

January 27, 2008
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First United Church of Christ
Northfield, Minnesota

A Pelican of the Wilderness

Thank you. Serving as your sabbatical supply pastor these last three months has been a great joy. I leave with a host of good memories and with gratitude for the opportunity to do work that I love. I am fortunate.

However, there has been one misunderstanding I need to clear up. True, last Sunday I used a box of Froot Loops as a teaching tool during the “The Word with Children” part of the service. And I’ll admit that having used a box of Joe’s O’s the week before I used the Froot Loops, I could fairly be accused of turning this time into a Sunday morning cereal. But it’s not true that I ever said, or even implied, that the people in this church are just a bunch of Froot Loops.

What I did say is that “the church is LIKE a bowl of Froot Loops”. Just as a single Froot Loop doesn’t make a bowl; so one person doesn’t make a church. You need a good number, the more the better. And like Froot Loops, the more shapes and colors the members come in, this is also for the better – just as long as they are all sweet. That’s what I really said.

Now that we have the Froot Loop issue out of the way, we can deal with another one: what seems like a serious omission in this morning’s order of worship, the lack of any scripture. Actually this is not true. The cover has a verse from Psalm 113, the call to worship is taken from Psalm 51, the confession from Psalm 32, the offertory will be Psalm 100, and the closing words are a verse from Psalm 27. So really, there’s more scripture than usual, just not in the usual place.

For the point I’ll be trying to make this morning, it will help to realize that the Psalms are not all the same type. Psalms 51 and 32, for example, are penitential psalms, a subclass of individual laments. Psalm 100 and 113 are hymns of praise. Psalm 27 is mixed, a psalm of trust, like Psalm 23, then an individual lament. There are also community laments, royal psalms, psalms of thanksgiving, and other types that scholars identify.

I start a lot of days by reading the Psalms. I began this practice about three years ago at the suggestion of a member of the conference staff. Three years ago I went through a difficult time, being hospitalized twice for major depression. As a result, for my mental health, I had to resign from a church that I loved and had served for twenty-six years.

I didn't work again for a year and a half. When I started feeling better, I began to get comfortable being unemployed. Reading the sports section over a second cup of coffee, watching a couple of old movies every day – not so bad actually. When I told my psychiatrist how comfortable I was becoming, he told me I needed more stress in my life and should start looking for a job. Thanks a lot. That's what you get for a \$15.00 co-pay.

This morning I have several reasons for talking about my experience with depression. As I said last week, years ago I was inspired by a young woman who stood up during the joys and concerns at my church and told the congregation about her eating disorder. Her honesty and her trust of the congregation moved me deeply. It still does. I felt God was very close as she spoke. Humbly I'm trying to follow her example.

Also I'm talking about my own experience with depression to make the point that it's nothing to be ashamed of. Depression needs to be talked about and the stigma removed, so that those who believe they might be suffering from depression find it easier to tell somebody and to get help. For most people, depression is a treatable illness. You can get your life back. Things can be so much better. I know. There is so much unavoidable pain in the world, but depression is pain you can do something about. Please tell someone.

From what I have learned, depression has multiple causes: biochemistry, heredity, diet, exercise, age, etc. According to my experience, stress also helps to cause depression. For me, the demands of being a parish minister became terribly stressful. Don't misunderstand. I love being a minister – having the opportunity to help people, to use my gifts to serve something I believe in.

Indeed whatever gifts you have you can use them as a parish minister. Whatever the gifts are – from preaching to boiler repair, from choral singing to computer networking, from theological explication to bathroom heating technology – if you have them, you can use them in the parish. But by the same token, whatever gift you don't have – however far it may be from your job description – your lack of that gift will become apparent over time.

And if you're not careful, needing gifts you don't have will wear you down. You can exhaust yourself trying to meet demands, real and perceived, you're simply not capable of meeting. You can go to great lengths trying to compensate for the gifts you don't have, but it won't work. Ultimately trying to give what you don't have just exhausts you. I know.

Out of this experience, I believe every church has a responsibility to look out for its pastor and indeed all its staff, to make sure that what happened to me doesn't happen to them. Cut them some slack; keep the expectations realistic. And do the same for yourself. Parish ministry is what I've done all my life. I know how stressful it can be. But I also know that many of you do jobs and live lives that are high stress.

Finally I chose to talk about my own experience with depression this morning because it leads me inevitably to talk about the psalms I love. These psalms helped me to get well, not the hymns of praise or the psalms of trust, but the laments, the dark psalms. Why? Because when I was in the depths of depression, when nothing else could reach me, these psalms did. They were true to my hurt. The dark psalms don't minimize or try to make nice. As Kathleen Norris wrote of these psalms, they "are relentlessly realistic".

I want to share some verses from a few of them: From Psalm 6, "I am weary with my groaning; all the night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears." From Psalm 44, "Thou hast sore broken us in the place of dragons. and covered us with the shadow of death." From Psalm 69, "I sink into deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me." From Psalm 102, "By reason of the voice of my groaning, my bones cleave to my skin. I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert."

Some of these images are so dark I wonder how they made it into the Bible. But they did, and I'm grateful. For me they give Biblical faith deep credibility. I know them to be truth. Their truth becomes the bedrock on which the other psalms that speak of hope and praise are built.

Carol Bly wrote that American Christianity blinds itself to pain and thereby makes a falsehood of its praise. True, but it's also true that the dark psalms do just the opposite. They open our eyes to the reality of pain. Because these psalms are so ruthlessly honest about pain, we can trust other psalms that promise the end of pain.

Before joy and praise happen, pain must be voiced. This is true of psychotherapy. It's true of the psalms that antedate psychotherapy by millennia. Lamentation comes before healing, before God transforms our pain into something else.

Through the dark night of the soul, through family and friends, through our church – God changes our mourning into dancing. As in the Psalm 30, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." As in Psalm 40, "He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my foot upon a rock, and established my goings." As in Psalm 42, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? Why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance." And again Psalm 30, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

That's about it. Again, I want to thank you for this opportunity to serve and to use the gifts that I have. I have learned so much here. I've had so many interesting times, from making paper chains with a six-year old to decorate the church's Christmas tree to attending a trustees meeting that clocked out at three hours and fifteen minutes. For three months I've even had my own parking place. Thank you.