



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: April 18, 2010

Your Impact Upon My Ministry, Robert B. Culp

Colossians 3:12-17; Galatians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 4:1, 5, 7-11

Almost 35 years ago on a Sunday afternoon in early June, I went forward from the pew Kathy and I were sharing in the Presbyterian church in Punxsutawney, answered searching questions about my calling to the ministry, and then knelt down in front of my hometown congregation for the “laying on of hands” and the ordination prayer. As I knelt down, I was surrounded by 12 or so ministers and elders who placed their hands upon me as the ordination prayer was offered, and when I arose, by the grace of God, I had been set apart as a duly ordained Presbyterian Minister of Word and Sacrament.

Even though I had grown up in the church as a “preacher’s kid,” was familiar with many of the church’s rituals, and had completed my Master of Divinity degree and all the trials of ordination, I confess that I was unprepared for that moment. I remember feeling the weight of the entire world upon me as the hands of these church leaders were placed upon my head and shoulders, and as I sensed deeply the awesome responsibilities of my becoming a minister. But as they lifted their hands off me, I immediately felt a floating lightness and gracious freedom, and I was overwhelmed, especially making my way around this small circle exchanging the peace of Christ and then, at the end, being embraced by my father who was sobbing.

It was one of the most memorable, moving, and humbling experiences I have ever had. In fact, it is rivaled only by my marriage to Kathy and the births of our three daughters.

Over the last year or so, I have been doing a great deal of reading and reflecting about the vocation of being a minister, which Lillian Daniel and Martin Copenhaver (two United Church of Christ parish ministers) describe in their recent book as “This Odd and Wondrous Calling.” This fascinating and helpful book comes from the genuine life experiences of its clergy authors, and it deals with such topics as: how we can understand the weekly ritual of shaking hands at the door at the end of a service, how ministers come to a clear sense of their clerical identity and pastoral authority, how to find a balance between ministerial expertise and pastoral wisdom,

how one of them as a young minister learned to pray, and other similar mundane, but important matters that pertain to the ministry.

The book is anecdotal and filled with real-life situations in the course of one's ministry, it is suggestive rather than prescriptive, and certainly it has been written out of a true love for the church and its ministry. As Peter Gomes observes in his Foreword to the book, it is "a credible testimony of why women and men still respond to a calling that by most of the world's professional standards makes no sense." I'm confident that many in the church today, whether in the pulpit or the pew, will find this a good and rewarding "read."

Martin Copenhaver begins one of my favorite chapters with this intriguing observation: "Being a pastor has made me better than I am. That is because the pastoral vocation requires that I act in ways that seem beyond me." Citing a sermon written by Rev. Amos Adams in Rochester Massachusetts nearly 300 years ago, Copenhaver notes the various ways in which being a minister can enhance one's spiritual life through the different duties that fall to ministers every single day. Whether it involves growing in the life of prayer, learning how to govern one's tongue, seeing chance encounters as opportunities for pastoral ministry, discovering how to care for people who may not be particularly likeable, learning the art of being on call even in the middle of the night ... ministry, in Rev. Adams' perspective, is a veritable "school of virtue" that lasts a lifetime.

In his sermon, Rev. Adams puts it this way: "The continual exercise of pastoral affection, in earnest care, tender pity, and affectionate sympathy with the flock in all their variety of circumstances, in trouble and in joy, hath a most powerful tendency to form in us those habits of goodness, that liken us to the angels of light." Copenhaver writes, "Update the language a bit, and the Rev. Adams could have been writing about my experience of how pastoral ministry has formed me in ways that make me better than I am."

Of course, it doesn't always work that way; but more often than not, it does. I suspect that is why Jesus tells his followers to act in particular ways, regardless of how they feel at the time. He counsels us to turn the other cheek, to pray for our enemies, to be not anxious about what we are to eat or the clothes we wear, to be forgiving and childlike in our attitude and demeanor. He focuses upon actions, not because interior dispositions are unimportant but because most often we act our way into a new way of thinking and feeling, rather than the other way around. Graciously, the pastoral vocation requires that I act in ways that seem beyond me.

I remember Tom Long telling of Max Beerbohm's story "The Happy Hypocrite," which deals with a wicked man who falls in love with a virtuous woman. He knows, because of his failings, that he has no chance to woo her successfully if he approaches her just as he is, undisguised. So he puts on the mask of a saint, and he wears it continually, comporting himself each day in a saintly fashion. Sure enough, she falls in love with the man – or, more accurately, she

falls in love with the saintly mask.

Years later, when a spurned lover of the hypocrite discovers the deception, she confronts the hypocrite in the presence of the woman he loves, and she challenges him to take off his mask and show himself to be the ugly, repulsive thing he truly is. After considerable protest, when he finally drops his mask, he discovers what he could not have anticipated: under the mask of the saint his face has become transformed. His is now the face of a saint ... and his life matches it.

Beerbohm correctly labeled the character in his story a “hypocrite,” for clearly it was the man’s intention to deceive, to pretend to be someone he was not, to hide behind the cloak of pious pretense. When somebody takes on the pastoral role, obviously it cannot be as a deceitful disguise masking intentions that are less than honorable. Nevertheless, I believe the pastoral role can be worn or embraced in the fervent hope that one might be inwardly transformed to its likeness. Or, as Rev. Adams put it, we assume the role in the hope that “the continual exercise of pastoral affection, tender pity, and affectionate sympathy” might “form in us those habits of goodness.”

I’m pretty sure that’s what Paul had in mind when he urged the members in the fledgling community of faith in Rome to “put on Christ.” He was urging his readers to assume Christ-like qualities in their daily lives, to wear them as they would a new and perhaps ill-fitting set of clothes, so that some day they might fit, that they might grow into them, and thereby become fitting expressions of who they had become. Of course, the clothes may be too full in some places at first, and not fit snugly at all, making the wearer feel more than a little awkward. But I well remember getting new clothes as a child that were a little big, and being told that it was important to have “room to grow.”

Indeed, what seems to cause you to trip all over yourself today allows for the possibility of growth tomorrow.

I’ve come to recognize that those who have experienced some form of transformation in their lives sometimes tend to exaggerate both the “before” and “after” dimensions of their lives. So, I want to be up-front about the fact that if I had not become a pastor, I doubt very much that I would have become a member of Hell’s Angels or a child of the darkness. Rather, I think in many respects that I would have become pretty much the same kind of person I am. But because of those whom I have known in the various churches I have served, and you who are God’s people here at Round Hill Community Church, I have been changed in many gracious and special ways ... “for good.”

There is a very unique “spirit” that you embody as a church family.

As the Narthex Plaque proclaims, this church family is not focused upon what distinguishes us from one another, but what we have in common – the thoughtful creed we affirm, the gracious prayer we offer, the shared and individual faith journeys that are ours, the gracious unity we experience amidst our rich diversity. This unity is beautifully reflected at the kneeling rail during communion, where each one is welcomed and has a special place and meaningful opportunities to share your considerable gifts of time, talent, and treasures, as you receive and are nourished by the food God alone can provide..

Indeed, there is an openness and acceptance of all who come through our doors, a genuine delight in greeting friends old and new, and a warm embrace of those times to enjoy and build up a fellowship that is accented by laughter and tears and love ... whether around the parlor table, or at a church dinner at the Community House; participating in lively living room conversations in members' homes, or sitting together in the Meeting Room at one of our forums or meetings; or talking with one another in the hallway admiring the many displays in our art gallery, walking prayerfully around our outdoor labyrinth, or simply sharing in the fun and fellowship of doing crafts in the craft room.

There is also a wondrous curiosity and a yearning to grow in the faith that is ours, a willingness to explore and live the questions of life's meaning, a contagious hope for opportunities to challenge and be challenged, to broaden and deepen understandings of what it means to be a human being "fully alive" in the world today, and to live out these discoveries in a life of service to "the least of these." Indeed, there is a willingness here to share in generous fashion the love and gracious blessings we have received ... and to do so joyfully, in gratitude to God for the loving and life-giving gift of Jesus Christ our Lord.

And without question, there is a great appreciation for meaningful worship, inspiring music, thoughtful sermons that connect the unfolding dramas of our lives with the transforming narrative of our faith, and pastoral prayers that reflect the hungers and hopes, the joys and sorrows, the yearnings and needs we feel upon our hearts being expressed to a loving God who, we believe, hears and receives all these, as we listen for God's still, small voice. Worship happens here as we open ourselves to be comforted and awakened, encouraged and renewed, guided and touched by the presence of God from whose love we are never separated, and whose love we are called to proclaim and share in our words and deeds.

Being with you and experiencing these memorable dimensions in our life together these last 11 years, I believe I have grown in gracious ways. I have become a better preacher, pastor, teacher, counselor, and spiritual friend ... and I am grateful beyond words for the gift you have been to me and my family.

There is a passage at the end of Matthew's 11th chapter that I have gravitated toward through the years as a kind of mantra that anchors me along the journey of faith, and I especial-

ly appreciate the translation of Jesus' words as given in Eugene Peterson's The Message: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life.... Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Here, in this place of grace, this community church family ... among you, my friends ... I have come to feel the truth of these words in powerful ways. Paraphrasing Martin Copenhaver, I don't think anyone would describe me as one of Rev. Adams' "angels of light." But I do believe that by assuming such a role and serving with you in the shared ministry that has been ours, being your pastor has made me better than I am.

And indeed, in many respects, I have come to experience the closer company of our Lord, and I am learning to live more lightly and freely. My hope and prayer is that you have been able to experience some measure of this as well.

Let us pray: O Lord our God, may your word in Christ dwell in us richly. With gratitude in our hearts, may we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to you along our faith journeys. And in whatever we do, in word or deed, may we do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to you through him. Amen.