



Joyful Conversations

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Maybe you've heard this one: an Episcopalian, a Lutheran, a Presbyterian, and a Muslim sat down together in a room, their knees almost touching as they huddled together. They were asked three questions: How have you experienced forgiveness? Would you share a time you felt closest to God? What is it about your faith that gives you strength and solace in times of trouble? Each thoughtfully responded and realized they had much in common and that God was a real presence in their lives.

As far as jokes go, it leaves us a little flat. As an interfaith conversation, however, it was rich. I was the Presbyterian in this ice-breaker for the regular Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee cabinet meeting.

Each of us spoke about a time personal to us – a story of intractable anger, a funeral, a classroom teacher, and a recognition of struggles. The goal was not to change the other person or persuade them of the rightness of our faith tradition. We didn't quote from holy texts. Instead we honored God through the sharing of a personal faith story.

And it was fun! I liked hearing from the others about what God has been doing in their lives. I appreciated the humility they showed in not professing to have all the answers and acknowledging that God is a mystery, only revealed in parts.

In my former church, we started a monthly Words of Witness segment in worship. A person was invited the month before to consider what they might want to share about their faith journey. We weren't looking for a recitation of baptism and confirmation dates or terms of service as an elder or deacon or a list of congregations of membership. We hoped for something much simpler, but more powerful – the answers to questions like how have you experienced forgiveness? Would you share a time you felt closest to God? What is it about your faith that gives you strength and solace in times of trouble? The stories were told in everyday words and from the heart. The stories brought life to our congregation.

The Good News isn't simply a story written in the New Testament and lived centuries ago. The Good News is being lived out by each of us on our journey as Christians. It wants to be proclaimed! It wants to be shared in joyful conversations with those sitting next to us in the pew, with our family, and with the stranger at the bus stop. You need not have a soap box and bull horn; you only need to draw deeply on why being a Christian makes a difference in your life. If you don't have an answer on the tip of your tongue or if you've not thought about it in a while, I encourage you to spend some time remembering. Then start a joyful conversation. Someone is waiting to hear your story and share in your hope.