; the Faith Moments testimonies had a strong environmental emphasis, which is culturally relevant to the people sharing these stories. In the stories of Julia, Jodie, and Jessie, we heard of the natural world revealing something about God as they experienced peace, presence, and the interconnectedness of all creation. As Pope Francis points out in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, scripture and tradition point toward this same peace, presence, and interconnectedness in the natural world that these three participants experienced.[12]

What does it mean that participants experienced a sense of God at work in nature? On the one hand, in Christian theology, the creator is something other than the creation. As Katherine Sonderegger so helpfully reminds us, God created something that is "not God." Creation is not "the Mind of God reified" nor is creation a "reflection" or "mirror" of God.[13] When we look at the first creation story in Genesis, we see the story resisting the divinity of nature itself: for instance, the story speaks of God creating a great light for the day and a lesser light for the night, instead of calling them the names Sun and Moon, which could be understood as divine names or beings as they were in the nearby communities.[14]

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[12] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015), Chapter 2.
[13] Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 366-367.
[14] David M. Carr, "Genesis" in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Fourth Edition: New Revised Standard Version*, ed. by Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12. Jon D. Levenson, "Genesis" in the *Jewish*

On the other hand, one does not need a sharp duality in order to still maintain a distinction between creator and creation. As Sonderegger says, "God can be immeasurably near to creation without destroying or sublimating the creature."[15] With Rowan Williams, we can affirm a non-duality that does not collapse creator and creation, rather allowing Christ to be "the heart of creation."[16] We can also understand this pneumatologically as the Holy Spirit expressing God's immanence as the ongoing work of creation unfolds by the power of the energy of the Spirit, as Moltmann argues.[17]

We can certainly theologically understand these nature-based testimonies as eyewitness testimonies to direct encounters with the divine in nature, hearing Christ in nature's heartbeat as it were. However, I want to offer an alternative understanding of what is happening in these nature-grounded testimonies: the stories are extended testimonies of nature's unwritten testimony to God's glory. In order to make this argument, there are two concepts from the first chapter on the nature of testimony that we need to remember: extended testimony as the sharing of someone else's testimony, and unwritten testimony as the testimony of objects that cannot communicate through written or oral speech. Tom Long argues that Psalm 19 is a psalm about testimony. The psalm starts by talking about the testimony of creation, the next section explores scripture's testimony, and the final verse invites the reader to share their testimony. Here are the first four verses from Psalm 19 about nature's testimony:

The heavens declare the glory of God, *

Study Bible featuring The Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation, ed. by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13).

[15] Sonderegger, 370.

[16] Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018).

[17] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 9-14. It may seem strange to pull in theologians as different as Sonderegger, Williams, and Moltmann. The breadth of theological perspective was pulled in to show how a breadth of theological perspectives can all maintain the classic Christian position of a distinction between the creator and creation. They all find the presence of God in the creation, despite their finer theological distinctions in how they would understand.

and the firmament shows his handiwork.
One day tells its tale to another, *
and one night imparts knowledge to another.
Although they have no words or language, *
and their voices are not heard,
Their sound has gone out into all lands, *
and their message to the ends of the world.[18]

Creation's testimony is a form of the concept of unwritten testimony: neither written nor verbal, yet still speaking. As the psalmist says, "although they have not words or language and their voices are not heard, their sound has gone out into all lands, and their message to the ends of the world." Without the usual means of sharing their testimony, creation still provides a testimony that can be discerned. Jessie overheard one day telling its tale to another as they sipped their coffee below a rising sun. Jodie picked up the night's knowledge as he witnessed the Milky Way moving through the sky. In nature, we can hear creation's testimony. Following this line of thinking, our testimonies of God's presence in the natural world would be a form of extended testimony. The speakers share the testimony that they heard from nature about God's glory and presence. The stories use words and language to help extend the non-verbal voice of creation.

This understanding of these stories as extended testimonies of creation's testimony need not be in conflict with the idea that they are eye-witness testimonies to God's direct presence. Both are possible simultaneously. Maybe this is what makes experiences of divine presence in nature so powerful: we are hearing Christ directly as creation's heart beats *and* we are hearing creation testify to God's glory and presence. Instead of mutually exclusive interpretations, these could be mutually reinforcing ones. Remember my chair experience from Chapter 1? It took an additional source of knowledge – inference – to transform my

[18] Psalm 19:1-4. Translation found in *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 606.

understanding beyond testimony alone. In nature, we are given both an eye-witness experience (perception) and nature's unwritten testimony. Creation's testimonial knowledge of God meets the knowledge learned from the individual's perception of the divine presence, strengthening one another in the process.

Julian shared her testimony in a culture that emphasized the passion and embraced particular forms of mystical experience; Julia, Jodie, Jessie, and others in the Faith Moments project shared their testimonies of God at work in nature in a culture that emphasizes the environment. The testimonies were shaped by the larger cultural milieu in which they were shared, dialoguing with the religious context in which they were spoken. The dialogue continues as the testimonies dialogue with culture. Now, we will move into more dialogues that these testimonies engage in as we see them dialogue with objects and hermeneutics.

On Hazelnuts, Peanut Butter, and Love

While the testimonies we have been looking at in the previous sections focused on events, we will now shift a little and see how the kernel of testimony is not just event-driven, but image-driven. Additionally, while we have focused in the previous sections on how the content of the testimonies has been shaped by external forces of society and culture, here we are going to give greater focus to how an individual's hermeneutics play a role in what the testimony looks like.

When we think about eye-witness testimony, we typically think about events; however, Julian shares not just events, but images in which the focus of the testimony is more about an object than the incident. One of the enduring images of Julian's testimony is the hazelnut.

> And in this vision he also showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball, as it seemed to me. I looked at it and thought, 'What can this be?' And the answer came to me in a general way, like this, 'It is all that is made.' I wondered how it could last, for

> it seemed to me so small that it might have disintegrated suddenly into nothingness. And I was answered in my understanding, 'It lasts, and always will, because God loves it; and in the same way everything has its being through the love of God.'

She continues by sharing a Trinitarian expression of the properties of this hazelnut as pointing to God as maker, lover, and guardian. Then, not moving away from the hazelnut, she shares another vision of Mary at the Annunciation and relates this Marian vision back to the meaning of the hazelnut, connecting the humility of the two.[19] The image of the hazelnut becomes the organizing principle of the section, but more importantly it becomes a sign that elicits deeper reflection and understanding. Paradoxically, the little hazelnut becomes an enormous symbol of creation, love, and humility.

Evocative images came up in Faith Moments stories. Over the months, participants shared about donuts, masks, house plants, a bear, Halloween decorations, and snow. These images were usually attached to stories, but the image was at the heart of the testimony. For instance, masks came up in several stories. In one story, the masks were a gift, a sign of love in the pandemic. In another story, a man needed to take his mask off at the DMV to get his picture taken. The speaker spoke of the hesitation of the man to remove the mask, the kindness of the employees in their encouragement to take off the mask, and the joy in his smile when the mask was removed. One of the testimonies was about the importance of snow to the speaker and how a recent snowfall signified hope. Hazelnuts never came up, but peanut butter did. One of the participants – let's call her Sue – shared a story about volunteering to make food for our hungry, unhoused neighbors. Sue talked about being spaced six feet from other volunteers "slapping peanut butter onto sandwiches … all for a sense of purpose." The peanut butter was a sign of love and connectedness for her. Love as

[19] Julian of Norwich, 7.

peanut butter was a gift for someone who needed it, and connectedness because the other volunteers around her were also putting peanut butter on sandwiches. Love, connectedness, and God were related for Sue. In a follow-up interview, Sue described her faith moments as being about "feeling connected." When I asked her to say more about that feeling of connectedness, she talked about how God is love and so she sees God in people helping others in need and in the people who are in need. In Sue's understanding, the God who is love is embodied in acts of love and solidarity.

Sue expressed in her interview that maybe her faith was not all that Christian, because it was focused not on doctrine, but on love. Yet love is central to the Gospel. In the synoptics, when asked for the greatest commandment, Jesus sums up the law and the prophets as love of God and neighbor.[20] In the Fourth Gospel, in Jesus' speech about his upcoming death, he gives the disciples a new commandment to love one another as he loves[21] and points to his crucifixion as an act of love.[22] Elsewhere in the New Testament, we see the primacy of love when Paul elevates it above every gift[23] and when John declares that God is love itself.[24] These acts of love can be understood as a direct engagement of God in this world. As Moltmann demonstrates, sociality, like nature, is a locus of the Spirit at work.[25] We can see the Holy Spirit working through others, most especially in their love. In her conclusion to the Long Text, Julian sums up her vision as "Love is the Lord's meaning."[26] Love is the interpretative lens for understanding what God revealed to Julian; it

[20] Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12: 28-31; Luke 10:15-37
[21] John 13:34
[22] John 15:12-13
[23] 1 Corinthians 13
[24] 1 John 4:7-12
[25] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 34.
[26] Julian, 164.

is also the interpretative lens for Sue's experiences of the divine as well. This is not peripheral, but central to the Gospel. Hazelnuts and peanut butter point to God's love.

"Your task is not to explain or prove anything; your task is to simply to describe the event," I emphasized every time I introduced people to the Faith Moments project. I had an anxiety that people would stumble while trying to justify or explain their moments of God at work in the world. I did not want anyone to hold back from sharing an experience because they could not justify its legitimacy or tease out its bigger meanings, so I asked them not to interpret the events, just describe them. And yet despite my instructions, hermeneutical matters were clearly present in the testimonies. Ricoeur says that all religious testimony is intrinsically hermeneutical because it occurs where a "moment of history is invested with an absolute character."[27] In a previous section, we spoke about the hermeneutical dynamic of testimony as the speaker's story drew out an interpretative response from the listener. Here we see another hermeneutical dynamic in the testimonies: the hermeneutical decisions of the speakers. We see it most obviously in how Julian and Sue both give the listener a sense of the meaning of the story along with the story itself. Neither shies away from telling us the meaning of their testimonies about the hazelnut or the peanut butter. Like weaving on a loom, the weft of description and the warp of interpretation work together to create a single piece of woven fabric. The testimony is not only about the event or image; interpretation is part of the testimony. The meanings of both images (hazelnut and peanut butter) overlap expressly on the matter of love. For Sue and Julian, both are images that point them to God's love and are shared to point us to God's love as well. Although not overtly named, these images can help interpret each other. The connectedness that the peanut butter symbolizes reminds us that Julian's hazelnut as a symbol of all created matter also points to

[27] Ricoeur, 112.

interconnectedness. All of creation is interconnected in its similarity to the hazelnut: a precious being held together by God's desire. The humility that the hazelnut signifies can also be seen in the peanut butter. We see humility in relatively insignificant thing of peanut butter being an embodiment of divine love. We see humility in people, regardless of any distinction, all doing the same task. We see humility in people of privilege serving those with less privilege. Like Jesus washing the disciples' feet, they were "slapping peanut butter" for people lacking shelter and food.

We also see hermeneutics at play in what was selected to be shared. Julian two versions of her testimony, often referred to as the Long Text and the Short Text. The Long Text is longer for several reasons, but partly because it includes a part of the vision that she excluded from her original telling because she claims to have not understood it yet: the parable of the lord and the servant. She believed that she needed to know the meaning before she could share it.[28] From Margery Kempe's account of her visit with Julian, we can see that Julian was concerned that visions were congruent with "the worship of God" and were of "profit to her fellow Christians."[29] It is not unreasonable to assume that this what Julian was doing here: she needed to make sure that this parable was congruent and profitable. She held back the vision until she could share a meaning that could meet that hermeneutical test. We see hermeneutical decisions in the selection of Sue's faith moments as well, not just in the peanut butter testimony. As we look at Sue's stories over the months of sharing at Vestry meetings, we can see that all but one was about seeing God at work in the loving actions of others: protestors at *Black Lives Matter* protests, a musician graciously

[28] Julian of Norwich, 106. See also Nichola Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 2.
[29] Margery Kempe, "Extract from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Ch. 18 (Margery Kempe Visit Julian of Norwich" in Julian, *Revelations,* trans. by Windeatt, Appendix 2, 168. See also Sheldrake, 21-22.

sharing their gifts with the world, the kindness of a stranger jumping her car, friends who gathered together over Zoom to support each other, a dying friend continuing to advocate for justice until the end. Sue hinted at her hermeneutical lens of love in her first faith moment. She shared about an occurrence while volunteering at a homeless shelter. Sue had been assigned to a new location (this is a multi-site cold weather emergency shelter) and she was confused and uncertain about what she was supposed to be doing. She did not feel like she was behaving well with the guests when she saw two other volunteers acting so lovingly and compassionately that she felt a "boost" to "behave better" and started treating the guests better herself. Sue said at the end of her story, "For me, that's God at work. You see people providing compassion for others for no reason, except they are there and they need it." The selection of all but one of her testimonies was influenced by this sense of God's presence in acts of loving kindness.[30] The God who is love is present in acts of love for one's neighbor. Or, as Julian would put it, love is the Lord's meaning.

The content of the testimonies of the project were not only events and stories, but like Julian's, they included evocative images that served as signs for something greater, like hope or love. These greater meanings were woven into the testimony so that the testimonies were not just descriptions, but they were interpretations, hermeneutics shaping both the choice and content of the testimony shared.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have been exploring what the testimonies of the Faith Moments project looked like. We saw that there were stories and images, description and interpretation. The testimonies were about deeply personal experiences, but were also

[30] The only exception was a testimony about seeing God in nature that she shared during the wildfires.

shaped by larger issues in society and cultural context. Pandemic, racial justice, wildfire, and the environment served as societal and cultural background for people's stories: the particular in dialogue with the universal. More than that, they served as dialogue partners with the speakers, revealing an intrinsic dialogical rather than monologic nature to testimony. Julian helped us see that although the specific details are quite different, the same dynamics are at play in her testimony as well.

Discussing these testimonies – Julian's or ours – as being shaped by the surrounding culture and the larger state of affairs is not meant to explain away, deny, or denigrate their power, reality, originality, or authenticity in any way. It very well could be that God speaks to us through our cultural realities or that we hear God filtered through our societal moment. God works "with the particularities of material resources," as the theologian Ben Quash says.[31] The context is part of the "finds" that interact with the "givens" in his concept of Found Theology. The mediation of our experiences and our sharing of them within cultural context does not necessitate that the experiences are simply human constructs. God's revelations would be incomprehensible if they were not mediated by our particularities of culture because we could not understand them.[32]

As we examine what these testimonies look like in conversation with Julian's testimony, we see God's grace subtly at work in this world. Julian said that "all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well" because God was present even in the challenge of suffering and sin. Stepping back from any particular testimony in the Faith Moments project, I see Julian's message reinforced in these testimonies as participants pointed to God's presence in the midst of their context of suffering and sin.

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[31] Ben Quash, *Found Theology: History, Imagination, and the Holy Spirit.* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 30.
[32] Quash, 221.

Chapter Five

Hesitant Testifiers: How to Help Facilitate Testimony

In the 1690s, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection's book *The Practice of the Presence of God* was first published.[1] Brother Lawrence was a seventeenth century Discalced Carmelite monk who had been a soldier and a footman before entering the monastery. Within the monastery, he served as a cook and cobbler. His book contains the testimony of his initial conversion and ongoing spiritual practice over the years. At the age of 18, Nicholas Herman - later named Brother Lawrence after entering the monastery - had an experience of God's presence that "never left him" from that day forward. Not unlike some of the Faith Moments stories that we explored in the previous chapter, the event happened in nature when he saw a tree in winter without any leaves on it. He considered the tree and thought about how it would soon have leaves and even flowers and fruit again. He was suddenly struck by a spiritual perception and recognition of God's presence, power, and providence. It also led to an overwhelming feeling of love toward God that remained with him through the years. Recognition of God's presence allowed him to detach from the world in such a way that even the tasks in life that he despised were bearable because he knew of God's companionship through the work.[2] Over the centuries, Christians from many denominational backgrounds have found his book helpful in their spiritual lives.[3]

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[1] The book originally was published as a two-volume series in 1692 and 1694. Subsequent editions and translations were often combined into one book. For more information on editions and translations of this work over time, see Conrad De Meester's introduction in Brother Lawrence, *Writings and Conversations on the Practice of the Presence of God: Critical Edition,* trans. Salvatore Sciurba, ed. Conrad De Meester (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1994), xxiv-xxxiv.

[2] Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God, Revised Edition,* trans. Robert J. Edmonson (Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 1985), 61-70.

[3] Hal Helms, "Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection" in *The Practice of the Presence of God, Revised Edition* by Brother Lawrence, trans. Robert J. Edmonson (Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 1985), 20-23. See also Bernard McGinn, *The Persistence of Mysticism in Catholic Europe: France, Italy, and Germany (1500-1675), The Presence of God,*

To call *The Practice of the Presence of God* "his book" is a bit of a misnomer as he did not write the book. The book was posthumously published by a friend and only some of it was written directly by Lawrence, and even that was not written for publication. Lawrence's moving conversion story was not shared as direct testimony from his hand, but as extended testimony from his friend, Abbé de Beaufort, who wrote down what Lawrence said over the course of four conversations they had 26 years prior to publication. Despite being relatively well-known, the book points toward Lawrence as a slightly hesitant testifier. In the Faith Moments project, I also encountered hesitancy, sometimes quite deep-rooted, in many within the faith community I was studying. In side conversations, formal interviews, participation rates, and even in the testimonies themselves, this hesitancy was a constant thread through the project. In this chapter, with Brother Lawrence as a conversation partner, we will explore how to help hesitant testifiers to testify. To study "how", we will look at reasons for the hesitancy and possible pathways forward that the research uncovered. Due to pandemic-induced adaptations, the chapter is not as initially planned because some of the elements of the project to help investigate this question were not possible. Instead, the project served as preliminary work that could be helpful for future project designs. As a result, this chapter is more provisional than the other chapters.

Were People Hesitant?

Before we can explore why people are hesitant to share their stories and see what insights we can find on paths forward, we need to spend some time verifying that they were in fact hesitant, which we will do in this first section. Just because the main story we have of

Vol. 6. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2020), 305-308. See also Conrad De Meester in Brother Lawrence, *Writings and Conversations,* xxxii-xxxix.

Brother Lawrence's conversion comes from extended testimony does not mean that he was in fact a hesitant testifier. Lack of evidence is not evidence. In the case of Brother Lawrence, our evidence is limited, yet we do see evidence of hesitation in *The Practice of the Presence of God*. For instance, in de Beaufort's eulogy of Lawrence, he informs us that Lawrence did sometimes like to write down his thoughts, but often he ripped them up afterwards so others could not see them. The few sheets that he kept would rarely be shared with others and then only on the condition that they be returned as soon as possible.[4] The letters themselves also point to his hesitancy. In one letter he masks his own identity by referring to himself in the third person.[5] In another letter, he expresses his "reluctance" to share and does so "only under the condition that you will not share my letter with anyone."[6] Hesitancy is not the same thing as complete unwillingness. And it is that hesitancy, not unwillingness, that we see in Brother Lawrence.

We see a similar dynamic in the Faith Moments project. Over 130 people participated in Part II of the project, making it one of our most successful non-worship service offerings at the church.[7] Many were willing to share, yet the attendance at the program masks the hesitancy within the congregation. While among the most numerically successful non-worship offering in the parish, still fewer than half of our average Sunday attendance, and less than twenty percent of our membership participated in Part II. Unlike most of our programming at the church, we intentionally structured this program to make it as easy as possible to participate, by scheduling multiple offerings at different times and days.

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[4] Brother Lawrence, 43.
[5] Brother Lawrence, 81.
[6] Brother Lawrence, 109.
[7] Prior to Covid, the annual meeting had an attendance about 90-110 people, all-parish fellowship dinners had about 60-100 people, and most adult education programs had about 10-30, with the most successful adult education programs bringing in 50-80.

It is possible that someone was not available for any of the twelve options we offered, but it is somewhat telling that nobody informed me that they could not attend, but wished they could have. Several did inform me that they were not going to come, often with some form of "I don't do that" given as a reason. Some of these unsolicited responses were forceful in their response. The hesitancy of these people had spilled into unwilling. But among the willing, there was hesitancy as well. More people than not stated that they had reservations about participating: 34 with reservations and 31 without (only 71 surveys were returned, and of those not everyone answered this question). Even those numbers might be a little misleading. For instance, one person stated that they had no reservations in participating, but then went on to say that the activity reduced their concerns because of the procedures we used to make it a safe environment. Another person stated that they had no reservations, but said that they felt relief once they realized that we would only be sharing stories one-on-one. In these cases, while expressly stating that they had no reservations, other answers show concerns were still present. Another person stated on their survey that they had no reservations, but only because they trusted me. Trust in me built up over years of pastoral relationship was something I informally heard from a handful of other participants as well. These individuals would mention to me that this was not something that they had much interest in, but they were willing to do it "for you." Perhaps unsurprising in a college town and a congregation with many academics, in one case, one person said they did it because they remembered how hard it was to get data for their doctorate, so they wanted to make sure I could collect data.

Even though most of Part III could not be fully implemented, we had started the process of scheduling the Part III events. Of those who participated in Part II, only one-third indicated on a survey that they were willing to *consider* sharing to a larger group for Part

III. The wording of the check box response for yes was "Yes, I would be willing to consider it." Additionally, there were maybe and no options, and several of these one-third were maybes. Furthermore, when I followed up with one of the participants who said yes, she told me that she had changed her mind and was no longer willing to share. Even for those that went through all three parts, surveys and interviews showed an ambivalence expressed among several about sharing their stories. One person indicated on the follow-up survey to Part III that they appreciated hearing others, but was uncomfortable sharing their own. One person called the project difficult and refused to give me an interview so that I could understand this difficulty. Although I do not have complete data on the level of hesitancy within the congregation, it would be fair to say that based on the formal data collected and informal conversations, that there was hesitancy within the congregation. That is not to say that the hesitancy was universal. There were some who were excited by the prospect. But even their excitement shows a cultural hesitancy, as there are not many opportunities for them to share like this. One person was happy that I did the project because she said how she loves this kind of sharing and has been disappointed since becoming an Episcopalian that there were not more opportunities for it.

Why They Are Hesitant and Reflections on Some Approaches to Ease the Hesitancy

As mentioned earlier, the project was not completed as originally intended due to pandemic disruptions. This impacted the scope of all of the research, but the effect was felt most fully on this particular research question. The limited ability to implement Part III reduced the variety of environments and styles of testimony that were designed to help me explore the "how" question. As a result, the data are more limited, the results are more provisional, and in one sense, the research project ended up serving as preliminary work that

could be helpful for future project designs. We will never know the reasons for Brother Lawrence's hesitation, but even in this incomplete and more limited outcome, Faith Moments points us to some of the reasons for the hesitation within St. Mary's. In this section, we will explore the reasons uncovered and some reflections on possible paths forward. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list; there are certainly reasons that were not identified in the research. Nor does this list pretend to claim how widespread these reasons were; they may be explanations that pertain to the hesitancy for many, or just for a few. These reasons are not meant to be singular explanations or mutually exclusive. Some people held more than one of these reasons and possibly others not described here.

Personality

Some participants indicated that their hesitation stemmed from a reserved personality. Some directly stated some form of "I am a private person." One person identified as a "super introvert." One person stated on their survey that "my feeling of inadequacy always makes me feel shy, especially around strangers." One person indicated that her uncomfortableness came from how she was raised, saying, "My mother often told me I needed more discretion. As an adult I have become less open to sharing intimately with others, especially those I don't know well." Another indicated that they were afraid of public speaking. One participant said that he was very private and had to resist the urge to leave during the activity. Another indicated that going deep into any personal topic is difficult for them and something that they generally try to avoid. The project exposed the limits of the outgoingness of one person who I would not have described as a private or shy person. This self-described "talker" said that she does not like sharing "too deep" and that this form of

sharing was emotionally draining for her. For these participants, the hesitancy flows naturally from their own personality.

In the surveys, several of these people indicated that offering their testimony in Part II was not as bad as they had feared. They did not indicate that anything in particular about the process helped make it less scary, they merely did it and it was not so scary. Simple encouragement might help some with this hesitancy. Several indicated in the surveys that the one-on-one sharing experience of Part II was helpful to them; though one of these people who also went on to do sharing in Part III in a small group said that the small group sharing was easier for them. One person said the rules of confidentiality – no note-taking, no sharing your partner's story without your partner's permission - were important to his participation. This reminds me of Brother Lawrence's insistence that people who saw the few sheets he wrote return them immediately. Additionally, some of these participants who valued privacy indicated that sharing with a trusted friend was helpful. I had initially encouraged people to share with people they did not know, but allowed them to pick a partner they knew. One interviewee who was able to participate in small group sharing for Part III told me that knowing and trusting the person they were sharing with was vital to their participation in the project. We see here what we have seen elsewhere in this project: trust matters.

Lack of experience

When Jeremiah was called to prophesy – an act of extending God's testimony – he resisted the call, saying, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."[8] These are words of hesitancy due to a lack of experience. This lack of experience was articulated by a few in the project. As one participant put it, "A lot of it for me is just simply

[8] Jeremiah 1:6, NRSV.

a question of not having done it." As mentioned above, these explanations are not mutually exclusive. A private personality can easily lead to a lack of practice. One of the participants indicated as much by first saying that they were uncomfortable with the project because they were inexperienced and then adding that it was also because they were "a private person." Another participant identified privacy as the reason for the hesitancy, but then went on to say that after they had done it, it turned out not to be as difficult to share as they had anticipated, indicating that inexperience was likely a factor as well.

It is tempting to say that practice solves the problem of inexperience. And certainly, some people indicated in surveys that they thought that the one-on-one sharing made it easier for them. However, the Vestry, which had nine months of monthly practice during the project, complicates this answer. One Vestry member shared that they "always had trouble" finding a story to share and they "never overcame that." Another reported that finding a story got harder as time went on after the "low hanging fruit" was taken. He had shared the most obvious moments early and had to dig deeper to find things to share as time went on.

Faith as a private matter

This is slightly different privacy matter than the one discussed above. This is not necessarily about an individual's private personality – that may or may not be there as well - rather this refers to the theological, political, or cultural conviction that faith is something that should be private and not shared with others. Theologically, a couple of people referenced Jesus' teaching to not practice your righteousness before others in informal conversations with me when expressing their discomfort with the project.[9] These people see testimony along the lines of the dangers of prayer and almsgiving that Jesus mentions in the

[9] Matthew 6:1-6, NRSV.

Sermon on the Mount, something done to get accolades from others. Political hesitation took one of two forms. One person mentioned in passing that they were uncomfortable talking about faith because that is "what conservatives do." Another mentioned the First Amendment and talked about how faith is individual. This person was not saying that the Constitution prevents them from talking about faith, but rather they were expressing that their political commitment to faith as a personal matter shapes how they express their faith elsewhere in their life. Culturally, one interviewee mentioned they were very sensitive to the "appropriateness" of talking about faith, saying that "at least in Eugene, we don't have the most welcoming community towards religion." This person recognized that the church was the appropriate venue, but the cultural context of what they perceive as a cultural resistance to matters of faith still influenced them and made them initially hesitant. There is little in the study to offer a path forward on this particular hesitation. Further research is needed to better understand this concern.

Inadequacy/Nothing to Share

This reason for hesitancy stems from people thinking that they do not have faith stories to share. This hesitancy is probably best expressed by Suzy from the Introduction, who said on her survey, "I felt like I had nothing to share, certainly nothing profound or 'religious' going into this exercise." This was another concern that the Project Thesis team had identified in their planning as discussed in Chapter 2. How can someone share an experience of seeing God at work if they do not know that they have seen God at work? We addressed this by offering prompts to help spark the imagination. Surveys and informal feedback seemed to indicate that this was a helpful approach for people. The relationship between the practice of testimony and other spiritual practices that attune oneself to God's

presence is important. Brother Lawrence's testimony is paired with his rich spiritual practice that kept him attuned to God's presence. We see it in the other historic testimonies we have explored in this thesis: both Augustine and Julian had rich lives of prayer that helped them be aware of God's presence. It seems that encouraging any practice that is designed to help one notice the workings of God in one's life or the world could be helpful to testimony: the Part II prompts, helping people engage in Brother Lawrence's daily practice of the presence of God,[10] leading people in the Ignatian Examen,[11] or others.

Along with practices to help one recognize God's presence, the process of listening helped one participant realize that they had something of value to share. This participant said, "There were often times when I could relate to what other people were saying and realize that I have experienced similar types of moments. This was a connecting point for me, both with God and with the people sharing. Perhaps it should tell me, that my fears of sharing with others because they would not find it interesting or meaningful could be misleading." In hearing others share and in finding their stories meaningful, she realized her stories be meaningful as well. This is related to the Bakhtinian concept of agreement/affirmation dialogic relationships that we explored in Chapter Three. Through agreement and affirmation, understanding grows. This participant experienced such an agreement/affirmation experiences as she heard the stories from others that resonated with her own stories. With the knowledge from that testimony, she inferred that others might benefit as well. From interviews with others, I know that to be the case. Another participant indicated that her stories were meaningful to them. Also, I know from my own experience of

[10] Brother Lawrence's advice for engaging in his practice is found within his book in the letters and the maxims.
[11] For more information about the Examen, see Jim Manney, *A Simple, Life-Changing Prayer: Discovering the Power of St. Ignatius Loyola's Examen* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2011).

hearing her stories in the project and in other pastoral conversations with her, that her faith experiences have been meaningful to me.

Insecurity

Several expressed feeling insecure in sharing their stories. This was one of the concerns identified by the Project Thesis team in our initial planning, as discussed in the first chapter. In surveys, the insecurity was mostly related to concern about the reactions of the listeners. For instance, one person said that they were "embarrassed by sharing personal stories." Another said "we are all vulnerable and fear rejection if we share our faith." The flip side of insecurity is security, and the most common way that people expressed their insecurity was in their relief that they did end up feeling safe. Several people indicated that the parameters that we set in Part II made them feel safe, such as only having to share one-on-one, offering that people could refuse to answer a question, telling people to be non-judgmental, and informing people to keep all stories confidential unless they had their partners' explicit permission. One person reported that the prompts brought up a few stories that she did not feel safe to share, but the prompts were broad enough that she was able to find another story to share. Others expressed that the listening partner made them feel secure. One person said that the openness of his partner made him feel secure, and another stated that she felt secure because her partner was a "compassionate listener." The insecurity was not just about the listener hearing their stories. In at least one case, the insecurity was about what the sharing would force the person to confront in themselves. They said that the type of stories they were invited to share triggered "deep memories, perhaps because I have sought God when I hurt the most."

Negative Past Experience

Some former evangelicals were opposed to the project because of negative experiences with testimony while growing up in a white evangelical church. This hesitancy was from people who had experienced that particular style of formal testimony that came out the 18th and 19th century revival movement. To be clear, this was not true of all former evangelicals in the congregation; some were even excited because they missed that part of their evangelical background. But some were opposed. One such person shared with me at coffee hour after the church service one Sunday that their experience of testimony was one of inauthenticity. They generally found it to be a waste of time at best, and perhaps harmful, as people would share what he called "trite stories" like seeing God at work in finding a parking spot. More common were people who like Tim from Chapter One: a former evangelical who had a negative experience feeling forced to offer testimony door-to-door when he was younger.

In Chapter Two, we discussed the negative reactions I had received to the word "testimony." Part of that reaction was grounded in this hesitancy. I understood the testimony being introduced as something qualitatively different than this negative experience, which the people in this group agreed with when I explained my intent. My reaction to their reaction was to shy away from the word testimony in my communications. I thought that avoiding the word would solve the problem. This was a mistake. What I discovered from the hesitancy, even opposition, by some people in this group is that avoiding the word testimony did not usually make them think this was something different; it led them to think that I was hiding what I was doing. One of these people in a side conversation in the hallway after the church service asked, "What is the goal of this project?" and went on inquire if I was trying to covertly create the type of testimony that he

experienced. I had to pastorally tease out what his experience was and show that this project and my goals were different than the negative experience he had growing up. In conversations with people who raised this objection to me, I was able to help diffuse the concern and anxiety with transparency and clarity. This was not tested in this project and would be good for future research, but it seems likely that greater transparency around the word testimony would be beneficial. Yes, there were people who immediately knew that this was similar, but different, as one person indicated on their survey, but others only saw the similarity and it created fear or discomfort.

To conclude this section, we have been exploring some of the reasons that the project uncovered for the hesitation. In this research, I found that elements of personality, experience, understandings of faith, security, adequacy, and past experiences played a role in the hesitancy. We cannot say anything about how widespread these reasons are within the congregation or how effective the interventions were in easing them. The conclusions of this research need to be held lightly and provisionally, but this section offers some insight for future research into the issue of introducing practices of testimony in the parish.

The Limits of Our Encouragement to Testify

My hypothesis going into the project was that finding ways to share testimony in the congregation would be positive. The intention of this chapter was to uncover the reasons for the hesitancy in order to find ways to help ease them. Given the value of testimony argued in earlier chapters, this was not unwarranted. My research so far has helped confirm other work that shows a value to the intentional practice of testimony. However, the research into testimonial hesitancy should cause us to pause and acknowledge there is a shadow side to the practice of testimony that needs to be understood and respected. In this section, we will

explore this negative side of testimony found in this research, demonstrating that we should put some limits on our encouragement to get people to offer their testimony.

Lauren Winner, in her book *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, warns us that while most of the literature on Christian practices is positive about the benefits of spiritual practices, there is a negative side to them as well: they are as able to deform as to form. "Nothing, not even the good practice of the church, is untouched by the Fall," she says.[12] To demonstrate her thesis, Winner explores the history of three central practices – Eucharist, prayer, and baptism – to reveal the ways that have been used malevolently. She uncovers the connection between the practice of Eucharist and the wicked history of Christian lies about supposed Jewish host desecrations that led to murder and massacres, starting in the late thirteenth century.[13] She plumbs the depths of the prayer practice of a nineteenth-century American enslaver and how prayer was used to help maintain the evil system that allowed this woman to enslave other people.[14] She investigates the delicate balance of the role of family in the practice of baptism and the deforming qualities when the seesaw tips: erasing particularity and risking supersessionism when it tips one way; reinforcing societal structures and risking consumerism when it tips the other way.[15] In her analysis of each practice, she spends time showing that these perversions of the practice are not incidental, but intrinsic in a world marred by sin. Her analysis is not meant to deny the good of these practices. She recognizes these practices as gifts, but understands them as damaged gifts. She wants those who have

[12] Lauren Winner, *Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2018), 1.
[13] Winner, Chapter 2.
[14] Winner, Chapter 3.
[15] Winner, Chapter 4.

received the gift of these practices to be "on the lookout" for the circumstances in which these practices are damaged and the routes that lead to further damage.[16]

The hesitancies of the participants are not just problems to overcome, but revelations of the ways that the practices of testimony are damaged and can cause damage. The negative past experiences that parishioners shared with me show how testimony has been damaged and causes damage. One of the ways the damage emerges is through coercion. In the brief history of formal religious testimony in Chapter One, we saw evidence of coercion on the practice of testimony, such as in New England puritanism that required testimony as a door to membership. This is not coercion through punishment, but through the withholding of benefits. The coercion does not have to be so strong. Tim's experience of offering testimony door-to-door may not have been directly coercive, with an overtly stated punishment or reward in exchange for offering his testimony; but there was an evangelical cultural expectation, bordering on pressure, that was in a subtle sense coercive. Another parishioner, let's call him Frank, shared how inauthentic the testimonies in his former church were. He felt that there was a cultural expectation to get up and offer your testimony that led people to use rote formulas that made him question the legitimacy of what he was hearing. The coercion of culture deformed the testimony, leading to the opposite effect of what the testimony was meant to provide.

The triteness that one parishioner shared in their experience of testimony might have its root in these coercive practices around testimony. People who feel they must share their testimony might grab an easy story or rely upon worn tropes that present as inauthentic or trite. One of the deforming realities of testimony in these cases is that the testimony can lead to a diminishment of faith for some of the listeners. The God who finds someone a parking

[16] Winner, 3.

spot feels quite petty in light of the injustices of this world. A God who serves as an assistant to the elite is quite different from the liberating God who has freed and continues to free people from bondage.

Coercion to elicit testimony is not the only way that coercion shows up as an element of testimony; testimony is also used as a method to coerce others. One former evangelical who participated in Faith Moments shared with me that, in her experience, testimony often quickly turns into a tool of conversion instead of connection or learning. Testimony becomes one-way as someone only wants to offer their testimony, not be truly open to receive the testimony of others in the process. Another person who did not participate in the project shared with me that they were taught to intentionally use emotion in their testimony to get people to change. They thought that this was emotionally manipulative. This is another subtle form of coercion that deforms testimony. This form of manipulation corrupts the dialogic nature of testimony that leads to growth as we authentically learn from each other. Testimony should be an element of the ongoing give and take of dialogue, not a tool to impose upon another. This makes testimony much more like the monologic communication that Bakhtin warns against.

Trying to overcome someone's hesitancy, especially when it is based in personality or conviction, risks disrespecting the dignity of the listener. It threatens to belittle their identity or principles. For Episcopalians, this would risk violating one of the promises of our baptismal convent to "respect the dignity of every human being."[17] This baptismal promise is rooted in the creation narrative in which God makes humans in God's image. When we engage in coercive practices, we are in great danger of violating that image of God in

[17] *The Book of Common Prayer, 305.*

another. This is, as Winner would put it, an element of the Fall. The sin that stains the world stains testimony as well.

The great irony and paradox of the practice of testimony is that I only learned about the dangers of testimony through testimony. During the course of this research, these participants who shared with me their hesitation and opposition to testimony had the courage to testify to me about the ways that testimony is damaged and has damaged them. Winner offers her critique of practices not from a place of opposition to them, but from a place of deep love for them.[18] I do the same. Being the recipient of people's testimony over the years has formed and deepened my faith. I have deep love for the testimony that people have informally offered me, and I want them to offer their stories to others so that others can benefit as I have. Having never been a part of a faith community that had a regular intentional practice of people offering testimony to the ways that they have seen God at work in their lives and the world, I never experienced the gift of testimony as damaged. Through this project, I have learned through the reception of testimony, through listening to the stories of others, about the dangers inherent in testimony. This does not mean that we should not engage in testimony or not encourage others to testify, but we must do so in a way that limits these dangers. We must always be on the lookout.

To help reduce the damage, Winner offers three companion practices to the three potentially harmful practices she explores: gratitude, lament, and confession/repentance. Acknowledging that as practices, these too can be damaged and deforming, she finds that they can help lessen the risks. In terms of testimony, at least, I would add a fourth practice: humility. Like all practices, humility can have a negative, deforming side as well, but it may help lessen the bite of testimony. The coercion comes about when we take the practice and

[18] Winner, 17.

the stories too seriously, and allow them to carry too much power. They become so important that we force others explicitly or implicitly to engage in them. What do I mean by humility here? I mean to hold this practice and stories lightly, gently share them as offerings instead of arguments, and be as open to receiving the gift from others as we are to share the gift with others. In doing so, we can lessen the dangers of testimony.

Conclusion and Advice

This chapter has explored some of the reasons that people in the congregation studied were hesitant to offer their testimony, with an eye to how to ease their concerns. While the goal of this research question had been to find ways to help overcome their hesitations, in the process of research, I also learned to respect and appreciate the hesitations, not as obstacles to overcome, but as revelations of the dangers of testimony. While I still hold that there is much value in practices of testimony, I found that caution is reasonable and necessary. Even as we encourage sharing of faith and helping people to share their faith stories, we should remain alert to the legitimate dangers that the practice holds. Some limits to our encouragement of implementing this practice are warranted.

Despite his being a hesitant testifier, Brother Lawrence's testimony has transformed the lives of many over the years. He did not do this by standing in front of crowds to share his testimony. He offered his testimony to individuals and small groups that came to him and asked to hear his story, not unlike we did in the Faith Moments exercises. Much more research needs to be done on why people are hesitant and on methods that can help people to overcome their hesitations. The research here offers some insights into some of the reasons that people are hesitant, posing questions to be explored more deeply in future projects and research.

Recognizing that the results of this research are very provisional due to the limits of this project and the data that were collected, what advice might I have for how to help leaders implement practices of testimony in their congregation based on my research? Start by identifying ways that testimony is already present and build from there. Understand your goals. Consider the purpose of what you are asking people to do and the audience that will receive it. Why are you doing it? Put together a team to help you shape and implement it. Be transparent about what you are doing; do not shy from the word testimony, but talk about what it means. Consider implementing testimony in smaller environments, perhaps in already established groups where trust already exists. Create parameters of confidentiality, respect, and non-judgment. Teach participants to be open and accepting of others. Consider whether testimony is the starting point: perhaps working on practices of attentiveness to God's presence, like the Ignatian Examen or Brother Lawrence's practice of the presence of God, is a necessary first step in your context. Alternatively, pair the testimony with practices of attentiveness. Create opportunities and encourage people, but avoid coercive practices that require people to engage in testimony or even more subtle forms of cultural pressure. Warn of dangers, like emotional manipulation. Watch out for past trauma and prepare to respond pastorally. Recognize the limits of what testimony can accomplish. Respect your people. Practice humility.

Conclusion

In the introduction to this doctoral thesis, we met Suzy, a parishioner who was hesitant to participate in the project. After an e-mail exchange earlier in the week, I asked her in a church hallway on Sunday morning if she was going to participate. She responded, "I'm not really into testimony." Suzy did end up participating in one of the one-on-one sharing sessions of Part II. As we saw in Chapter 5, in her survey, she said "I felt like I had nothing to share, certainly nothing profound or 'religious' going into this exercise," but in the end she found that she did have things she could share and she discovered that it was a positive experience to share them. Not only that, on her survey, she indicated a willingness to share a story to a larger group in Part III. This never came to pass due to the pandemic, but what a shift for someone who was so hesitant to participate in the first place.

As mentioned in the Introduction, part of the impetus for this project was my own spiritual growth from hearing my parishioners' stories. I hypothesized that my parishioners' faith would also be nourished and deepened if they had greater intentional opportunities to hear from their fellow parishioners. There is a common, but false assumption that what works for me will work for you. In the psychological literature of human learning this is called the "false consensus effect." What works for me will not necessarily work for you. People are too idiosyncratic for us to simply make such an assumption.[1] However, in this project, in the experiences of people like Suzy, Tom, and many others, this hypothesis held, though it was not universal. It did not work for everyone.

[1] Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel, *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 117.

In this thesis, we have been exploring testimony in an Episcopal context. In Chapter One, we explored what testimony is in a broader sense than many understand it to be. Testimony is something we all engage in daily, including in our churches. Although testimony is rarely manifested within the Episcopal Church in the classic, formal ways that testimony has traditionally been understood in church contexts, testimony has been and is present. And it has been important to our faith. Building on that presence of testimony that already exists in the Episcopal Church, in Chapter Two, we looked at a project I implemented in my parish to more intentionally practice a type of testimony that is less common: testimony to experiences of seeing God at work in this world today. This project was interrupted by a pandemic, which forced adaptations that shrunk the project and by extension, prevented me from collecting some of the data that I wanted to collect, but also opened up a unique opportunity to explore testimony in middle of unique crisis. I also laid out in this chapter my methodology for implementing and analyzing this project using action research, practical theology, and dialogism. These first two chapters served as a necessary foundation for the heart of the research project explored in the final three chapters: why, what, and how. Why is testimony important? What does it look like? How do I help people start doing it?

In Chapter Three, we dialogued with Augustine to explore why testimony matters. We learned about a particular evening of testimony at a Vestry meeting that generated hope for participants, encouraging their hearts as Augustine had hoped that his testimony would do. In the middle of a crisis that felt metaphorically like being in the belly of the whale as the prophet Jonah was in the book of *Jonah*, participants found themselves "swallowed with all hope" as the poet Dan Albergotti puts it. Using philosophy, we understood how this testimony generated knowledge of hope, and we considered the reliability of this sort of

testimony. We learned about the critical importance of trust in regards to testimony: testimony depends on trust, and testimony can also build trust as it fosters connection and belonging. We looked to psychology to understand how this testimony was taking place in the midst of a communal trauma, and how testimony might help in the process of understanding the trauma and creating alternative pathways to help with healing.

In Chapter Four, we dialogued with Julian of Norwich to explore what testimony looks like. We saw how testimony is contextually shaped by events and culture. Julian offered her testimony in a world marred by war, poverty, political instability, and pandemic; my parishioners offered their testimony in a world marred by pandemic, racial injustice, political division, and wildfire. Julian's testimony echoed fourteenth and fifteenth century Western European religious practices, especially the emphasis on the Passion, certain artistic representations, and particular meditative visualization practices; the testimony of my parishioners was consistent with the contemporary religious practices of the Pacific Northwest, especially the emphasis on the environment. We also saw in this chapter how testimony is not only about events, but about images. Julian's testimony about hazelnuts found a conversation partner in a parishioner's testimony about peanut butter and jelly. We also spent time in this chapter investigating the role of hermeneutics for both the speaker and the listener. We found that hermeneutics play a role in the selection and shaping of the testimony shared, and in the reception of the testimony by those hearing.

In Chapter Five, we dialogued with Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, on testimonial hesitancy. Although the data for this chapter were more affected than other chapters by the pandemic adaptations, we were able to do some preliminary research on the causes of testimonial hesitation and possible interventions. Although we do not know the extent of these concerns, we saw in the research data hesitation due to personality, lack of

experience, a commitment to faith as a private matter, inadequacy, insecurity, and negative past experiences. We also explored how the reasons for the hesitation are not just hurdles to be jumped or obstacles to be cleared, but speak to the real and legitimate dangers of testimony that can deform faith. These need to be considered and appreciated, and the effects need to be minimized if one wants to move forward with incorporating testimony. I also offered some provisional advice based on what I learned in this project for those that want to do further research or those that want to try and implement practices of testimony in their parishes.

In all of these chapters, we have been circling the issue of Episcopal identity. Is testimony part of who we are or is it a violation of our identity? "We're a faith that doesn't do that kind of sharing," as one interviewee put it. As we have seen in this thesis, some form of this statement was shared by both life-long Episcopalians and newer converts. One person newer to the Episcopal Church warned me, "Careful with what you are doing. I joined the Episcopal Church to get away from that sort of stuff." And yet, as we have seen in this thesis, testimony broadly understood is inescapable and is already a part of our Episcopal identity. Testimony is everywhere. Episcopalians use it every day. Even the type of testimony that is less prevalent – testimony to the ongoing work of God in this world – is a part of who we are. In dialoguing with the testimonies of Augustine, Julian, and Lawrence, there is an implicit understanding that testimony is a part of our heritage.

A part of our identity is also the hesitation - a hesitation that was born in historical realities hundreds of years ago. A hesitation that continues in personality, inertia, and negative experiences. Perhaps these two parts of our identity can be understood as a gift. Could we reclaim this part of our identity that embraces testimony while using the hesitant part of our identity to incorporate it responsibly? This might help us to better bring out the

forming elements of testimony while reducing the deforming aspects of the practice. This might allow us to grasp more easily that testimony is one epistemological source that can be utilized to grow in our faith. Testimony is a source of knowledge that is not better or worse than the others - perception, inference, and memory - but one that interacts with the others. And all of four of the sources are working together to draw us closer to God, the *telos* of our lives as Christians.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Faith Moment Conversations (Part II) Survey

Doctoral Research Disclosure and Consent

In turning in this form, I freely consent to Robert Bingham Powell using the data collected in this survey for his Doctoral Project Thesis for the Doctor of Ministry program at Virginia Theological Seminary.

This project is designed to help parishioners share their faith experiences and listen to others share their experiences. The hope is that this process of sharing and listening will help participants to deepen their faith as we talk about how God is at work in this world.

Strict confidence will be maintained on any data from observations, surveys, and interviews. Following the research, Bingham will be writing his doctoral thesis based on the research, but names of participants will not be used and any quotes will be anonymous, including limiting details that could help identify the participant.

Anticipated risk is minimal, no greater than the standard risk of participating in a faith community and intentionally working to deepen one's faith. Participants may decline to answer any question during the project and may withdraw at any time.

1. Did you have any reservations going into this exercise? What were they? Did this exercise help reduce your concerns about sharing your stories? Why?

2. Do you feel more comfortable, less comfortable, or have the same level of comfort talking about your faith after this experience?

3. Did you have any insights about faith – in general or your faith in particular - after sharing your stories today?

4. Did you have any insights about faith – in general or your faith in particular - after hearing another person's stories today?

5. Questions regarding individual prompts/questions:

    a. In prompt two, did you select a hymn, prayer, or other piece of music?

    b. In prompt three, did tell a story about peace, renewal, or gratitude?

    c. In prompt four, did you select someone from history or someone you know personally? Who?

    d. In prompt five, did you tell a story about clarity, comfort, hope, or justice?

e. In prompt six, did you have a story that resonated most with the words of Augustine, Julian of Norwich, or John Wesley?

f. In prompt seven, did you tell a story about awe and wonder or a story about love?

g. In prompt eight, did you answer the first (holiness), second (distant from God), or third (serendipity) question?

h. In prompt nine, did you tell a story about home, joy, redemption, mercy, or immensity?

i. In prompt ten, did you select the question based on Psalm 43 (light), 86 (rescue from a pit), or 122 (joy in church)?

6. Were there any prompts/questions you would have liked to have been asked today?

7. Might you be willing to share a prepared faith moment to a larger audience (Part III of this project)? It could be one of the stories you shared today or another that did not come up today. Depending on the venue, the length of time might be slightly expanded. You do not need to select which story today.

☐ Yes, I would be willing to consider it

☐ Maybe, I would like to talk to Bingham more about it

☐ No, thank you, I am not interested

If yes, would you be willing to share in the one of the following forums *(Please check all that apply. Depending on numbers, I may need to ask people to share in a forum that is not their first choice, but you will not be asked to share in any venue that you are unwilling to)*:

☐ During a worship service ☐ Online – Social Media

☐ During a special event ☐ In the parish newsletter – The Bellringer

☐ Other

_____

8. As part of this research, Bingham will need to some more in-depth interviews with people who participated in Part II, regardless if they participate in Part III. Would you be willing to participate in a more in-depth interview on today's experience, if needed?

☐ Yes ☐ Maybe ☐ No

If you answered yes or maybe to questions 7 and/or 8, please include the following:

Name:
_____

E-mail(s):
_____

Phone number(s):
_____

Appendix B

Vestry Survey on Faith Moments

In turning in this form, I freely consent to Robert Bingham Powell using the data collected in this survey for his Doctoral Project Thesis for the Doctor of Ministry program at Virginia Theological Seminary.

This project is designed to help parishioners share their faith experiences and listen to others share their experiences. The hope is that this process of sharing and listening will help participants to deepen their faith as we talk about how God is at work in this world.

Strict confidence will be maintained on any data from observations, surveys, and interviews. Following the research, Bingham will be writing his doctoral thesis based on the research, but names of participants will not be used and any quotes will be anonymous, including limiting details that could help identify the participant.

Anticipated risk is minimal, no greater than the standard risk of participating in a faith community and intentionally working to deepen one's faith. Participants may decline to answer any question during the project and may withdraw at any time.

Name: _____

I am willing to participate in a one-on-one interview ☐ Yes ☐ No

I am willing to participate in a focus group ☐ Yes ☐ No

Questions

1. We started sharing our faith moments in March and have continued most months since then. Thinking back over this time, generally, how has this experience been for you?

2. Describe the process of putting your faith moments together? Did you spend much or any time before the meeting planning? Or did you come up with it during the meeting? Did you ever try writing anything out ahead of time or practice it ahead of time?

3. Did you ever have difficulty selecting a moment to share because you couldn't think of one? If so, how did you overcome that?

4. Did you ever have difficulty selecting *only* one to share because you thought of too many? If so, how did you decide?

5. Did coming up with and/or sharing your faith moments give you any insights into your faith?

6. We not only shared our own faith moments, but we listened to others share their moments. What was it like for you to listen to the faith moments of others?

7. Did you listening to other people share their moments give you any insights into your faith?

8. Did you listening to other people share their moments make you think about another moment in your own life?

9. Did you listening to other people share their moments affect you in any other way?

10. At the Vestry retreat, we shared moments one-on-one; at Vestry meetings, we have been sharing with the whole Vestry. Did the Vestry retreat activity make sharing in Vestry meetings easier?

11. Is your level of comfort in sharing about your faith greater, less, or the same as before we started doing this activity?

12. Do you have any other thoughts about participating in Faith Moments?

Appendix C

Questions for Part I

1. What words describe the presence of the divine for you?

2. Where are you most likely to feel a sense of holiness?

3. What is your favorite prayer? Does it evoke a particular feeling for you?

4. How old were you when you first had a sense of God's presence in your life or in the world?

5. What image comes to your mind when you think of faith?

6. Which Bible story do you most personally identify with? In a phrase or a sentence, can you say something about why you do?

Appendix D

Prompts for Part II

1. What is your earliest memory of a sense of faith?

2. Is there a prayer, hymn, or piece of music that is particularly meaningful to you? Can you tell a story of a time when it touched you?

3. Think about the following three words: peace, renewal, gratitude. Pick one and share a moment in the past several years when you have felt it.

4. Name a person who well exemplifies the life of faith for you. This can either be someone you know personally or it could be someone from history. Tell what it is in their story that characterizes that faith for you.

5. Think about the following words: clarity, comfort, hope, justice. Pick one and share a moment in your life when you have felt it.

6. In sharing about their own religious experiences, St. Augustine says that our hearts are restless until they rest in God, Julian of Norwich recounts God telling her that all shall be well, and John Wesley tells about the time that his heart was strangely warmed. Have ever had a moment that your heart felt completely at rest, a moment in which you knew that all shall be well, or a moment when your heart was strangely warmed? Share about that experience.

7. When was the last time you were struck by awe and wonder? Describe the experience: Where were you? What did you notice?

   or

   God is love, First John teaches us, and that the love we experience in this life is a reflection of that divine love. Share an experience of being loved.

8. Share about a recent (however you define the word recent) experience of feeling holiness? Where were you? What did you see? What was happening?

   or

   Was there a time when you felt separate or distanced from God, and how did that feeling resolve?

   or

   Serendipity is that experience of things just clicking together in an unexplainable way. Have you ever had an experience like that and what happened?

9. Think about the following words: home, joy, redemption, mercy, immensity. Pick one and share a moment in your life when you have felt it.

10. Psalm 43:3 says, *Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me, and bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.* When have you felt a light turn on in the middle of a dark time in your life?

or

Psalm 86:13 says, *For great is your love toward me; you have delivered me from the nethermost pit.* When have you felt rescued from a pit?

or

Psalm 122:1 says, *I was glad when they said to me, "let us go to the house of the Lord."* When have you felt joy in church?

Appendix E: Prompts for Youth in Part II

Faith Moments Part II – YAC Faith Moment Conversations

1. Share a favorite Pilgrimage memory.

2. Share a favorite memory of church.

3. What is your earliest memory of a sense of faith? Tell the story about that time.

4. Is there a prayer, hymn, or other piece of music that is particularly meaningful to you? Can you tell a story of a time when hearing, praying, or singing it really touched you or meant something special?

5. Think about the following three words: *peace, renewal, gratitude*. Pick one of these three that resonates most with you and share a moment in the past several years when you have felt it.

6. Name a person who well exemplifies the life of faith for you. This can either be someone you know personally or someone famous. It could be someone alive today or someone from the past/someone historical. Tell what it is in their story that characterizes that faith for you.

7. Think about the following words: *clarity, home, hope, justice*. Pick one of these four that resonates with you and share a moment in your life when you have felt it.

8. When was the last time you were struck by awe and wonder? Describe the experience: Where were you? What did you notice? How did you feel? Etc.

   or

   First John teaches us that God is love and the love that we experience in this life is a reflection of that divine love. Share an experience of being loved.

9. Share about a recent (however you define the word recent) experience of feeling holiness? Where were you? What did you see? What was happening?

   or

   Serendipity is that experience of things just clicking together in an unexplainable way. Have you ever had an experience like that and what happened?

10. We have all had dark times in our lives. Often, sometimes only in hindsight, we notice that a light turned on in the midst of those dark times. When have you felt a light turn on in the middle of a dark time in your life? Tell that story.

    or

    Have ever had a moment that your heart felt completely at rest or a moment in which you knew that all would be well? Tell the story of that time.

Appendix F

Ground Rules for *Faith Moments* sharing

1. Small and mundane stories are okay. Big and profound stories are okay.

2. Time limits: 2 minutes per story max, so brief vignettes only. If you finish early, wait in silence for the two minutes to finish.

3. Tell the story and describe the experience. You do not need to explain or prove anything.

4. If you are listening, just listen. Do not talk or respond to their story beyond a brief thank you.

5. Respect your partner's story. No judging.

6. Only share what you want.

7. Respect the privacy of your partner's story. Do not share their story with others without their explicit consent.

Appendix G: Guidance for Speakers in Part III

Preparing Your Faith Moment

Here are the questions/prompts, we utilized in Part II. Perhaps reading over these will remind you of a faith moment you shared during that session that you would like to further prepare and share. Or perhaps you will think of another story or a more recent story that you would like to use as your Faith Moment.

1. What is your earliest memory of a sense of faith?
2. Is there a prayer, hymn, or piece of music that is particularly meaningful to you? Can you tell a story of a time when it touched you?
3. Think about the following three words: *peace, renewal, gratitude*. Pick one and share a moment in the past several years when you have felt it.
4. Name a person who well exemplifies the life of faith for you. This can either be someone you know personally or it could be someone from history. Tell what it is in their story that characterizes that faith for you.
5. Think about the following words: *clarity, comfort, hope, justice*. Pick one and share a moment in your life when you have felt it.
6. In sharing about their own religious experiences, St. Augustine says that our hearts are restless until they rest in God, Julian of Norwich recounts God telling her that all shall be well, and John Wesley tells about the time that his heart was strangely warmed. Have ever had a moment that your heart felt completely at rest, a moment in which you knew that all shall be well, or a moment when your heart was strangely warmed? Share about that experience.
7. When was the last time you were struck by awe and wonder? Describe the experience: Where were you? What did you notice? ***or*** God is love, First John teaches us, and that the love we experience in this life is a reflection of that divine love. Share an experience of being loved.
8. Share about a recent (however you define the word recent) experience of feeling holiness? Where were you? What did you see? What was happening? ***or*** Was there a time when you felt separate or distanced from God, and how did that feeling resolve? ***or*** Serendipity is that experience of things just clicking together in an unexplainable way. Have you ever had an experience like that and what happened?
9. Think about the following words: *home, joy, redemption, mercy, immensity*. Pick one and share a moment in your life when you have felt it.
10. *Psalm 43:3 – Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me, and bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.*
    When have you felt a light turn on in the middle of a dark time in your life?

    or

    Psalm 86:13 – For great is your love toward me; you have delivered me from the nethermost pit.
    When have you felt rescued from a pit?

    or

Psalm 122:1 – I was glad when they said to me, "let us go to the house of the Lord."
When have you felt joy in church?

Here are some other ideas to help put together your faith moment.

1. Look at this list of words. These are some words people used when I asked them to describe the feeling of experiencing God. Can you think of a moment that you felt/experienced one of these? Read through the list multiple times imagining yourself at different times in your life (childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle-age, older adulthood). Read through the list multiple times imagining yourself in different places (at church, at home, out in nature, different places you have lived or visited).

Serenity	Hope	Wonder	Recognition
Surprise	Clarity	Peace	Realization
Focus	Comfort	Renewal	Resurrection
Joy	Harmony	Holy	Acceptance
Connection	Gratitude	Communion	Epiphany
Astonishment	Presence	Love	Awe
Surrender	Eternity	Care	Being Known
Healed	Home	Justice	Redemption
Mercy	Immensity	Forgiveness	Cleansed

2. Think of a favorite hymn. Why is it a favorite? Look it up and read the words or sing it yourself. Do any parts resonate with your life? Which? In what way? Can you think of an experience in your life or someone you know that resonates with this hymn?

3. Think of a favorite bible passage. Read it. Read it again. Do you see your life in it? In what way? Can you think of a story in your life or in someone you know that connects to this story?

4. The Daily Examen of Ignatian Spirituality is a form of prayer that can help you see God at work in your life. You can learn more about this method of praying here: https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/

5. Maybe we are trying too hard. Try simply asking yourself: Where have I seen God today? This week? This year? This decade? During my life? Describe that experience.

Appendix H: Letter to Families of Youth

Research with youth followed protocols of Virginia Theological Seminary in regards to research with human subjects.

Dear YAC families,

YAC (Young Adults in Church) is our class for 11th and 12th graders. Most of the youth in this group will have gone on pilgrimage and been confirmed, but those are not pre-requisites. Any high schooler in 11th or 12th grade in the parish is welcome to participate and will be able to. YAC is the final class in the Journey to Adulthood program.

We hope that YAC will be a place for these young adults to find continued fellowship and fun, a place to serve as a launching pad to get more integrated into ministry, and a place to intentionally work on deepening faith.

It is that last hope that I am writing about today. In regards to faith development, one of the overarching goals of the whole program is to help the youth to develop a stronger sense of owned faith. The YAC curriculum has a strong emphasis on this. This goal is very much related to the work I am doing with my doctoral studies. The Faith Moments program that I am doing is designed to help give people more ownership and agency over their own faith. After consulting with the Sunday School Director and the YAC leaders and youth, I think it would be beneficial for us to use a modified* version of what I am doing with adults in Faith Moments for the YAC class this year. I would also like to be able to do some research around this experience for my doctoral thesis. As all of the YAC students are minors, I need not only their permission, but parental permission as well. Attached is a required permission form for my educational institution.[1] Declining to participate in the research does not mean that child cannot participate in YAC this year. Your child can still participate, including participating in the exercises related to Faith Moments, but I would not be able to utilize any observations in my research or ask them to participate in any surveys or interviews. As you will see in the attached permission form, strict confidence will be maintained, including masking any identifying details in order to protect the privacy of the individuals involved, and either parent or youth may withdraw from participating at any time.

Thank you for considering this request. The permission form is attached. If you are willing to participate in the research, please sign and e-mail the form back to me (you can scan or take a picture of the signed form) or bring it on Sunday to our YAC class. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Thank you.

Advent Blessings and Peace,
Bingham+

[1] See Appendix I.

PS - This Sunday's class is important to do the work we will do this year. If your youth is not able to participate this Sunday, please let me know and we will work out an alternative to give them the foundation to do their work the rest of the school year.

*If you have been engaged in the project, you might be wondering, What do I mean by modified? Part II of the project will be similar. They will still share in pairs, but the questions have been adjusted. For instance, we have a few simpler ice breaker questions to share, some of the harder questions have been removed, and the time lengths have been shortened. We will also model the process for them. I am happy to share the questions with you if you would like. Part III of Faith Moments is the part in which participants share a story with a larger group. For the YAC class, they will have a portion of each class in January, February, and possibly March dedicated to work on their stories. Then each participant will have the chance to share with the whole YAC class in March or April. That sharing with the whole class will be the larger group sharing for Part III. After sharing in class, if any would like to share the story again with the whole congregation, either in worship or in the Bellringer, they will be given the opportunity to do so.

Appendix I: Doctoral Research Consent Form

I, _____, freely consent to participate in Robert Bingham Powell's doctoral research for his Project Thesis for the Doctor of Ministry program at Virginia Theological Seminary.

This project is designed to help parishioners share their faith experiences and listen to others share their experiences. The hope is that this process of sharing and listening will help participants to deepen their faith as we talk about how God is at work in this world.

There are three parts to the project. 1) An initial introductory event to introduce the congregation to the project. 2) Small group settings in which parishioners will share in pairs or triads experiences of faith guided by a series of question by Bingham. 3) An invitation and opportunity, if I so choose, to share a story of a particular moment of faith to a larger audience. It is anticipated that Stage 1 and 2 will happen in Fall of 2019 with Stage 3 happening in late Winter/early Spring of 2020.

I understand that for Bingham's research, he will utilize data from observations from these events and I will be invited to complete surveys following the second and third stages. Further, if I choose to share a story with a wider audience, Bingham will use verbatims of those stories. Finally, Bingham will invite some participants for further interviewing.

Strict confidence will be maintained on any data from observations, surveys, and interviews. Following the research, Bingham will be writing his doctoral thesis based on the research, but names of participants will not be used and any quotes will be anonymous, including limiting details that could help identify the participant. In Stage 3, those who choose to participate will be sharing in a more public venue, but privacy of participants will still be maintained in the write-up for the doctoral thesis.

Anticipated risk is minimal, no greater than the standard risk of participating in a faith community and intentionally working to deepen one's faith. Participants may decline to answer any question during the project and may withdraw at any time.

I have read and consent to participate in this research.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name	Signature	Date

If the participant is under 18, a parent or other legal guardian must sign:

I, _____, am the parent or legal guardian of _____. I have read the above material and consent to my minor child participating in this research.

_____	_____	_____
Legal Guardian's Printed Name	Legal Guardian's Signature	Date

Appendix J: Sample Letter to Part III Participants

Dear _____,

Thank you for agreeing to share a faith moment during the _____ service on _____.

The Faith Moment sharing will take place during the sermon time that day. I will give a brief introduction and then invite each speaker forward to share their moment. Each speaker has approximately 3 minutes to share their moment.

A Faith Moment as we are defining it for this project is a moment in which you have seen God at work in your life or in this world. This could be recent or much earlier in your life. This is something you have seen/experienced, not something you have heard about second-hand. As we discussed in Part II, remember that seeing God at work is more often about seeing the effects of God at work than seeing God directly.

Your faith moment can be an expanded and prepared story of something you shared in your one-on-one sharing during "Part II: Faith Moment Conversations" or it can be something new. I have attached the original Part II questions in case those prompt a faith moment for you, along with some other ideas to help you plan and prepare your faith moment.

As a reminder, this program is part of my research project for my doctoral studies at Virginia Theological Seminary. As part of this project, I will utilize these Faith Moments in my research. Although you are sharing this publicly, strict confidence will be maintained as I report data from observations, surveys, and interviews for my final paper. No names of participants will be used and any quotes will be anonymous or pseudonyms will be used. Details that might help identify a participant will be limited or possibly changed to maintain privacy and confidence.

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this project.

If for some reason you are no longer able to participate, please let me know as soon as possible.

Lenten Blessings,
Bingham Powell+

Appendix K: Timeline of Sharing

Part I: Large Group event to introduce project - Evening of October 8, 2019

Part II: One-on-One Sharing

October 20, 2019 (Following the 11 am service)
October 30, 2019 (Wednesday morning at 10:30 am)
November 2, 2019 (Following the Saturday 5pm service)
November 3, 2019 (Spanish-language option, following the 1:30 pm service)
November 7, 2019 (Thursday evening at 7 pm)
November 10, 2019 (Following the 9:30 am service)
November 12, 2019 (Tuesday evening at 5:30 pm)
November 13, 2019 (Wednesday evening during Men's Club)
November 17, 2019 (Following the 8 am service)
December 8, 2019 (Sunday evening 11th-12th grade Sunday School Class)
January 12, 2020 (Make-up opportunity for 11th-12th grade Sunday School class)
February 28, 2020 (Vestry members at Vestry Retreat)

Part III: Sharing in settings larger than one-on-one

Men's Club

1st session occurred on March 11, 2020
April and May events cancelled due to Covid

Vestry

March 10, 2020 (in-person)
April 14, 2020 (on Zoom)
May 12, 2020 (cancelled due to too large of an agenda)
June 9, 2020 (on Zoom)
July 14, 2020 (on Zoom)
August 11, 2020 (on Zoom)
September 8, 2020 (on Zoom)
October 13, 2020 (on Zoom)
November 10, 2020 (on Zoom)

Worship Services

1st session scheduled for March 15, 2020, but cancelled due to Covid

Parish Newsletter (The Bellringer)

Scheduled for April and May editions, but cancelled due to Covid

Youth

May 17, 2020 (on Zoom)

Transcriptions of testimonies from Part III events not included to preserve privacy of participants.