



A Sweet Sadness

Reflections on Leaving My First Appointment

I know why we have itineracy. It is meant to keep things fresh, to keep ministers and congregations both from a kind of familiar ease with one another that dulls the sharp edge of the sword we wield weekly from the pulpit. I as a minister am supposed to find sufficient support (and job security) from itineracy to say things to my congregation I wouldn't otherwise say. They, conversely, are comforted in the knowledge they will be spoken to prophetically, and that they will never become the sort of personality cult church that other denominations sport. Most importantly to them, they will never have to waste time or energy on a search committee, and if they get hacked off enough, they can move a preacher.

Some comfort this is to either one of us. As I think of my last two Sundays before moving, my last two chances to break bread and open Scripture with my church, I am wrestling with a new pastoral emotion: sadness. I see the same on their faces. We have had a terrific, all-too-short two years together, and all of us are sorry to see them end.

This sadness sheds some new light on pastoral ministry. Had I known I would feel this way at the end, I may have begun things quite differently two years ago. Here is what leaving my first beloved church has taught me about ministry.

Pastoral Honesty

I am not sure that my sadness does not conceal a certain pastoral pathology. That is, it may indicate an emotional dependence on my parish, rather than a priestly vocation to speak the truth in love. I deeply relish every "Good job, Preacher" that comes my way Sundays at noon. I cherish every smile that greets a pastoral visit, glad to have improved a lonely or hurting person's day, even just a little. I love most the look of respect I receive even when I just walk into a room. When at church, I feel like I matter.

And perhaps just so, I have failed as a minister. For that love of their company and respect has kept me from saying things I ought to have said, about matters large and small. About how he talks too much, drowning out anyone else who might speak in Sunday school class. About the dreadful theology, culled from the South's various fundamentalisms, that says America had better support Israel against the Palestinians or lose any blessing from God. About the one-hundred pounds he ought to lose, lest he go on to glory land earlier than any of us wants. About the self-righteousness that poisons her long tenure as Sunday school teacher, no matter how grateful we are for her time and effort. About the "crisis" mode she is always

in, almost needing some desperate prayer request to make it through each breathless day. About the racism that seeps from his jokes, stinking to high heaven, but not objected to by his preacher. Even the word of approval about the new car or fancy vacation, offered out of friendliness, could have been substituted for a prophetic warning about greed.

Of course, these words would have reduced the sadness now, and the happiness during my tenure here! They would have also built a reservoir of resentment and resulted in some painful comments back to me about the quality of my preaching and visitation and theology and motives. And just so, perhaps we would have gotten somewhere toward the truth-telling, mutual repentance, and reconciliation that ought to mark the Kingdom of God.

Boundaries

Since the first day in seminary I have heard that a minister must guard her or his boundaries. Don't let them have all of you or you'll be nibbled to death by ducks, I was told. Keep time to yourself, defend your family's space, take regular Sabbaths. Otherwise there will be nothing left to give them come time for church.

I have taken this advice and kept my distance to some degree. Yet now I wonder. Could I not have thrown myself more deeply into the thick of their life together?

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What if I had participated in choir, as they asked me at the beginning? The music would have been no better, but perhaps that time with them would have offered opportunities for teaching, now lost forever. Perhaps the Sunday nights I guarded for myself could have been given away more liberally to the youth, who would have remembered the time gratefully. Could I have designed more midweek teaching opportunities? Sure, only the same five people would have come, but they would have been well-served, and both I and they would have been stretched in salutary ways through the time together. How precisely does our ecclesial re-emphasis on Sabbath and boundaries fit in with one who “emptied himself” completely in service to us? (Phil. 2:7).

The Church’s Nationalism

I know no better how to deal with this now than when I arrived. The Fourth of July always seems to follow hard on the heels of a pastoral change. For my first one, the scouts processed in with the flag, which everyone promptly pledged. I did not, remembering all I had learned at Duke from Hauerwas and Willimon about the idolatry that passes for worship in American civil religion. They noticed, of course. One brave soul called to ask me about it. “I fear that pledging, in church, crosses the line from honoring one’s country to worshiping it.” She was confused, but respectful. “I disagree, and I hope no one will be mad or leave over it.” No one was.

The next time around we did not pledge. Perhaps they remembered my silent protest the first time through. Yet we did have a soloist sing Lee Greenwood’s “I’m Proud to Be An American,” and the procession of the flag remained. Not much of an improvement! Clearly they deferred to my unstated wishes to remove the pledge but had no understanding of why I felt how I did, let alone any ability to articulate a view of holy space that would not see it compromised by idolatrous symbols of the nation-state.

Perhaps a teaching opportunity was lost here. Immediately after the hurt following the first act of noncompliance on my part, I could have held a weeknight Bible study on church and state and articulated my position in full. They would not have liked what they heard, but they would have understood it more fully. Then they would have had another year of hearing me

preach on all manner of issues—Israel and the nations, peace, love of enemies, greed, and pride and so forth—that would have filled in their initial unawareness of a Christianity that claims to supercede all other claims to lordship. Informed and angry would have been better than confused, but respectfully distant.

The Church in Mission

In whatever parish I serve in the future, I will dedicate my first few weeks to knocking on the doors of people around the church and introducing myself, inviting them to come to worship. This seems so

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simple, so obvious, yet I never did it. I was too caught up in getting to know my parishioners and the church and its needs and figured those needs of outsiders could wait. Too devoted to becoming their chaplain, rather than their minister. Yet there are so many nonchurched people right outside our doors, and they must feel we don’t care whether they show up, for we so rarely, if ever, have gone to them. An initial dedication to this task would have also signaled to my church a desire to see us in outreach together, as a task at least as important as learning intricacies of the lives of those already in my parish.

One of the proudest accomplishments during our time together has been the parsonage we have built for my successor. It is a nicer house than I will live in for some time, perhaps ever! They have done the work, from fund-raising to building, and are right to feel proud. Yet I worry. We have done all this work to help ourselves, to guarantee our own future. What of those around us who are not United Methodist preachers who need housing? Can’t we devote the considerable fund-raising, organizing, and building skills we have shown in our parsonage project to housing the homeless, or those now inadequately housed? Or would such an effort exhaust the few people I had competent to do this sort of work? Would they have been emotionally and even physically unable to do it more than once? I don’t know. But Scripture’s call to bear one’s cross may signal an answer.

Friendships

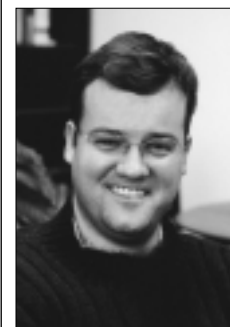
Some of the people I care about most in the world are members of this congrega-

tion. Yet that is not the same thing as to call them “friends.” Friends are those for whom not just affection, but intimate personal knowledge is mutual. I know my parishioners fairly intimately—what they love, fear, hope for, work for, think is important. Yet they do not know me to that extent. To a degree I have remained a stranger among them. This is somewhat understandable, given the great differences between post-farming rural community and a kid who grew up in Chapel Hill and is now in, by my count, twenty-fourth grade.

If I had this to do over again, would I try harder to extend myself in actual friendship to those in my congregation? To have them know me in my least ministerial moments, as well as on Sundays, behind the pulpit, berobed, preaching away? I don’t know the answer to this question. Perhaps the desire to be “friends” is dangerously close to the overly dependent emotional connection described above as keeping us from prophetic speech to one another. Yet it would have been less lonely, more honest.

Beauty

My church is beautiful. Each member has taught me something about churchmanship, whether how to be a better church person, or how not to! Each has painfully patent weaknesses, as well as glorious gifts. And each, and all of them together, is an icon of the living Christ, an image of the Lord of the church. Some Sundays I walked in behind the choir during the prelude and was met with a wave of feeling for these people, an overwhelming sense of love, of being precisely where I ought to be at precisely the right moment doing precisely the right thing. It’s a great gift to feel this at least once in one’s life. Preachers are those gifted to feel it Sunday by Sunday. Whatever other faults I or they bring to that meeting, it is beautiful. And for that, glory be to God. □



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