

Sharing your story... as a spiritual discipline.

In the New Testament gospels, Jesus tells us that one of our primary witnesses to the truth of God is our ability to **love each other** and **live together in a healthy way**. In the eyes of the watching world, it is our ability to be a genuine and loving community that provides testimony to the truth of the gospel. In our current society, much of what we see around us is the *inability* to live in healthy community with others... and sadly, the Christian church has been strongly criticized, because some others have seen us as a hostile or un-loving place where real community is not possible. Some of this criticism is unfair for sure, but some of it is a true critique of the ways that Christians have historically failed to love others with the heart of God.

In this season at Emmanuel, one of our goals is to learn how to live together as a beautiful community that exemplifies the grace and love of Jesus. We already *know* that we are diverse in this church body: we come from different social, ethnic, generational, and political backgrounds. (Just like the early church did.) As individuals, we don't always agree on every topic. But this is the power of the gospel of Jesus – that people who were formerly “strangers” and “aliens” to each other now come together as part of a new family, based solely on God's promise and God's power to redeem this Earth, to make all things well.

One of our commitments in the year 2018 is that we will focus on learning how to listen to one another and welcome one another as the children of God, as a new kind of family. We do this because God's gospel demands it from us (if we are God's people). In our Sunday services, we will begin this process by taking time to hear the life stories of each member of our community.

You are invited to share your story as a member of the Emmanuel family.

There will be two primary ways that we share our stories with one another this year: some of us will participate in a short life story interview on Sunday mornings, and some of us will submit a written life story that will be published to the whole community. This is a spiritual discipline; a way of practicing the “shared life” that Jesus calls us to. It is only in the telling and hearing of our stories that we begin to form genuine community. But it's called a “discipline” for a reason – it takes practice, and it takes work to become the kind of people who can share and listen authentically.

Every member of this community should be prepared to share their life story with the church family (either in verbal or written form). As you prepare, please keep these principles in mind:

* When you share your story, the goal is not to create a false image of yourself. We share both our victories and our failings, our genuine goodness and our failure to see things rightly. No human being is God, and so we don't pretend to be perfect, to be God. Human beings are mortal and fragile creatures, each one of us in our own way. We don't need to pretend to be perfect or victorious in all things – that would be false. Often it is our weakness and our fragility that opens the door to real communion with one another.

* Part of the discipline of telling your story is learning how to see yourself in a whole, realistic way. We naturally tend to exaggerate certain elements of our lives in one direction or another... some of us talk about ourselves as *better* than we really are, and some of us talk about ourselves as *worse* than we really are. Some of us tend to share only “happy thoughts,” and some of us tend to focus on the ways we've been victimized or wounded or treated unfairly. For one reason or another, we tell our story from a particular angle (often we don't even fully understand our own motivations for doing that!). When preparing to share yourself with the community, part of the challenge is to prayerfully construct your story in a transparent, humble, and honest way. This means asking God to show us the truth about the journey we've been on, where we have struggled or failed, where we have been good and beautiful, and above all... what is the plotline, the path forward that God has been gently leading us toward. God's Spirit *has* been with you, and *is now* guiding you into new territory, even today. Do you have eyes to see the Spirit's leading?

* When you share your life story, it's not enough to just focus on the "demographics" of your life. Many of us can ramble-on about our various academic degrees, career moves, or achievements in the common social sense. These are important details, but they are not the *only* important details. What we are looking for is a balance: tell us about the things you have achieved and strived for, tell us the "facts," but also tell us about the *heart* that is behind it all. Tell us about the fears and hopes that have inspired your journey. Let us know the real you, not just the résumé version.

* When you are presenting your life story to a large group, it's *not possible* to include every detail. It's not even a good thing to do so... it's sometimes a sign of distraction and inability to "find the main plotline." This is an exercise in discerning the main point, not the random details. There is simply no way that you can present every facet of your life to others, and that's just fine. Think about the big themes, the most important details that help to tell the story in a purposeful way.

* If you are preparing to share your story with the group verbally, write it out and then *pare it down*. Your goal is 10 minutes total time. (Or roughly two typed pages.)

* Just as it is a discipline to learn how to *tell* our stories well, it is also a discipline to learn how to *hear* the story of another person well. When listening to the life of another member of your church family (whether on a Sunday morning or in written form), try to commit to giving them your whole attention, and listening deeply for the heart behind it. You can honor another person's story by asking them thoughtful follow-up questions, or expressing the ways that you appreciate something that was shared. And of course, it is absolutely essential that we form a foundation of trust with one another by personally committing to never use the details of another person's story against them. Talk *to* one another, not *about* one another. Build one another up.

The Basic Outline of Your Story:

This can be presented verbally on a Sunday (**10 minute interview with the pastor**) or in a written form (**2 pages**)...

- 1) *Tell us where you came from. Your origins, your family, your childhood, your work life.*
- 2) *Where has life taken you? (Unexpectedly, or planned.) You can include your faith journey here.*
- 3) *What was your experience of God and your faith community throughout the journey?*
- 4) *What have you struggled with (in life, or in faith)? You may choose to reveal specific struggles here, or you can describe your life struggles in more general ways.*
- 5) *Where are you feeling called **forward** in this next phase of life (in faith, or other areas)?*
- 6) *What do you sense as your main calling in life, or your purpose that has been revealed over time?*
- 7) *What brings you to church in general, and to Emmanuel? What do you seek here?*
- 8) *Is there a strange fact about you that we should know? (feel free to be weird or humorous!)*

**** Photos are often a helpful way to visualize our stories. If possible, please email about 5 photos from your life to Pastor Bob, and we'll put them on the screen as you speak. If you are submitting a written story, you can include photos within that document as well.**

Each of us will share these details in our community! It is your choice, verbal or written.

Please contact bob@emmanuelphinneyridge.org if you have any questions, want to sign up, or need help.