



Sharing our Stories

Transcript

If you would prefer to read rather than watch the video, or want to reference certain parts as a leader or participant, this text version of the resources is available:

Episode I: The Scripts We're Given

Robert: I'm Father Robert Hendrickson, the chief of discipleship initiatives at Forward Movement and the director of the center for Discipleship and Renewal. Cedar at Forward Movement.

Welcome to the Telling Our Stories course with Father Andrew and Kristen Tovar.

Andrew and Kristin developed this resource with Cedar, and we are delighted to share it with you.

Andrew: My name is Fr. Andrew Stravitz. I am a priest and a marriage and family therapist, which means I am constantly hearing people's stories. And I've had to spend a lot of time learning how to tell a story, how to understand a story, and especially how to understand my own story. I grew up in a home with a dad who was a secular Jew from New York, and my mom was a Mennonite farm girl from South Dakota, which has left me mostly confused. And so I've had to figure out who I am.

At home we grew up loosely Jewish and outside of the home we were a part of an evangelical church. This left me really confused, because in the Jewish tradition, you belong to the faith at birth, in the Evangelical tradition there's more focus on how you become a Christian over time, once you learn the right things and adopt the right beliefs. And so both of these things are good, and both of them shaped me. But it led to a lot of confusion, especially when I was 16, giving a sincere public testimony for the first time at my baptism, saying that I never understood God before, and having this twinge of dissonance and confusion within myself because I remembered praying to God since I was a very young child.

So many of us have similar experiences that we don't know how to fit into the scripts that we have on hand for understanding our faith story. Most of us, when it comes to our faith story, we get handed a script and there are basically two scripts on offer in American Christianity. One is the conversion or evangelical script. There's a before and then after, there's a moment, a crisis, a night or an aisle that you walked down, a prayer that you prayed. You can name that date, probably. You could probably tell this testimony in three minutes at a dinner party, but the script tells you what you have to believe in order to follow Jesus.

Script two is the liturgical, or maybe it's a mainline script. Usually your parents brought you up in this tradition. They handed you a way to pray away, to sit away, to kneel away, to stand away, to sing. You learned the motions and you belonged because you were always belonging there.

But perhaps you didn't really understand what you were participating in. This script tells you what you have to do in order to follow Jesus now, and this is important. Both scripts have shaped real people. They've shaped saints. They've shaped my own life in different seasons. I'm not here to throw shade on either one, but the pastoral problem is also a cultural problem. Most people's actual lives don't fit either script cleanly. And when your life doesn't fit the script. What do you do? You go quiet. There are million scripts. Even besides the religious scripts. We see this all the time. People who clearly, evidently love God in the way that they live. People who clearly, evidently love others in the way that they treat one another. They treat their kids well. They are generous. They are looking to be kind wherever they go. But they think their story doesn't count because it doesn't fit either of the scripts. Sometimes it was too dramatic of a story, maybe it wasn't dramatic enough, and it doesn't really fit into the conversions script that looks for these moments of clarity and conviction. We see this in the conversion script, which may not resonate with those of us whose faith developed over a period of time, really early in our childhood, rather than all in one particular moment. It can also unintentionally exclude children who do not seem to have those moments of crisis, those types of stories to share. The liturgical script might unintentionally leave out the ways that the Spirit does move in conviction in these piercing moments of clarity and conviction for others, there's a long stretch in the middle where they weren't sure of anything, and others have been handed a script that has actually harmed them, and the Gen Z and millennial version of this might not even be religious. You might have been handed the script of being a productive person, being the best ally, being a self-made person, healing your trauma the right way. And as a therapist, I really love that. But it also is its own script that a lot of folks don't feel like they fit into.

And when actual life doesn't fit and doesn't make sense, and you go quiet about the parts that don't fit.

I think the gospel has something to say to all of that. But before it can, we have to get out from under the scripts. We have to make a move that can make sense and make space for all stories.

And I think what that move is friendship.

What if telling your story isn't thinking the right things, like the conversions script wants? And what if it's not about doing the right things, like the liturgical script might say, but what if it's instead discovering the friendship of God that has actually been happening in your life?

Most of us walk around with a really vague sense of our own life. We've got a few highlights, a few wounds, a few jokes we like to tell in order to make the wounds less stinging. But we don't really know our own story until we sit down and try to tell it honestly. And then, this is the wild part, we start to see things we didn't see before, patterns. We start to see people who carried something to us that we didn't have words for at the time, moments that we wrote off as coincidence, but in

retrospect, were the only times that we were really meeting God through friendship. I want to call this the long handwriting of your actual story.

Your life is a story. Your life is being written, and most of it we can't read in real time. We have to read it looking backwards, and that's when we tell our story slowly, honestly, without forcing it into a script. And it's one of the main ways that we begin to learn who we really are. Paul writes this beautiful thing to the church in Corinth. He says, "you yourself are our letter written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God. Not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts." You're a letter. Your life is a letter. Your life is the story of friendship with God, the Spirit of God. Whatever you might make of that word, that phrase right now has been writing on you since before you knew how to read through the people who loved you, through your love for others in need, through the questions you couldn't really put down, through the moments of unaccountable grace where something held, even though you can't explain why.

The world is already reading you, the only question is whether you have the words for what's written there. Now, I have to use a word that probably makes some of you flinch, and I'm going to ask you to stay with me with this. The word is evangelism. For a lot of people, evangelism sounds like coercion or condescension. It sounds like someone's trying to corner you. It sounds like someone with a script trying to get you to recite their slogans. I want to propose a different definition. The original definition of evangelism literally just means announcing good news. And the most honest way to announce good news is to tell the truth about the great things that have happened, to be excited about the beauty and justice and transcendence that God is accomplishing in your actual story. When you tell your story honestly in relationship to the story of Jesus, not pasted into it, not forced into it, but in relationship to it, something beautiful happens. The person across from you stops feeling pitched at because you're not selling anything. They start feeling that because you're sharing life, not twisting it because they have a story too, and they've been hiding parts and blind to parts of it, just like we have. And maybe, just maybe, your willingness to tell your story of friendship with God will give them permission to find the words for their own stories.

Here's the claim I want to land on. The Gospel isn't a script you paste over your own story, and it certainly doesn't want you to redact or edit your story to fit into it. It's the claim that you are known, not just observed, not just tolerated, but known by name, by a God who isn't trying to recruit you or grade you.

It's the claim that the long handwriting of your life isn't random. It's the claim that the people who carried something to you were carrying something they didn't fully understand. Maybe. And that's okay, because the thing they were carrying is older and bigger than all of us. And if that's true, and I think it is, then telling your story isn't selling something or persuading someone. It's bearing witness. You are a letter. You are worth reading. The good news is the writer is a great author, and your story is a classic.

Robert: I wonder which story in scripture you know the best. Which one's your favorite? Which one resonates with you? Says something to you as a believer? From the very first days of the church. From the first hours where people were meeting Jesus and being transformed. One story after another has been the life of the church changed, lives changed by encountering Jesus Christ.

I'm so delighted and thankful that Andrew and Kristen have taken us on this journey, and I hope that you're getting a fresh chance to look at your story again, and that you understand how your story intersects with the story of Christ. The story of the church, and most importantly, the story of God's love.

Episode II: Friendship with God

Andrew: Last time we talked about growing beyond the script you were handed and telling instead the story of friendship with God. Friendship with God allows us to tell the truth about our lives. The slowness, the strangeness, the gaps, all the loose ends that often don't fit into the scripts. Friendship with God means that God is not a judge, not a coach, not a cosmic vending machine, but a friend.

Friend in our culture can mean almost nothing. It can mean someone who's an acquaintance. It can mean someone that you follow on Instagram. But in the world Jesus is speaking to Friend of God was a title. It was reserved for Abraham, and it was reserved for Moses. The Book of Exodus says that Moses spoke with God face to face as someone speaks to his friend. It was the highest possible category of relationship a human could have with the divine. This isn't a casual sense of the word. Not like an acquaintance or even a good buddy, but a friendship of intimacy and authenticity and loyalty. And then in the Gospel of John, Jesus says something astonishing to his disciples, his students, his followers, that I don't think we here right anymore because the word has kind of lost its gravity. He says, "I no longer call you servants, for I have called you friends," And Jesus extends this to his ragtag group of disciples, to a tax collector, and to a political revolutionary, to blue collar fishermen and to well-read nerds, to introverts that we really don't know much about, and to extroverts who grabbed all the headlines. Jesus extended the friendship of God to people who had, until that point in their lives, had never considered that God loves them as much as the patriarchs of the faith. That's the gospel claim. Not that you can work your way into the inner circle, not if you believe the right things or pray the right way. Your story finally fits, but that the inner circle has broken wide open to the world, and you're already invited. You're already in. Jesus calls this friendship.

Now biblical friendship isn't sentimental. It's much thicker than that. And it does these three things that we talked about before. And you can watch Jesus do all three in basically every encounter in the Gospels.

This isn't a script. It's more like improv, the improv of love.

Friendship confronts, friendship comforts, and friendship calls.

Friendship confronts. Because a real friend loves you too much to leave you stuck in arrogance or pride or prejudice.

Friendship comforts. It comes near to you and your pain and your distress. Not to a cleaned up version of yourself that you wish you could present and friendship calls. It invites you into a wider life than the one you were settling for, often a wider life that includes people you'd rather not have to love, confrontation, comfort, and calling.

These are the three things to watch out for in these Gospel passages, because once you see them, you start to see how Jesus is working in the Gospels. And just as important, you see how Jesus has been working in your own life.

Let me show you what I mean. Three quick stories. Here's the first one. Jesus picks 12 people to be his closest circle, and among them, there's a guy named Matthew who's a tax collector, which in that time meant a Judean collaborator with the Roman occupation. And Matthew would have been extorting his neighbors and his family and his friends. And another guy in that group was Simon, who's called the Zealot, which meant at that point an anti-Roman, violent revolutionary. These two men in any other context would want each other dead.

They're on opposite sides of the most polarizing political conflict of their time. It's said that Jesus at one point sent his followers out in twos to care for people. Can you imagine if he sent these two together, walking together, working together, maybe even camping out or rooming together along the way? You'd have to imagine that they slept with one eye open. Jesus confronted them both, and he doesn't make them sign a statement. He doesn't say to Matthew, "You have to denounce the Romans," or to Simon, "You have to lay down your politics." He calls them into shared proximity, shared life together around the same table, the same bread, the same mission. Go heal and cure and declare the goodness of God.

Now, does that sound familiar to our day and age? Because we're living in a moment when every group in America, especially in American Christianity, is being told to choose a side, fly a flag, sign a statement, and here, Jesus is doing this stunning thing. He's forming a community where the first loyalty is to a friendship that crosses the most coercive politics. He doesn't make them apolitical. Matthew and Simon were both deeply political people. He just refuses to let those politics be their deepest loyalty.

Here's the second story. Two people that the world had thrown away. One is a man called the Gerasene demoniac. He lives in a graveyard. He's violent, violent toward others, even violent towards himself. The community has tied him up, chained him up, and even that failed. He's the kind of person that every culture has, the one we cross the street to avoid, the one we call security on, the one whose pain has gotten so bad that nobody feels that it could be helped. Jesus crosses the stormy sea to reach him. That's the detail I want you to notice. It was that trip across the water in Mark 4, that famous passage where Jesus calms the ocean. Jesus is going somewhere in that story, and he's going to this guy. The whole detour is for this one person that nobody else wants to deal with.

The other is a Samaritan woman. In John chapter 4 she's the wrong ethnicity for a Judean to be talking to. She's the wrong gender for a male to be talking to. She has the wrong relationship history for a respectable rabbi to be talking to. Jesus goes to her anyway. And get this, it's the longest conversation recorded between someone and Jesus in all the gospels. And this is the part that the script can't handle. He doesn't make either of them pray a prayer or recite a creed. He doesn't make her move to the right mountain or make him perform ritual cleanings. He doesn't make her clean up her life or make him clean up his act. He receives her protest and confirms her worship, and sends her back to her own community as a witness. He passes straight through the social shame and fear for the demoniac to release him from his demons, and then asks for nothing in return. Notice what's happening. He comforts each as they need, and they turn that comfort into their calling to go and declare this loving and liberating friend to their hometowns.

Here's the third story, and it's the hardest one. The night before Jesus dies, two of his closest friends fail him. Peter, his right-hand man, denies he even knows Jesus three times to save his own skin. And Judas, another of the 12, sells Jesus out and hands him over to be arrested. Now, the scripts know exactly what to do with these two men.

The liturgical script says that Peter became the first pope and Judas got what was coming to him. Both scripts give you a clean villain and a clean hero, but the Gospels don't actually do that. The Gospels say that Jesus washed both of their feet on the same night, knowing what they were about to do.

He didn't shame Peter into courage. He didn't physically stop Judas from leaving the room. He maintained their dignity. He left the door open for Peter to come back, which Peter eventually did, and he let Judas walk out, which Judas did. And when Judas finally came back to betray Jesus with a kiss, Jesus said, "Friend, do what you're here to do." That's not a soft Jesus. That's a fierce, non-coercive love that refuses to override anyone's agency, anyone's story, even when overriding it would've saved his own life. That is what friendship with God looks like at the bottom.

It doesn't manipulate you, it doesn't shame you into compliance. It holds the door open and lets you choose, and it says that you're always invited. And if you come back, the welcome is real. And if you don't, the love of God is still real. So what does that mean for us? If you've felt like you're on the wrong political side to be welcomed into a faith community, Matthew and Simon ate at the same table. So can you. If you've felt like your life is too messy or too far gone for any of this to be for you, Jesus crossed the sea for one and crossed into a graveyard for the other, and he comforted both and sent them out without demanding anything from them. And if you've failed badly, I mean really badly, the kind of failure you can't quite say out loud, Jesus washed Peter's feet even though Peter denied him hours later, and the friendship was still there in the morning. Friendship with God does not require you to clean up first. God is a friend who comes near, tells the truth, and calls you outward into a wider life than the one you were settling for.

Here's what I want to leave you with:

Friendship with God is not a doctrine you have to defend. It's not a club you have to join. It's not a pitch you have to sling. It's a relationship you may already be inside of. You are, in fact, already inside of it, whether you have words for it or not. And if you want to know whether you're inside it, don't only look for the dramatic moment or the best practices.

Look for these three motions: confrontation, comfort, and calling. When has something confronted you, and you knew somehow that the confrontation was love and was right? When in your life has something comforted you that you can't quite account for? How are you being called toward a person or a vocation or a reconciliation you'd rather avoid?

The Gospel is a story of friendship that transcends guilt and shame and meaninglessness. That's the long handwriting of the Spirit of God in each of our lives. So tell your story, tell it honestly, and trust that God, who is the friend of all people, is waiting for you and is coming to you and is calling you.

Trust the words of Job who said "Behold Him, who is my friend, and not a stranger."

Episode III: You Are the Letters of God

Robert: I'm Father Robert Hendrickson, the chief of discipleship initiatives at Forward Movement and the director of the center for Discipleship and Renewal. Cedar at Forward Movement. One of the most powerful things a person can say is "Let me tell you what God has done in my life." Not because every story is dramatic. Not because every story is finished, but because testimony creates connection. When people share honestly about grief, healing, doubt, forgiveness, addiction, loneliness, wonder or joy.

Something sacred happens. Walls come down and shame loses power and hope becomes imaginable. So many people today feel unseen. They carry hidden pain. Hidden questions. Hidden longing. And often what opens the door to faith is not argument, but authenticity. Someone saying I was lost to I struggled to, I wonder to. And somehow Christ met me there.

Welcome to the Telling Our Stories course with Father Andrew and Kristen Tovar. The center for Discipleship and Renewal at Forward Movement is grateful to Saint Michael and All Angels in Tucson, Arizona for hosting our filming and to the Diocese of Arizona, who initiated the sharing of this resource with Father Andrew at their discipleship days. Andrew and Kristen developed this resource with Cedar, and we are delighted to share it with you.

Kristin: In the first episode, we talked about the two scripts American Christianity hands you: the conversion script and the liturgical script, and how most people's actual lives don't fit either one. And when your life doesn't fit the script, you go quiet. We made a claim that we want to pick back up, that your life itself is a letter. It's being written. And most of it can't be read in real time. We read it looking backwards. In the second episode, we asked who's holding the pen? And the claim was a friend. Not a judge, not a coach, not a cosmic vending machine. A friend, who moves toward people in three ways confrontation, comfort, and calling.

Even toward political enemies, even toward outcasts in society, even toward the ones who betrayed Jesus. This episode is the one where we stop talking about it and actually do the work. Because here's the thing nobody tells you can believe every word of the last two episodes and still have no idea how to read your own life. Paul writes to the church in Corinth and this is the line this whole episode hangs on. "You yourselves are our letter. You are a letter from Christ, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God. Not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts."

Sit with the strangeness of that. You're not the reader. You're not even the writer. You're the letter. The thing being written, known and read. Paul says by everyone.

And here's the pastoral problem we keep running into.

Most people are walking around as letters they've never learned to read. The handwriting is there. The Spirit has been writing on you. Through the people who loved you, through your griefs, through the questions you couldn't put down since before you knew how to read. But nobody taught you the alphabet, so you skim your own life.

You catch a few highlights, a few wounds, a few jokes you tell to make the wounds smaller. And you call that your story. Reading your actual letter is a skill. It can be learned, and it's better learned in a room with a few other people than alone. Because, and any good therapist or Spiritual Director will tell you this, we cannot read ourselves accurately in isolation. We need a witness. Before we read, we have to deal with the shapes. And because the scripts only allow two of them, and the third one where most of the real story is hiding. The conversion script has a shape, and the shape is revolution, the sudden overthrow, the before and after. Paul knocked off his horse on the Damascus Road.

One moment. Everything changes. That's a true shape. It happens to real people, but it's one shape. The liturgical script has a shape too. And this shape is evolution. The slow unfolding. 10,000 kneelings. You're formed over decades, imperceptibly like a riverbed. Like when Jesus defended the little children of whom he said, "these little ones who believe in me" also true, also one shape.

But there is a third shape neither script will narrate, and it's the one I hear most often when people learn to voice it. Devolution. The coming apart. The backslide. The deconstruction. The dark middle where you lost ground you thought you had gained for good.

The decade you walked away. The faith that got smaller instead of bigger. The scripts have no language for devolution except failure. And so people bury those chapters, they edit them out. They decide the unraveling years don't count. Or worse, that they're disqualifying evidence that the whole thing was never real. But go back to the second episode. Where is Jesus most active?

He crosses an entire stormy sea to reach one man coming apart in a graveyard. He washes the feet of a friend who is about to deny him, and a friend who's about to sell him out. Jesus' friendship is most visible in the devolution. A judge sentences you and leaves. A coach benches you. A vending machine just goes dark when you've got no coins. Only a friend crosses the sea into the part of your

story you're most ashamed of. So here's the unlock. The chapter you're most tempted to skip is usually the chapter where the handwriting is heaviest. Don't read past your devolution. Read into it.

One guardrail before we pick up the pen, because I don't want anyone hearing the wrong thing when I say, we're going to reimagine your story, I do not mean inventing a prettier one. I'm not talking about the testimony industrial complex version, where you sand off the edges and tie a pretty bow on it. I actually mean the opposite.

Reimagination, the kind I'm after, is recovery. It recovers what actually happened, what you actually felt at the time and weren't allowed to say. The reimagining is what lets you finally tell the true version, the one with the dissonance still in it, the doubt still in it, the harm still in it.

Because the friendship of God is secure enough to let you be honest about all of it without the story falling apart.

In episode one, Andrew shared that when he was 15, during his baptism, he stood in front of hundreds of people and recited that he didn't know God before that night, and even as he said it, he knew it wasn't true. He'd been talking to God since he was 3 or 4 years old. The script needed a clean before and after, so he edited out his entire relationship as a child with God.

For years, he thought the dissonance was a problem, a faith defect. It took him a long time to reimagine that night and recover what was actually true. He wasn't meeting God for the first time. He was being asked to deny that he had ever known God in order to fit a shape. The recovery wasn't pretty. It was just true.

And the truth is where the friendship actually was. That's the work. Not a better story, a truer one.

Okay. Here's the method. We're going to take the same three motions we watched Jesus make in the last episode and turn them around in episode two. They were things the friend does to you.

Now they become three lenses you read your own life through.

Arrogance is the first thing a real friend has to get through, because arrogance is the self-sufficiency that says I don't need anyone to carry me. It's also, and this one stings, often the certainty the scripts themselves hand at you, the smugness of being on the right side. So the first question is, where were you sure and love proved you wrong in a way that set you free?

When did someone love you enough to tell you a hard truth? And you knew somehow that the confrontation was love? We start here because you cannot be comforted in a hurt you're too proud to admit. And you cannot be called to serve people you think you're above. There must be a confrontation first. Now that the wall is down, go to the graveyard chapters.

Not the highlight reel. The fear, the loss, the devaluation. The question is, when were you comforted in a way you still can't fully account for? Something came near. It didn't necessarily fix anything. It just came near and held and validated and soothed like a mother. Mark those moments. Those are often the heaviest ink in the whole story.

Two questions and you need both. First, looking back, who carried something to you that you didn't have words for at the time? A grandmother, a mentor, a friend who stayed with you in the dark and didn't try to fix it. Someone doing the work of God, whether or not they used that language.

Then turn it around. Whose letter are you becoming? Who are you now being called to confront in love, to comfort, to carry? Because that's the whole point. The friendship doesn't stop with you. It moves through you. You read so that you could be written onto someone else.

So here's what we're actually going to do. Let's read your life three times.

One pass for each movement. First pass. Confrontation. Find one time your arrogance or your certainty got lovingly broken. Write down what happened and who is in the room. Second pass. Comfort. Find one time you were afraid or hurt and someone or something came near and brought relief. Write down what it felt like, not just what happened. Third pass, calling. Name the time you sensed the need and desire and impulse to care for someone else. That's it. Three scenes, you're not writing your whole life. You're finding the three places the handwriting is clearest.

Now, a letter exists to be read. Your story exists to be told. You can either write this down or share it with someone else. A story you only keep in your own head is still half buried. The telling is where the recovery actually happens. Something settles in us when the scattered pieces finally become one coherent thing, said out loud to a face that's listening. And to the listener, be the face that listens. Don't fix it. Don't correct the theology. Don't rush them to the redemptive bow. Just receive it.

One last thing for anyone nervous about cracking this open.

There is a reason telling a true, coherent story of your life is one of the most healing things a human being can do. The fragments, the wound here, the grace there, the decade you lost sit in a scattered and unintegrated, and scattered is where shame lives. When you finally lay them end to end and read them as one story held by one friend, something reorganizes.

The devolution chapter stops being the disqualifying evidence and becomes the chapter that friendship crystallized. That's not a trick of positive thinking. It's what it feels like to finally read the story that was always there.

Three questions to finish up. Same three movements. Go slow. One confrontation, where in your life were you certain you were right and love proved you wrong in a way that set you free rather than crushed you?

Two comfort, Go to a chapter you usually skip: a fear, a loss, a devolution where someone or something came near and held you in a way you'll never forget.

Finally, calling. When did you have that piercing sense that you needed to reach out and care for someone in need, or resist something that was hurtful? Write them, then tell them. Let someone tell you their story. You are a letter from Christ, written not in ink, but by a friend who has been there the whole time, confronting, comforting, calling.

The world is already reading you. Go gently. Tell the truth. Read your own life like it matters. Because you are already inside the story and now you know how to read it.

Robert: I wonder which story in scripture you know the best. Which one's your favorite? Which one resonates with you? Says something to you as a believer? From the very first days of the church, from the first hours where people were meeting Jesus and being transformed. One story after another has been the life of the church changed, lives changed by encountering Jesus Christ.

I'm so delighted and thankful that Andrew and Kristen have taken us on this journey, and I hope that you're getting a fresh chance to look at your story again, and that you understand how your story intersects with the story of Christ. The story of the church, and most importantly, the story of God's love.

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