

Stories even better than Garrison Keillor's

## **It's Advent, and accusations against prominent men are shaking things up like a highway construction project in the wilderness.**

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As a pastor, I hear women's stories. As a woman, I have stories of my own. I know that power tends to corrupt, and I know our society works to keep women silent. So all these allegations and admissions of sexual harassment and abuse haven't really surprised me.

And then I heard about Garrison Keillor.

I grew up with *A Prairie Home Companion*. My father grew up in a small Minnesota town that still bears our family name. I used to spend winter vacations and entire summers with people straight out of Lake Wobegone. Their stories were moral

stories, humble yet humorous, full of common sense and valor—the sort of stories Keillor told so well.

So I was disheartened at the news about him. To be clear, I don't doubt the accusations or their seriousness. But I'm sad, because I feel caught between my love for Keillor's stories and my desire for justice for those harmed. Does it have to be so hard?

I think the answer may be yes.

It's Advent, and in Sunday's Gospel reading John the Baptist is doing strange things in the wilderness. When we meet him in Mark's Gospel he's wearing camel's hair and eating bugs. And when the people gather to see what this is all about, John gives them the cheery holiday message, "Repent!" Everything is all itchy and indigestible and unpleasant, and *that's* where John chooses to announce that the Messiah is coming, the one who will change everything.

Can we take the hint? It's not going to be comfortable when the world is about to be saved.

"Prepare the way!" the Baptist cries in the wilderness. "Make the path straight!" My great-grandfather came to Minnesota to build a railroad—a railroad that was never finished. Almost certainly the trouble resulted from problems of terrain, because between those 10,000 lakes is a whole lot of swamp.

Any engineer would tell you what my grandfather learned: it's no small thing to build a highway, let alone through a wilderness. High places have to be made low, the rough places a plain. In the process, some people will lose and some will gain. For some the highway will seem like salvation. Others aren't going to like the way things turn out.

And yet, we still build highways.

Some powerful and famous men are being brought down low. At the same time some women, many of whom were young or poor when these things took place, are being lifted up. Like a highway construction project, these accusations are shaking things up. Like a highway construction project, they just might just make our world more accessible and more comfortable for everyone.

I loved the way Keillor spoke like my Minnesotan Lutheran relatives. But as quaint as Lake Wobegone is, it isn't a fair depiction of Lutheran life. We are not all Minnesotans living on lefse, lutefisk, and folksy charm. We are big-city folk and suburban soccer moms. We are members of the military and jet-setting executives. Our heritage is Scandinavian and German, yes, but also Ethiopian, Indian, Chinese, and Haitian. There is more to the story than Keillor could ever tell alone, however good a storyteller he might be. So while abuse and impropriety aren't the sorts of things Keillor's stereotypical Lutherans talked about, maybe it's time that changed.

When I heard stories told in Minnesota—in coffee shops, in barnyards, in living rooms and kitchens—there was never just one story or one teller. People took turns adding their own voices to the mix. Together their voices built a common history and a future vision.

When abuse and harassment no longer keep people silent, I think new stories will be told. They won't just be about abuse and shame. They will be moral stories of common sense and valor, stories both humble and humorous. And our world will be better for hearing them.

As Keillor and all the others enter a wilderness of their own making, I hope they will find it possible to do as the Baptist commands: repent. There can be a way, even for them. Redemption, after all, is the best story of all.