

First Presbyterian Church  
“The Marks of the Church: Telling”  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
May 15, 2022

Acts 6:8-15; Acts 7:1-8

“Who are you?” I suppose there were lots of ways I could have answered. I could have said I'm John, or I'm John Judson, or I'm the Reverend Doctor John Judson, or I'm Roger and Carolyn's son, or I'm David, Richard, and Paul's brother. Or I am the great, great, great grandson of the man who broke the law in England and brought the plans for the first throstle to the new world. If you don't know what a throstle is, just Google it. There are many ways I could have answered him, but because the question is often contextual, my answer was I'm Principal Judson's husband. One of the things some of you may or may not know about Cindy, is that when she was a Principal on the south side of San Antonio, she was tasked with opening a brand-new school. Meaning she oversaw new construction, ordered supplies, and hired new teachers. The weekend prior to school opening and the students arriving, there were no cafeteria tables at all. They finally arrived on the Saturday before by truck. And so, Cindy and I and our kids and some of the faculty offloaded the cafeteria tables and put them together. So, when the guy asked me, “Who are you?” I knew the best answer was I'm Principal Judson's husband.

So, who are we? If we think about it, that question has far more answers than we might expect. Some of us are husbands; some of us are wives; some of us are daughters; some of us are sons; some of us are cousins; some of us are aunts and uncles; some of us are people who work in the auto industry; some of us are retired; some of us are from Germany. There are, in other words, an almost unlimited number of ways in which we might answer the question, “Who are you?” But the one thing about all these identities is that we are shaped by the relationships to which those identities are linked; and they are especially shaped by our families. I say this because our families teach us who we are supposed to be. They teach us how to interact with other people. They teach us what we're supposed to believe. They teach us how we understand and engage in relationships. Our families shape who we are and how we understand ourselves. And it is that idea of being shaped by family that is at the heart of Stephen's defense of Jesus. Let me explain.

If we return to our story, we see that there were some members of the Jewish community in Jerusalem who did not believe that Jesus or his followers were really part of God's family; that somehow Jesus and his followers were outliers who had left Judaism behind. This was the accusation against Stephen which opened him to persecution. The question was then, how would Stephen defend himself? How could he convince people that Jesus was part of God's family? The answer was to tell a story. Well, not just a story, but **THE** story. Stephen tells the story of Abraham and then of Moses. He begins by telling the story of how Abraham was living in Mesopotamia where God came to him and said, get up and go first to Haran and then to the promised land. This led to God's declaration that through Abraham, God would bless all the nations of the world. Stephen continues with the story of Moses; how God came to Moses and told him to lead the people out of captivity, into the wilderness, receive the Law and prepare them for entry into the Land of Promise. The climax of this telling of the family story is, essentially, that Jesus is the next chapter of **THE** story. Jesus is the next chapter of **THE** story because what **THE** story is about is God's desire to recreate humanity, to create a humanity in

which all human beings are seen as having worth and value; of creating the kind of world we would all love to be a part of; a world of love, peace, joy. Thus, Jesus and those who follow him are not outsiders, but family; shaped and formed by the same family story.

This understanding that the followers of Jesus are part of this ancient story is one of the reasons that we preach out of the entire Bible. Over the forty or so years of my ministry, people have come to me and asked, why do we bother with the Old Testament? My answer is that we bother with it because it is our story. It is part of our family story and we cannot understand who we are unless we know the whole story. And this is the reason that the confirmands, those who are coming in a few minutes to confirm their faith, to publicly affirm their faith, used a curriculum called God's Story, Our Stories, which covers the entirety of the scriptures. And in exploring that story, the confirmands had the opportunity to reflect on their own stories. To reflect on where their stories intersect with God's story and are being shaped by God's story. Again, not just the stories in the New Testament, but the whole breadth of the scriptures. And I have to say, that in reading the statements of faith of the confirmands, you will see how these young adults are wrestling with and discovering what their faith looks like as it is being shaped by our common family story. And I admire these statements of faith because I don't think at their age, I could have written anything as powerful as what they have done.

Before we finish, I want to say that there is one more story that has shaped these young adults, and that is the story of this congregation. I say this because many of our confirmands mentioned the importance of this church; its community, mission, preaching, and teaching as instrumental in shaping their faith. And so, I want to take a moment and reflect on why this church is the kind of church that it is; why our church family is the kind of family it is that is shaping these young adults. I will do so by telling the story of Elijah Fish and how he helped shape our family D.N.A. First Presbyterian church was founded in 1834. Their first meeting place was Elijah Fish's barn. That may not sound like a big deal, but it was. It was a big deal because Elijah Fish was an abolitionist; meaning he worked for the abolition of slavery long before it was a popular cause. He invited abolitionist speakers to come and address the people of Birmingham and the surrounding communities. But Fish did not stop there. He participated in the Underground Railroad helping escaped slaves find safety either in Canada or in the Birmingham area. His barn, our first meeting place, was probably where he hid many of these formerly enslaved people. At least two of those formerly enslaved people, the Taylors became members of our congregation. What this says is that our family is one that from the very beginning embraced the full humanity of all persons. What this means is that our confirmands have been shaped not just by their families, and by the Biblical story, but by the story of Everybody's Church; a story of a community in which all persons are loved and accepted and embraced by God in Jesus Christ.

The challenge for this morning for our confirmands and for the rest of us, is to continue wrestling with the question of "Who am I?" To continue wrestling with our faith as it is shaped by our families, the scriptures, and this community. It is to refuse to allow our faith to become dormant and cease growing. It is to refuse to allow what we believe to become stagnant rather than vibrant. To put it succinctly, my challenge to all of us is to ask ourselves, how is my faith still growing and changing that I might be more faithful tomorrow than today to Jesus Christ and to the God who sent him into the world?