

Tuesday, April 24
11:30 Plenary
Kathryn Johnson

It is fitting that we will spend a good portion of this first day of the Third Global Gathering in “telling and listening to the stories of our Journeys with Jesus Christ.”

This practice is one of the distinctive marks of a Global Christian Forum event; some call it a “charism” of the Forum. It has such a prominent and memorable place because it invites each of us to make part of our own experience here a central goal of the Forum: “to recognize one another in Christ and Christ in one another.”

As we saw earlier this morning in the video, the aim and the hope of the Forum is not only to “bring to the same table” but also to bring “into the same conversation” people from the widest possible range of Christian families and Christian formations. But how do these conversations begin in ways that make a place for every voice? What could we talk about together?

Not first of all our differences in doctrine: that is clear. Some of us – like me – respect and participate in serious theological dialogues. I thank God for the steps they have taken toward re-examining divisions in our teaching and allowing us to take important steps forward. But theological dialogue is not for every person, and not for every problem. And it is not the most reliable way to build relationships with those whose traditions are in some ways unknown to us, or even puzzling.

It is part of the “lore” of the GCF, part of its family narrative, that it did not set out with the intention to make faith stories central but rather discovered in practice how helpful they could be. The first reason for this is simple, and true in this Hall today

as it has been at every Forum gathering. Every Christian has her relationship, each Christian has his relationship, with Jesus Christ; every Christian life is a journey with Jesus. Telling that story is a way of introducing ourselves to each other, Christian to Christian.

But if the story-telling began, at least in part, as a response to a concrete challenge, it soon became clear that the practice offers more substantive gifts. It opens our eyes anew to the presence of Christ, and it invites us to listen for the breath of the Spirit – in the lives of those around the circle with us and then in the communities from which they come.

1. Let us focus first on telling our stories.

For some of us in this room, giving a testimony, telling our story, is a familiar practice in our communities. For others -- and I am included in this group – it is not our custom, and it is not entirely comfortable. It is one of the little jokes, an irony of the Forum experience that I then am the one asked to talk about this practice. I have learned through obedience to this expectation what treasures it can offer. It is a gift to be asked to put our experience into words – even as we have to search for the words, for the patterns and the images, with which to tell it.

For those who do this often, the invitation is to be open to new words, new selections and perspectives, to fit this distinctive occasion. For as we change over our lives in our relation to Jesus, we change also in our relationship to ourselves – in our perspectives on our pasts, and how what has been will come with us into our journey's next steps.

Our prayer for each of you today is that you come to some new understanding of your own relationship with Jesus—as you put it into words for others.

2. But stories are both told and heard, and the hearing part is equally important.

To listen to a faith story is an opportunity to hear from the heart of the life of another disciple – to have a moment of access to what it feels like, from the inside, to live in Christ, to live with Christ, in ways that are not the ones we know most intimately. We are offered a measure of hospitality in the inner home which Christ has made in another person. We can see the shape of that individual life – but also how it has been shaped by the relationships with others – particularly with the Christian tradition – from which that person comes.

In gatherings as diverse as this, we almost always discover that something we just “knew” about “those people” is simply not borne out in the stories we are hearing. We are invited at this Gathering to listen as if we do not already know, to listen generously with open minds, hearts and spirits, to listen for the surprising work of the Spirit of God. In the holy moments as stories are spoken into the space between and among us, as the Spirit of God is at work. And that Spirit is the Spirit of unity, unity Christ desires for those who follow him.

There was a wonderful anecdote in this morning’s video which helps us think about what can come of listening. Anne-Cathy Grabar related a memorable conversation between two Middle Eastern Christians at the Second Global Gathering. One was a charismatic pastor, in whose experience life with Christ was expected to have a clear “before” and “after”. The other was an Orthodox priest who was asked how long he had been a Christian. And the answer was 2000

years. As Anne-Cathy said, it was difficult for each person to understand the other's perspective – and yet here at the Forum they were “in a position” to do just that.

But of course such mutual understanding does not happen of itself, just from putting two perspectives side by side. These two Christians were indeed “in a position” to understand each other. But their moving toward actually doing that depends not only on each speaking from a perspective unfamiliar to the other but on each listening for the faithfulness which each perspective expressed, listening for the Christ's presence where it was not expected to be.

Now I will close with another anecdote, from conversations seeking to harvest the wisdom from the Forum's experience with faith stories. A testimony was given to the importance of testimonies by someone for whom this was a cherished part of worship. An Orthodox priest offered a challenge: in his tradition they rather told stories of holy people, in order to provide an example to others and, even more, to bear witness to Christ. The Pentecostal retort was swift; “What do you think our testimonies are for?” And then there was a remarkable silence of mutual re-assessment. On the one side, honoring of the memories of saints could be recognized as a form of testimony to God's transformation of a particular life, and in the other the testimony of the living could be honored as a thanksgiving to Christ. Stories reverently offered and prayerfully heard can be provide bridges over which we can move to a new place, where the paths of our journeys with Jesus are not so far apart. For it is in our relation and through our relationship with Christ that we move into closer relation with one another.

Now we will hear four short sample of faith stories. They are from old churches and new, from women and men, from those experienced with Forum events and those here for the first time.