

Reflections on Ministry

By

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These reflections focus on ordained ministry, for that is the ministry I have exercised in the church these last eighteen years. All baptized Christians are ministers, but some are set aside within the community of faith, and compensated by the community in order that particular functions may be handled with due, proper, and holy consideration.

I felt myself called, or directed toward ordained ministry when I was in my late teens. However, ordination was not an option for women in those days, nor had the “women’s movement” of later decades yet stirred our souls to think it should be. I chalked those inner feelings up to an overdose of sausage for breakfast, and spent many subsequent years seeking a place in the service of God that felt life-giving for me.

I tried many ways of serving and all were good, but none were “it.” Always there was within me a sense that I was supposed to do or be something more. By the time I was in my late 30’s I had married, acquired six children within a seven year time span, and was busy serving on the altar guild and working as a church musician. When through the work of spiritual direction, I began to return to the idea of ordination, I was overcome with a deep sense of inadequacy. I was too old, had never finished a bachelor’s degree, only knew how to be a wife and mother, etc. The excuse list was enormous. It was eradicated by two things. One was a gentle priest who tapped me on the shoulder in the midst of a worship service and pointed to a verse in his Bible: “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.” (1 Thess. 5:24) The other was my bishop, who simply looked at me and said, “I believe you are called to be a priest. It will happen.”

And so, at a time that seemed all wrong by everyone’s standards except those of God and the bishop, my journey toward ordination was more intentionally undertaken.

I’m sure people asked me what I was doing. I’m sure someone asked me what it meant to be ordained, and what it meant to be a minister. I don’t remember any of my answers. What I do remember is a peculiar inner feeling of peace surrounded by lots of confusion. I knew I was doing the right thing. I just wasn’t sure what it was I was doing exactly.

I agree with preacher and theologian Barbara Brown-Taylor, who notes that “God does not call us once but many times.”¹ In my own experience, some calls are deeper than others, and my call to ordained ministry felt very deep indeed. So I stumbled along the path as it opened before me, trying only to be faithful and to put one foot in front of the other. Finally, the day came. I knelt and episcopal hands were placed on my head. The next morning, I stepped in front of our chapel altar to celebrate the early communion service. It was as if I stepped into footprints that were waiting for me, and those footprints felt like putting on a pair of slippers that were exactly my size.

My studies in seminary helped me to understand what I knew in my heart: Ordination to the priesthood did not make me different from lay persons. It only put me in a different place. Again, I use the words of Barbara Brown-Taylor:

“My office...is in the church. That is where I do what I do, and what I do makes me different from those among whom I serve. But my vocation is to be God’s person in the world, and that makes me the same as those among whom I serve.”²

That is my perspective for these reflections. An office in a church building, a place among the people of God that is at once glorious and mundane, prosaic and terrifying.

Seven years into my life as a priest I took a three month sabbatical. I was definitely ready for some time off. While I loved my work, my daily appearance at the office had begun to feel like a task. There was a creeping cynicism around the edges of my pastoral care calls, and I had become a lot less concerned about the hymns in the Sunday liturgy. “Sing whatever you want,” I would say to the organist. That was definitely not my style!

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. The Preaching Life, (Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1993), p. 23.

² Ibid, p. 29.

Since our diocese encouraged a sabbatical policy, I had built this one into my letter of agreement. Not having much in the way of resources, I spent the three months at home. I was finishing up a two-year Masters of Theology in Preaching at Duke Divinity School, so I used my time to research and write my thesis. I love research and writing, but it is not the best use of sabbatical time. Scholarship does not always allow the soul much space to stretch and breathe.

Despite the efforts of study, I did find time to rest, and I returned to my office refreshed and renewed and committed to one thing: Never again would I let more than five years pass without a sabbatical. At this point in my life, being well and whole had become very important to me. I worked out in the gym regularly, spent no more than two nights out in every seven, and tried to hold my work hours somewhere in the neighborhood of sixty per week.

My children were all young adults, struggling to find their place in the world. The latter years of my marriage had not been good, and my children had plenty of “stuff” to take into therapy. I was committed to being there for them, knowing that my commitment would necessarily be longer than the average parent, because of the damage that needed time for healing. It was, however, a struggle to be present for them, tend to my own needs for growth, and administrate and minister in a growing congregation.

As a survivor of incest and abuse, I had a particular empathy for women in pain, and it did not surprise me to find myself dealing with them in the parish. What was surprising was how much of ministry engaged this wounded part of my past.

At this point in my life, ordained ministry was very much a definition of self, but I believed I could keep certain things about myself outside the boundaries of that definition. Whatever pain was current in my life was surely a personal problem, and I did my best to make sure it had no effect on my ministry. Sometimes that meant working a seventy-hour week, just to keep the pain at bay. Sometimes it meant bending the truth in order to keep from making confession to a group of my own parishioners. I did have a support system of two or three other clergy and lay people beyond the bounds of my own congregation, and that helped enormously. Still, there was a split in my life and there was a level of deception that, when I allowed myself to own it, brought me much shame.

Long before I had heard of Celtic Christianity and the notion of “thin places” I had used the term “thin places” to identify times in my life when I was “skating on thin ice,” when things were dicey, chancy and anxiety-provoking. Part of me was drawn toward thin places. I had struggled with obesity since early childhood and frankly, I craved any connection I could find with the word “thin.” Perhaps if I could be in thin places often enough, my physical body would conform. Yes, that was a silly notion, but I have to own that it was in my mind, perhaps as a coping mechanism when the anxiety of being in a thin place grew too great.

But the other part of me recognized these as places of high risk. Above all else, I wanted to keep my ministry risk-free. I held high ideals about giving only my best to the people of God, of loving them more and better than I could love myself. So even as I was drawn toward them, I thought I should stay away from thin places.

Unfortunately – or perhaps fortunately – the heart of ministry for me has always been at the Table, and most particularly in that ultimate of thin places, the moment of the fraction. As the bread is broken, there is an empty space – as empty as the tomb of the risen God. To me, that space speaks the presence of infinite possibility for life. It is a gift to us from God, and it is always there, time after time. I wanted to keep the deaths of my personal life separate from my “work” but the work itself – the liturgy – would not allow me the luxury. It insisted that God could always provide resurrection and new life.

Therapy and spiritual direction helped of course. So did that decision to become physically more healthy.

But I think the thing that changed my life and my ministry more surely than anything else was and is the nature of ministry itself. Henri Nouwen has said:

“If teaching, preaching, individual pastoral care, organizing, and celebrating are acts of service that go beyond the level of professional expertise, it is precisely because in these acts the minister is asked to lay down his own life for his friends...For many individuals professional training means power. But the minister, who takes off his clothes to wash the feet of his friends, is powerless, and his training and formation are meant to enable him to face his own weakness without fear and make it available to others. It is exactly this creative weakness that gives the ministry its momentum.”³

The first time the penny dropped for me was at a training event for working with sexual abuse in the church. I realized that women had come to me for pastoral care, and I had been drawn to this particularly painful place in ministry not because of any gifts or strengths, but because of my weakness – because of my wounds, and my own continuing journey of healing. “To lay down my life” for those in my care did not mean being strong enough to pick up their lives, but rather being will to put down mine, to have it opened by God and used as a passage for God’s love and grace.

It would be wonderful to be able to say that having had this great insight made my daily life instantly perfect. But life, and human beings, do not work that way.

³ Nouwen, Henri J. M. Creative Ministry, (New York: Doubleday, 1978), p. 113.

However, slowly but surely, I was beginning to understand a great deal more about the ministry of presence, and I worried less and less about whether or not I had the skills to accomplish some particular task.

My reflections on life in general, and ministry in particular, became more deeply infused with notions of resurrection. My preaching kept circling the same message: We have been created by a God who can bring new life out of any kind of death – even the worst death that human beings can devise. I began to read books on the holocaust and kept up with the latest psychology on victims and victimization. All of this was useful, and connections with life in the parish were frequent.

Still there was a separation within me, and a notion that such separation was necessary and right. I went through divorce, and told myself that the effects of the trauma on my daily life were minimal. I held to the notion that the details of my particular situation – that my husband was choosing to live a gay life-style, that he was an alcoholic – that these details were educational but had no other connection to my ministry.

The wonderful thing about ordained ministry is that its bedrock is faithfulness. The notion that I, as minister, can be stumbling around within myself, seeking God one day and fleeing from God the next – and that my stumbling can actually be a blessing to others – that to me is a miracle. What I believe God requires of me is that faithfulness, that willingness to continue to put one foot in front of the other, day after day. I am called, in the manner of comedian Woody Allen, to showing up.

Eventually I was employed in a congregation that had an on-going interest in the ancient world of Celtic spirituality. Again I began to read and to ponder. I was drawn to the Celtic notion that this world and the next were not separated by some imaginary line, but rather woven together, like threads of a tapestry. The notion of “thin places” was once more before me – this time as places where the universe was literally worn thin by the ceaseless communion of God and God’s people.

I began to yearn to experience such a place.

It was time for another sabbatical. Accident, or the Holy Spirit, placed in my hands information about the Lilly program for Clergy Renewal, and I decided to apply. I had no particular design in mind. It was just that money had been a continual struggle across the years, and the thought of taking time off and not having to worry about money was tantalizing. I was somewhat dismayed by the requirements of the application forms, but I began writing anyway. I do not know at what point my worlds came crashing together. I only know that I had written several paragraphs and found myself in tears. I went back to read what I had

written. I was proposing to the good folks at Lilly that they fund a trip to Celtic realms (not a surprise) on which I would take my four adult daughters and a spiritual director (a very great surprise indeed!).

I knew that if I followed through on this proposal, the parts of my life that I had tried to keep separate would be woven together as surely and completely as God’s universe. All the doubts about myself as woman and mother would be drawn into the spiritual fray if this trip came to pass. I was pretty sure the barriers I had created would be irrevocably disturbed.

Part of the gift of this sabbatical was the grantor’s insistence that it involve the congregation. We created “daybooks” with a daily scripture, theme, and questions to ponder. We invited prayer partners to join the pilgrimage from their homes and pray us across the water and back again. I am convinced that the energy of this prayer support was vital connection and affected the results of our adventure.

In his delightful guide, The Art of Pilgrimage, Phil Cousineau suggests: “Imagine your departure as a metamorphosis...treat everything that comes your way as part of the sacred time that envelops your pilgrimage.”⁴ That notion of metamorphosis became central to me. I knew everything was about to change. I knew I could not hurry the change, but I could welcome it.

So it came about that I found myself standing before a Dali painting of the resurrected Christ in a museum in Glasgow, explaining what I saw to my youngest child while she listened earnestly. I sat on a rock above a beach on Iona and watched my four girls gathering tiny spiral shells, exclaiming over the glory of creation and using the shells to make creations of their own. I heard one daughter sobbing with homesickness, and another offering comfort. I observed two of them have a disagreement (how many of those had I watched over the years?!) and watched them solve the problem and “make up” – all without any interference by me. Encouraged by the spiritual friend we had brought along, I relaxed and began to feel more whole.

My daughters and I met with our spiritual director each evening and talked. But, being who we are, we also talked while traveling from one place to the next, while standing in line, while sharing a meal, over afternoon tea in the hotel lobby. We were six women with nothing to do but be with one another, and we indulged ourselves mightily.

Of course we came home changed. How we changed is still being revealed. Certainly my daughters and I formed a new and stronger relationship as adult women. I rejoice to see them united in a new bond of understanding with one

⁴ Cousineau, Phil. The Art of Pilgrimage, (Boston, MA: Conari Press, 1998), p. 71.

another. I am comforted by a sense of their presence and love in my life, by the new understanding they have of what I do, which gives me a new perspective on my life and ministry.

That new perspective is best understood through words like healing, wholeness and salvation. The catechism in our Book of Common Prayer teaches that the mission of the Church is the reconciliation of all people to God and to one another, and that all ministry is first and foremost concerned with reconciliation. My sabbatical trip with my girls was full of healing and reconciliation. I came home knowing something deep within my bones about what it is both to be human and also to be a child of God.

Articulating all that I have learned since I began that last sabbatical is impossible, although this reflection is a welcome beginning. I know that God’s gifts of grace and love have enlivened my teaching and preaching and continue to bless me in the midst of the Divine Liturgy. They also bless the more mundane parts of ordained life, and I suppose that is what I most want to share. What I would like other clergy to know is that today is never the end. Ordained ministry can be full of discouragement and cynicism. In the post-9/11 world, ordained ministry can easily feel and appear irrelevant. We cannot stop the carnage, whether it is happening on our own shores or far away. The presence of evil in our daily lives is very real, and our renunciation of it in our baptismal vows can seem very, very small. Sometimes the life that emanates from the church office can feel like a dead weight, a burden full of insoluble human struggles and intractable human interactions.

I now have a card taped to the top of my desk which reads “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Cor. 5:17-18) More than ever I am aware of the gift of a particular kind of hope that comes to us only through Jesus Christ. This hope is, I believe, the great need, the great aching in the world today. Science and technology have given us new knowledge and new insights, but they cannot provide the ultimate answers to the mystery of life and death and the purpose of the universe. Our global village has both enriched our understanding of what it means to be human and also revealed the depths of poverty. Whether from a tsunami or cyclone in the Pacific, or a hurricane in the Atlantic, we now are fully cognizant of the extent of human need and the breadth and depth implied by the words “total destruction.”

However well-informed and well-educated we may be, I do not believe we as religious leaders can second-guess the decisions or even the rationale of the world’s political leaders. What we can do is preach the gospel consistently and embrace fully the task given us by Jesus Christ: to continue his work of reconciling the world to God. This healing ministry is unique to Christians, and it

is both Christ’s gift and his charge to the Church. To support that ministry, the community of faith sets aside certain persons within the Church, to be first of all lovers, and then healers.

To be lovers we must bring our whole selves to the task. We cannot compartmentalize our lives and attempt to leave our own pain outside the circle of God’s love. In fact, our personal pain provides the openings for God’s love to flow through us to others. To be healers, we must constantly pray for and be open to our own salvation, for God will heal us and will use that healing for others as well.

Today, this is how I view the life of ordained ministry. It may not be so tomorrow, for the ministry is not mine, but belongs to God, and is therefore new every morning.