

## **I Told Myself**

Rev. John Allen

Charles Wright was born in Pickwick Dam, Tennessee. From there he went off to Davidson College, my beloved alma mater, then off to the army where he began to write poetry.

After publishing nine books of original poetry, one of which received the Pulitzer Prize, he would be named Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and for good measure the 20th Poet Laureate of the United States.

So you can imagine my surprise when I heard him say one day on the radio “I do not really think of myself as a poet. It’s kind of a sacred trade, I don’t think I have passed all the barriers yet to call myself that.”

A friend of mine has a four-year-old nephew who I am going to call Matthew.

Matthew has leukemia and spends a lot of his time in the hospital.

And when he is not undergoing treatment, or sleeping, Matthew is painting and drawing and sculpting with clay. There isn’t a medium that he has not taken to with enthusiasm.

And so the walls of Matthew’s hospital room are covered with his creations. With watercolors and scribbles with crayons, with coloring book pages colored outside the lines, and blank sheets filled with the images and hues of his imagination.

On the table next to the bed, and the windowsill are his works in clay. It gave the room this sort of magical feel, despite everything else.

My friend told me once about visiting Matthew and she commented on all the wonderful and beautiful creations that adorned his room. She mentioned how much she liked them.

“Well.” Matthew said. “I *am* an artist.”

And for good measure he said it one more time, “I am an artist, and do you know how I know?” he asked.

“How?” She asked.

“Well.” Matthew said, “I guess I just I told myself.”

Perhaps it could just be that simple. I am an artist. I told myself. And now I am telling you. From the mouth of a little boy who knows better than many of us just how scary the world can be, how out of control life can feel. I told myself, and now I am telling you.

Ruth just read us a bit of a letter exchanged between early churches as the first followers of Jesus were trying to figure out exactly what the contours and shapes of this new faith would be.

These are church people, talking to each other, admonishing and encouraging each other. And here is one thing they had to say.

“Always be ready to give reasons for the hope that is in you.”

For this new and fledgling church, it was very important that people were ready to tell their story of what they had discovered in Jesus. How their lives had been changed. Give a reason—an account—of the hope that now lived in their heart.

“Always be ready to give reasons for the hope that is in you”

In church we call that testimony.

In my very first church, and a new pastor in my early 20s, I decided to offer a class on the Christian practice of testimony. And I was really excited about it.

My idea was that we would practice writing and sharing testimony with one another. Telling each other the stories of how our lives had been shifted, shaped, and remade by our faith.

Several church members pulled me aside kindly to inquire about this class which I had named: “Testify!” in a cool font, with a big exclamation point.

They listened kindly as I described what I was imagining, and then politely suggested changing the name of the class. How about “telling our stories” or “sharing our faith” anything but: “Testify!”

I also noticed that folks started avoiding me at coffee hour when they saw me with my clipboard and sign-up sheet because they did not want to get roped into this ‘testimony’ business.

Its a tricky word.

I think that when we imagine religious testimony, we imagine something manipulative. Maybe even something a little bombastic. Often we associate testimony with someone’s attempt to convert people; to change “non-believers” into Christians.

I was hoping for something more like the testimony described in today’s reading. Giving an account of what was in us, our experiences, our hope, our faith.

That is the kind of testimony I love. And, for those who braved the class, that is exactly what we got.

Some people told hard stories about difficult childhoods and the scars that linger even still.

Some people shared the joy that they felt when they first found a home at church.

Some people told us about experiences with God that took our breath away.

And at the end we realized that speaking candidly and honestly about our faith with one another was not coercive at all, no one felt pressured to shift their perspective, but all of us felt like we had broadened our field of view, and widened our experience of God.

I want to close by offering you my testimony, which is also something of a confession.

I walked around that coffee hour with my clipboard signing people up for my class on testimony, but I know if I had been on the other side of that clipboard, I would have been running and hiding too. I deeply understood why people were afraid of the idea of speaking plainly and openly about their faith in a room of people they did not know.

I get it. Because, it is hard for me too.

You might think that because of what I am wearing, and where I am standing, that it would be the easiest thing in the world for me to call myself a Christian. You might think it would be the easiest thing in the world for me to readily share the joy I find in this faith with others. But it is not.

Truthfully though, most places in my life I struggle to utter that simple phrase because I am afraid of how it will be heard. I am afraid of what assumptions people would make about me. I am afraid that people will mistrust my motivations for being kind to them.

I notice that when I say I am a minister. Or when I say I am a Christian. The next word out of my mouth is usually “but...”

I am a Christian, but	my church celebrates the love and marriages of all couples.
I am a Christian, but	I do not assume that people of other religions need to be converted.
I am a Christian, but	I am comfortable with questions and doubts.
I am a Christian, but	we can still be friends, I can talk about other things...

And every time I do this, it makes me sad.

Because I realize that I am missing the chance to proclaim the reasons for my faith, filling that space instead with my apologies and caveats...

Take it from me, you could really overthink this. You could think that you have to have a good answer to every possible question before you step out and claim this faith. The problem is that if you wait until you have chased every question and doubt away, if you have to offer up every caveat and qualification that is rattling around in your mind, you might wake up one day as the poet laureate of the United States, and not be able to call yourself a poet.

I want to say. "I am a Christian, because..."

I am a Christian because:	In the life of Jesus I see the way I strive to live.
I am a Christian because:	I have witnessed God's spirit work in people's hearts
I am a Christian because	I will never stop needing forgiveness.

I'm a Christian because, deep down something about that word names me.

So I told myself. And now I'm telling you.