

Sermon 011115 My Story
Scripture 1Timothy 6:6-19
Sermon Title- My Story

We've gotten to know each other in the year and a half that I've been your pastor. I've learned many of your stories so now maybe it's time for me to open up on my story, my life journey that has landed me here.

So, how does it happen that a 52 year old man who was rolling along in a reasonably successful career in business would chuck it all away, sell the home he owned on the waterfront in Hull, enter seminary, and live for three years in a dorm room with shared bathroom down the hall, in order to enter a career that, well, lets just say you don't get into for the money. Really, "What *was* I thinking?"

I can tell you that there is no 'big event' story. I have no 'born again' story, no 'road to Damascus' story.

There were events, some big and some small. I can't tell all of them, nor should I, as the story is more about becoming than recounting biographical events. You don't need to spend a lot of time around the Fabulous Meg to hear her talking about, "becoming the person God wants you to be." That is what I believe my story is about, but there were events along the way.

I was born in Boston and grew up in Weymouth. I was raised Roman Catholic and left the church when I left home for college at

UMass Amherst. Along with ample doses of guilt and shame, I did absorb some Christian morals and ethics. An important aspect of my formation was the Boy Scouts. I am proud to be an Eagle Scout. I'd like to recite for you the Scout Law. Anyone who knows it is welcome to stand up and join me. "A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent." They are not just a list of words for me. I have fallen down on the Scout Law in my life, but I can tell you that it is part and parcel of how I try to conduct myself to this day.

I put myself through college tending bar. I'd go to Martha's Vineyard in the summer to work. I fell in love with the island. After I graduated I wasn't ready to get put on a necktie and get serious so I spent five years as a commercial fisherman on the Vineyard. I mention this to point out that Peter and the sons of Zebedee are not the only disciples who started out as fishermen.

I spent decades in what I have called a 'spiritual wandering.'" I had my moral and ethical foundations from my religious and scouting background, but never joined a church. I dabbled in different faith traditions and learned a lot, but never committed. I liked the moral and ethical teachings of religion, but was a big time doubter about God and theological teachings. For me, reading has always been a source of personal growth. It has always gotten me

out of myself and brought me to new places-intellectually, emotionally, spiritually.

I was in the travel business and I'm fortunate to have traveled a lot in my life. I've been to 46 of the 50 States. I've traveled in China, India, Europe and the Caribbean many times. Traveling, like reading, has contributed a great deal to me becoming the person that I am.

Meanwhile, marriage and divorce tore at my spirit. I have had what St. John of the Cross-called the dark night of the soul. It is said that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. I believe that to be true, but better is not necessarily easier. There are things in my life that I am proud of like my 10 years of volunteer work at a homeless shelter. I also confess to you that I am a sinner. I have deep regrets.

So, I was at a non-church event when I heard a brilliant young pastor, The Rev. Dr. Rochelle Stackhouse, speak. She was funny, profound, and quoted Bruce Springsteen. I remembered thinking, "I'd like to hear her preach." I went to hear her at UCC Norwell the next Sunday. She was great and I kept coming back. I left worship wanting to be a better person. I also got to know some really great people at church. I started looking forward to church, but still had doubts about God and particularly Jesus Christ as God. I want to give a whole sermon on doubt, soon. I'll tell you now, I

believe doubt enriches faith, not hurt it. Paul Tillich said, “Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is a component of faith.”

I participated in a church program called, “Unwrapping your Gifts.” In that class, by the way, I met a good looking, smart, funny, and powerful woman named Meg. One of the exercises was to read the parable of the mustard seed; then take a mustard seed in your hand and meditate on it. I did so and took a long walk on Nantasket Beach. On that walk, I had a revelation. I opened my heart to God. I then resolved to try to live my life according to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Pastor Shelly moved on from UCC Norwell and was followed by yet another brilliant young preacher by the name of The Rev. Dr. Steven Chapin Garner. Chapin told me fairly early that he saw me as a minister. One of the things he encouraged me to do was to give a lay sermon. I did so and something happened. I felt more alive than I ever had and people responded in some amazing ways. Someone said, “I felt like you were talking directly to me,” which may be the words preachers most like to hear. People started suggesting that I look into ordained ministry.

While my life of faith and church life was blossoming, I was also experiencing a decrease in my passion for my work in business. There is a definition of success written by Ralph Waldo Emerson that I had read at my mother’s funeral. That says: “To

laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty, to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.”

I was divorced, not a dad, and doing in business a lot of what I had already done many times. I started to think, “Is this all I have to say for myself?” So I did, again sponsored by the church, a discernment program to take a fresh look at the direction of my life. It was about me, but a group project. Meg was there, too, by the way...are you detecting a theme about my life of faith and Meg’s presence? The next day, I was sitting in the office of the Director of Admissions at Boston University School of Theology. There is a phrase attributed to the late, great mythologist Joseph Campbell: “Follow your bliss.” If you do something and love it, do it some more. Get better at it. If you follow your bliss, doors will be open to you that will be closed to others. If you are not following your bliss, doors will be closed to you that will be open to others. Well, doors just flew open for my entry into seminary.

I prayed a lot and came to the point of deciding to devote the rest of my life to serving God by serving God’s people. I had

doubts about my capabilities but believed that it was what I needed to do with my life. Seminary was really hard. I needed to learn how to write academic papers all over again. It was, by far, more sophisticated, more spiritually compelling, and more complicated than anything I'd ever done. But there was one thing I did in my time in seminary that really was, I think, the test of my capabilities for ministry. It is called CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education). I did it in my first summer of seminary. I worked in a hospital as part of the chaplaincy service. I went into hospital rooms and delivered pastoral care to patients and their families. I introduced myself as 'Chaplain Jim,' which meant the first time I had clergy title, which was quite powerful. It was my first true test of ministry. Pastoral care is, in my view, pure ministry. That's when I learned that this work is truly for me. I believe CPE taught me that I have a pastor's heart.

Meg and I went to a party put on by UCC Norwell around five years ago. We'd both been out of UCC Norwell for around five years. We kind of worked the room. I was a pastor at the time. A couple of church ladies jumped up and embraced me. The ladies said, "Jim, you're a pastor and married to Meg. So much has changed for you. Tell us about it." My response surprised me. I said, "I never knew what happy was. Now I do." It is true, as a youth, as a young man, as a businessman I was never truly happy.

Now I am married to the right woman and I'm doing what I love to do. I now know what happy is.

Don't get me wrong. I am flawed and a sinner. I still have a long way to go to become the person that God wants me to be. I still strive to get right with the Scout Law. I try to be the best husband and pastor that I am capable of being. I believe that following my bliss has brought me here to Union Church. This is my second church as pastor. I can't tell how grateful I am to be the pastor of this particular church. Thank you for welcoming Meg and me into your hearts. I thank you and God.

AMEN