



Story. It is one of the most personal, and most powerful, avenues of communication available to us. Story can move a heart, motivate an action, and change a life. Story is the narrative which expresses who we are as human beings, shapes our personal journeys, and invites others to join them.

Jesus knew the power of story. His life told, in essence, God's grand story of creation and redemption. And Jesus used stories almost exclusively to call individuals to participate in God's Kingdom.

We tragically shortchange the power of story if we assume at any level that story is, by definition, fiction. The greatest stories are those which are most true. These are the stories which grip our hearts and change our lives. When we are so transformed by the power of God that we must tell others of His graphic intervention in our personal narratives, we not only promote God's redemptive agenda but also prove that it works. The personal progression of what life was like, what happened, and what new life is like now gives practical evidence of the interventional purpose of Jesus Christ.

Every time I have personally witnessed spiritual renewal on a broad scale, whether within a small group, a congregation, or a larger community, the catalyst has been an individual's willingness to honestly and authentically share their own life story. Many times the most important narratives are those we recognize are not yet completed. When we risk sharing our struggles within a "to be continued" context, one in which we clearly establish that God is the author, we create opportunities for personal identification. When others identify with our spiritual journeys, they are invited to share them. More importantly, our experiences can help lead others to their own personal experiences with God.

This little publication is devoted to story – real stories of real people living real life in relationship with a real God. Our prayerful hope is that, as you are welcomed into the narratives of the fellow life travelers shared within these pages, you might discover points of intersection with your own life story. The same God who has made a difference in their lives wants to make a difference in yours.

Ultimately, we are all part of His story. And the thematic thread of His narrative is this simple truth – **You are loved...No matter what!**





"One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to have dinner with him, so Jesus went to his home and sat down to eat. When a certain immoral woman from that city heard he was eating there, she brought a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume. Then she knelt behind him at his feet, weeping. Her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them." Luke 7:36-38

It is her most precious possession... For a woman with very little evident value in her character, it is a luxury she has reserved for herself. An indulgence to help her recapture her childhood fantasies, when she was a little girl imagining herself loved and cared for by the man of her dreams. A small dab of the rare fragrance covers up the stench of her memories, the smell of her sin, and makes her feel beautiful.

This woman is known in Scripture the same way she was known in her community – "a certain immoral woman." To speak her name is to acknowledge the undercurrent of disgust which follows her. It is shameful for such a woman to exist in this town, but the paradox is that she would not exist without the vile desires of the supposedly respectable citizens who patronize her. Nightly they visit in secrecy, using her, abusing her, satisfying their guilty consciences by paying for the privilege.

For years she has taken this hush money – compensation more for her silence than her services – and sacrificially set some aside for her purchase... "an alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume."

She will not waste this on her paying customers – they don't deserve it. She has kept it for herself. It is the private and personal indulgence of a woman who is in the business of indulgence. Her secret treasure. An exotic, fluted urn filled with rare, fragrant, imported oil. Elsewhere we read that such a treasure is worth a year's wages for a working man. For a working woman, especially one in her particular profession, it represents a lifetime of sacrificing herself for the guilty pleasures of others.

The oil is her gift to herself. Somehow she imagines it will make everything alright. Women who are graced with such a fragrance are respectable and respected. In the recesses of her mind, twisted by the years of sin and self-deprecation, she imagines this fragrance will make it all go away. Even if only in her imagination, this perfume will somehow make her acceptable. If she is honest, she knows the truth – the guilt which mars her reputation is so much more than skin deep. But in the necessary sweewtness of her denial, she dreams of the moment when she will douse herself in the exquisite aroma and pretend that she is beautiful...acceptable...loved...

And then she met Him.



Scripture doesn't tell us where, when, or how she first met Jesus. Obviously such details of her particular narrative are unimportant to the Gospel purpose.

Regardless, whatever happened in her encounter with Him changed everything that had ever happened before, or might ever happen again. She had known so many men, but knowing this one changed the way she knew herself.

He loved her. Really loved her. Not in the way she was accustomed to being loved – love as a thinly veiled excuse to use another person for your own interests. She knew from the moment she saw Him that Jesus loved her as she was – and that love would change her forever. The guilt and shame had kept her going back to the other men, the old ways, the life that identified her as "a certain immoral woman." She knew she didn't deserve better. But Jesus' love showed her it didn't matter what she deserved. His love proved the truth that changed everything.

She was loved...No matter what.

It was this truth that prompted her extravagant sacrifice that day. She poured out the most precious possession of her past as an act of love toward the treasure of her eternity. She no longer needed the priceless perfume to mask her immoral identity. She was forgiven.

What is the cost of the oil in your alabaster jar?

Like this woman, each of us has something of perceived value which we have been storing up as an attempt to prove our worth, our value, our respectability. Money, possessions, unhealthy relationships, a pet sin, a broken dream... the list is almost endless.

The question is: What are you holding on to, or what is holding on to you, which is keeping you from giving yourself completely to Jesus? Whatever it is, the call is to break the jar in which you have been hoarding it and pour it out at the feet of the Savior. To do that, you will need to come to grips with the truth at the heart of this story... You are forgiven!

This Biblical narrative is a true story of forgiveness and our response to it. It's incredibly important that we don't get the details of the woman's story backwards. She

isn't forgiven by what she did for Jesus – she is forgiven because of what He did for her. Jesus is God Himself entering into the world as one of us, taking all our sins, our struggles, our failures, our innate immorality on Himself.

Jesus' sacrifice is an act of love for you.

It doesn't matter what you've done, it doesn't matter who you are. In Luke 7:41-42, Jesus tells a parable of two men. One owes his master 500 pieces of silver and one only owes 50. But the master treats them both the same – He forgives the debt. This is how God treats those who will trust Him. You have never done anything so bad that you cannot be forgiven for it.

But you must believe it is true in order to receive the gift. This is Jesus' literal bottom line to the story of the "immoral woman." Her story ends with this: "And Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Luke 7:50

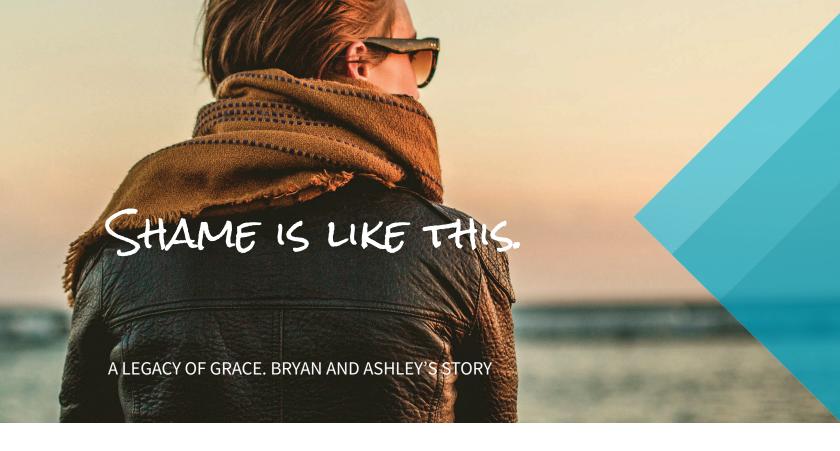
She isn't forgiven through the sacrificial act of pouring out her most precious possession. Her behavior is an extravagant act of worship made possible by the fact of her forgiven state. She is loved by God, she is forgiven of her sins, and her response is to let go of her former treasure. Now she understands where the true treasure lies. She pours her oil on Jesus as proof that relationship with Him has become her most precious possession!

Today I invite you to accept the love and forgiveness of Jesus and let Him set you free. Whatever the oil in your alabaster jar, let it go...pour it out...break the jar and let your sacrifice of love become a sweet and precious aroma to your Lord. You don't need it anymore – it's not who you are – it doesn't identify you.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 3:8 – "everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ" Know the truth that you are loved. Accept the fact that you are forgiven.

Believe in the One who gave His life for you. And give yours to Him in return.





Shame is like this. If you will accept it – if you will drink the cup to the bottom – you will find it very nourishing; but try to do anything else with it, and it scalds.

-C.S. Lewis, The Great Divorce

Firmly rooted in our Christian-American heritage is the desire to leave a noteworthy legacy: to live a noble life, to be Christ-like, to learn wisdom from older generations and pass it down to newer ones. We desire to be remembered, to embody something worth remembrance. This desire perhaps first surfaces when we are young in the form of pleasing our parents, teachers, and mentors. This is true of Bryan and Ashley Shields.

Before Bryan and Ashley met, and well before they married, they shared a spirit whose rawest desire was to please-- most notably, their parents. Each of them wanted to live a life free of mistakes and brokenness. Their desire to please, however, became a secret weed each watered for many years, taking on the form of perfectionism. Bryan and Ashley each developed the mask of "I'mok" for the sake of others. As they grew from adolescence into teenage years into adulthood, perfectionism became less of a mature and noble responsibility and more of an idol. Sin planted roots so deeply within their hearts it began to look like a part of their identity in Christ. The face they showed their peers, their parents, and others was

not their own, but a mask they had been polishing over many years, an outward countenance that screamed desperately, "I'm good enough!" But in reality, beneath these masks were two humans so insecure, so desperate to love and be loved, that they had learned to lie to themselves in the process of convincing others of their holiness. Their desire for shiny legacies outweighed the reality of the brokenness of their souls. Thus developed an internal hollowness that nearly overtook both of them in waves of self-doubt, self-hatred, and addiction.

Bryan was exposed to an inappropriate experience at age six which made him feel like "damaged goods". The child of a minister, he knew something was foul in his newly discovered feelings. Around age twelve, Bryan began simultaneously indulging lustfulness through explicit books and magazines, while also building a social shell around himself, reputedly as "the good kid." A subtle duality began to evolve inside Bryan. In one sense, he wanted to know this God who loved him, but in another, he wanted to fulfill his every physical whim. Both sides within Bryan were fueled by one question: Am I loved? The topographical love he chased for most of his early adulthood resulted in ephemeral answers to this question. The permanency and consistency of Christ's love seemed unreachable even though Agape love whispered in the back of Bryan's brain, yes, you are and always will be loved.



"AM I LOVED? AM I

ACCEPTED? IS THIS

THING! HAVE BECOME

WOTZITH TZEDEMPTION?"

For years, Bryan didn't heed the whisper; rather, he polished a façade of goodness, which Christ would eventually shatter.

Bryan's wife Ashley discovered the contagious nature of hatred very young. When Ashley's brother was stillborn, her family's grief took root in all of them in various forms. For her father, grief eventually yielded verbal abuse to his later children; and in her mother, passivity allowed this abuse to go on for many years. Ashley, concerned deeply with impressing and making her parents proud, began to despise herself for not being a boy—the boy her family had wanted. Ashley wanted desperately to fill the void her brother had left in her parents, to save them of their grief. Selfloathing began to sink its fangs in Ashley's heart, and it leaked out into her everyday life and general outlook on society. She hated herself for not being a boy, but eventually developed a mistrust and condescension towards all females, or at least the female stereotypes. This naturally led to a sexuality crises, and Ashley wondered if she was homosexual. At the same time, she wanted to be what God had created her to be.

When Bryan and Ashley married, they were in love, but neither one knew the depths of the other's brokenness. Reading their story now, it is no coincidence the Lord paired these two together. While their brokenness and sin was too big for either of them to carry alone, they sought affirmation through marriage. But when their spouse could not rid the other of or "fix" the other's brokenness, they were at a loss, each assuming their union was doomed. Through the ministry of Celebrate Recovery at Madison Park, both Bryan and Ashley realized they had something very much in common: each of their identities was rooted in

shame. Bryan's was utterly disgraceful to him and caused him to hide his actions and struggles with sexual addiction. Ashley's shame produced a more overt cynicism, stripping away the good and hope that Christ promises.

After Ashley and Bryan began attending cocounseling sessions together, they developed tools to chip away at the lies the Enemy had been growing in them since childhood. Celebrate Recovery proved to be the catalyst for the healing gospel of Christ to finally break through; shattering the paper-thin masks they'd worn. Those haunting questions, "Am I loved? Am I accepted? Is this thing I have become worth redemption?" were met with grace and forgiveness. Shame had created cavity-like scars in Bryan and Ashley's hearts, but surrounded by other broken people in Celebrate Recovery, the couple finally surrendered to major spiritual surgery. In time, the Enemy's stronghold began to relinquish.

Bryan and Ashley know their healing is a lifelong journey needing a daily walk with Christ. They have experienced the power of redemption; the buying back of shame and sin and sickness, transforming their lives into testimonies of grace. In light of all the Lord has done, Bryan and Ashley have no choice but to fall on their knees, to weep, to rejoice, thanking God for the painful ways He breaks us and remakes us.

The Sunday morning Bryan and Ashley shared their story, Pastor Paul Strozier made a profound statement. "The church is not a spa for the spiritually perfect. It is a hospital for the spiritually broken." As Christians, we are sometimes attracted to physical and emotional greatness in others, but also, we're inevitably attracted to relatable brokenness. Brokenness is what attracts us to Bryan and Ashley. All of us have sinned and because of sin, the Enemy tries to convince us we are unlovable; that we are nothing. But God, being rich in mercy because of the great love with which He loved us....by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:4-5). Every redeemed sinner can stand with Bryan and Ashley and agree, the Lord makes beautiful things out of us and there is no shame, no secret, no lie strong enough to undo the power of His love. Only the Redeemer can take the dust of our lives and create a legacy of grace.

Celebrate Recovery meets every Friday at 7:00 p.m. at the North Anderson Campus on Scatterfield Road.



BLANKETS OF HOPE, BLANKETS OF LOVE KASSIDY JULIAN'S STORY

A peek into Kassidy Julian's calendar would make your head spin! She is a 21-year-old student at Ivy Tech Community College. She also has a full-time job at Gordon Foods, and to top it off, is planning her upcoming wedding. During her rare free time, she always has a blanket, but it's not for a quick power nap. Kassidy is the founder of the Battle Blanket Project, a ministry which provides handmade blankets and unique Scripture cards to severely ill children. Her blankets serve as a tangible symbol of the comfort and healing of Jesus.

The idea for the Battle Blanket Project came to Kassidy when her aunt was diagnosed with cancer in the fall of 2014. Kassidy's aunt has been able to bravely face chemotherapy by drawing strength from her faith in God. Although they live in different time zones, Kassidy stays in frequent contact with her aunt via Facetime. She has been deeply affected by her aunt's courage in battling and surviving the disease. Of her aunt, Kassidy says, "She has shown me what it means to be a warrior."

During her aunt's illness, Kassidy began thinking about others who are going through the struggle of cancer, especially those without the hope and peace of faith in God. She began to pray for a way to reach out to them. Her prayers were answered with a compassionate and practical idea.

As a student in the medical field, Kassidy is especially drawn to children diagnosed with serious long-term illnesses. She is also the eldest of four siblings. Kassidy admits, "I have a soft spot for kids. I can't get enough of them! With the wonder of the Word of God and my love for kids, the Battle Blanket Project started to take shape." The name Battle Blanket Project was inspired by the patients themselves. "They are entering a fight they weren't prepared for and that's exactly what a battle is. The kids who are venturing through this obstacle [of cancer] are warriors and soldiers. They are entering their own battle."

The Battle Blanket Project is also inspired by Kassidy's own special baby blanket. "Whenever anything bad happened, I could wrap up in my blanket and feel comforted and safe." It is her hope the Battle Blankets will create the same type of comfort for a child in a hospital. Kassidy believes children need a physical, personal symbol of comfort. "Watching my aunt's struggle was so hard, and she was an adult. With children,



they sometimes cannot fully comprehend what is happening with their bodies. A child may not understand or be able to participate in a fundraiser, but they can hold onto these blankets and be reminded they aren't alone and people like me and you are always fighting with them. And, most importantly, God is always with them."

Every blanket is handmade by Kassidy. With each paycheck from Gordon Foods, she faithfully allocates \$50 to \$100 towards supplies for the Battle Blanket Project. She uses soft fleece fabric and hand ties them at the edges. She also makes a point to wash the blankets before delivery so they have a comforting smell; reminding children of home while they are living in a hospital environment. Each blanket comes with a unique card containing a Scripture verse of encouragement or hope for healing.

Can a simple blanket make a difference?

Kassidy thinks so. Her goal is simple; to touch as many lives as possible with the message of Christ. Through the gift of her blankets, she hopes to show others God's unconditional love. Her blankets are a physical reminder the Lord gives strength during life's challenges.

Kassidy welcomes your prayers for the Battle Blanket Project. For now, the main recipient of Battle Blankets will be Riley Children's Hospital. If you are interested in knowing more, feel free to contact her at kassidyleland@gmail.com

ABOUT KASSIDY:

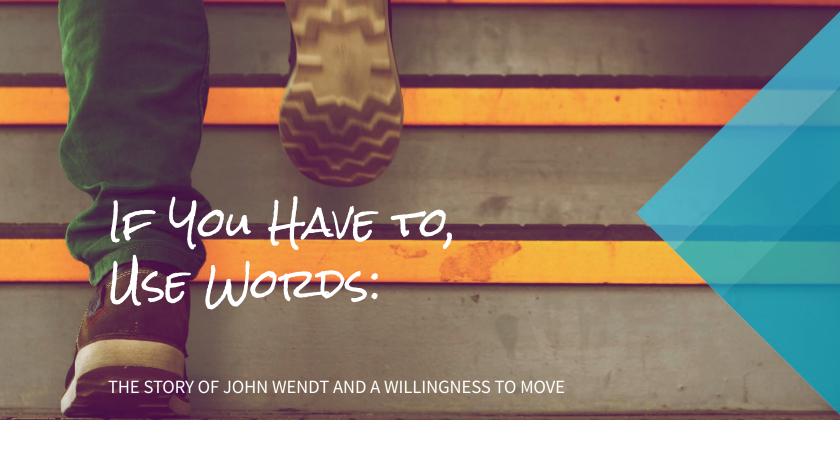
"I am currently studying Phlebotomy. I have a heart for medicine, missions, and helping others. After graduation, I plan to pursue a career in medicine unless God guides me in a different direction. If my heart and skill are meant to remain in the medical field, I hope to one day be a trauma surgeon."

Kassidy and her family were attracted to the lively sense of community at Madison Park. "I originally got connected with Madison Park about 3 or 4 years ago when my family wanted to try out a new church. We went to Madison Park and immediately fell in love! Each Sunday, the message challenges me and makes me really think."

Kassidy is the oldest of four siblings. She has two sisters, ages 15 and 8, and a 6 year old brother.







When I asked John Wendt the typical how ya doing, he sincerely answered, "Better than I deserve." I learned that John is a man who has no time for fluff, exaggeration, or small talk. The urgency of Christ's beckon to all of us is apparent in John: "Follow Me," (Matt. 4:19). And John has chosen to "follow"

regardless of monetary confinement, rugged past experiences, or career obligations. Unlike the man who brought up excuses in Matthew 8:22, John chooses to wholeheartedly follow where the Spirit guides him.

In his short 57 years of living from Indiana to California and back again, John has experienced death and chaos in

tragically familiar ways. He's attended the funerals of both parents and each grandparent. He's battled drugs, alcohol, and toxic relationships. He's struggled through two divorces and fought grueling custody battles. He's known the successes of business and the failures of trying to be "good"

enough" for church, community, and Christ's love.
And perhaps most consistent of the enemy's lies,
John has strongly felt that he is inadequate in
giving enough, of being "saved" enough, of loving
enough to earn the redemption Christ offers. Where
John is now, though, is a Truth-grounded place. He

is able to say:

"No, I'm not-- never was good enough. But that's where Christ takes over. I'm rescued."

Today, weary of life's battles, John is a relentless, optimistic, self-proclaimed "Jesus-freak" who has a very real sense of what it means to endure tribulations before experiencing any prosperity. He is admittedly "shy" and not one to "go in

front of people to tell [his] story." Yet, his is one that must be told, just like Jeremiah. When Jeremiah professes to the Lord that he can't speak, the Lord responds:

"...NEVETZ-WAS GOOD

ENOUGH. BUT THAT'S

WHETZE CHTZIST TAKES

OVETZ- L'M TZESCUED."



"You shall go to all to whom I send you... Don't be afraid... I Am with you..." (Jer. 1:7-8). Before I even asked John any kind of generic question like whom from the Bible do you identify with, he referenced the parable of the Prodigal Son. But after learning John's story, I think he is much more like one of the disciples who "immediately left their nets and followed Him" (Matt. 4:20).

While John grew up in a dysfunctional family, he attributes his grandfather, Oliver, to planting in him the seed of the Gospel. And it was Oliver who first baptized John; although at eleven, John didn't know what baptism symbolized. He simply desired to live a life like his grandpa. Oliver became known in Kokomo, IN (where John grew up) for picking up hitchhikers. He unashamedly told them the Good News. This stuck with John throughout his adolescence and his adult years.

In his late teens and early twenties, John wrestled with depression—a deeply seeded loneliness that was founded on the tragedies of a dysfunctional family. John got on his knees and begged for Christ's forgiveness. He prayed to his grandfather's God. And he experienced Grace. He moved to California, started a family and worked for a successful business. After two marriages gone awry, John again found himself on his knees. Again, he found God's mercy. So, nearly six years ago, John moved to Anderson, IN. A seemingly coincidental string of circumstances led him back to the Midwest, renting a house from a woman he'd known and worked with for many years. He found the Lord's calling not just exasperating, but relentless. Even when John sought salvation in other places, he claims he "always knew [Jesus] was there."

For the past six years, John has attended Madison Park Church of God and has been an active member. John does not have time to dilly-dally.

He views time as precious and insists that listening to the Spirit is mandatory. The Spirit speaks to us all, but only to those who truly listen is the Lord's will apparent. With no friends, community, or family, John plunged head-first into community at MPCG. He's since let the Spirit lead him on trips to Kenya, Uganda, and more.

While contemplating a mission trip to Honduras, John received a phone call. The caller had the wrong number, as John surmised from the broken English on the other end of the line. However, the caller was from Honduras. John took this for nothing less than a sign to embark on yet another trip with his church. This is where John's tenacity stands out. Because of his total willingness to always MOVE, John is rarely hesitant. He has confidence not in himself, but instead has an unrelenting faith in the Spirit of Christ who serves as a clear compass for life's direction.

One day, John's mother received a call from a stranger. The stranger was a Christian musician who revealed that Oliver, John's granddad, was the one who first planted seeds of the Gospel in him. "Anybody can be an Oliver," the musician sings. John's life now is dedicated to doing the same. As a man seasoned by the world, John has tasted both the bitter and sweet in life, and he's reconciled with Jesus, the Rescuer from Rock Bottom, the One who first loved him.

Before we said goodbye, John admitted he isn't the best speaker. Paraphrasing a quote usually attributed to St Francis of Assisi, John says, "Go tell people about Jesus, and if you have to, use words." John is a man of action. His security is not in himself, nor in what he's earned, but in the One who first called out to him. John lives a life of love, and is consistently willing to move and be moved by the Spirit.





Worship is a foundational core value for Madison Park Church of God. At Madison Park, worship is not limited to Sunday morning; rather everyone who attends the church is encouraged to make worship a way of life. Maybe that's why this church is blessed with amazing people as well as amazing musical talent. Keyboard, Cajon, bass, guitar, and singers can define many bands leading in praise all over the world each week, but Madison Park has a very special band. The musicians are Jr. High students, encouraged to develop their talents in tandem with praising their Creator. They are encouraged by Anderson University student Elle Worrell.

A native of Chicago, Elle has always loved leading worship, so she was happy to fill in when asked to help with the group in the fall of 2014. She never imagined herself involved in junior high ministry, but after attending a retreat with the students, Elle found herself enthusiastically leading a weekly small group for the girls. Her heart for worship led her to become involved in helping these students develop a lifestyle of worship. God revealed Elle's gift for relating to this special age group, and she is now all in!

Since becoming involved in Madison Park's Jr. High Ministry, Elle has gently guided the musically-gifted middle-schoolers into one unified band that leads the entire student ministry in worship. Elle has also worked hard to bond with Jr. High students. At an age that can be tough to navigate, a positive influence like Elle's makes all the difference. Students are learning to love and accept the unique talents and personalities God has created in each of them.

Jr. High ministry has become a large part of Elle's life, and she is devoted to making the band a great

experience for everyone involved. It takes a lot of time, but she doesn't mind. Elle views her role as something bigger than "just helping out a couple of times a week" and it shows. Some of the students have told her their Wednesday rehearsals and Sunday performances are the highlight of their week. The relationships Elle has developed with the Jr. High girls have been personally rewarding. She has watched them blossom as individuals, and she is so proud of their musical progress. Enthusiastically, Elle exclaims, "It's impressive to see how good they are with their instruments, especially for their ages!" For Elle's students, worship has clearly extended beyond Sunday mornings.

Elle's approach to ministry is encouraging and fun. She's happy to goof off with students at rehearsal, wear reindeer antlers at a Christmas party, sing silly carols and encourage a relaxed atmosphere for everyone. In these off-beat moments, Elle is setting an example of lifestyle worship, sharing joy with God and others. Certainly there are many styles of worship music. The list is as varied as the people God created. But Elle demonstrates, while we can commune with God through music, we also worship and serve Him by helping others.

Christians are admonished to "rejoice always" (1 Thessalonians 5:16). Rejoicing daily in the goodness, blessings and grace of God through Christ, translates into a life of worship. A heart of worship is not only open to the Heavenly Father, it is also open to blessing others. This is Elle's heart, a heart that praises God for and with the gifts He has given her. Her worshipful heart translates into a worshipful life, influencing and developing gifts in others. Her life reflects Christ and it is seen by many as truly a lifestyle of worship.



