



minister

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Our Sense of Call

The Call Over the Long Haul

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We are told that before David went to confront Goliath, he picked from the river five smooth stones and put them in his shepherd's bag. So, when it comes to persevering over the long haul in ministry, the question becomes, "What five smooth stones are in my shepherd's bag?"

Not that I think of ministry in the church as a never-ending battle with Goliath! I love being a pastor. The people are my friends. I am their friend. Of course, there are times we don't get along. Robert Frost put it as his epitaph: "I had a lover's quarrel with the world."

What minister called to ministry doesn't have from time-to-time a lover's quarrel with the church? Perhaps second only to boredom, nothing gets us to call into question sticking it out for the long haul more than those quarreling times, those stretches on the road when the going is tough, patches of conflict. I think of the persistent misunderstandings and endless meetings that accomplish nothing more than having a meeting, and frustrations and irritations and disappointments galore. I think of the parking lot conversations and hush-hush hallway warnings about who is not getting along and who is upset with whom and who is unhappy with the pastor. The lover's quarrel gets messy and aggravating, nasty and exhausting, and we are tempted to quit the call.

Like the disciples, we never know all we are getting into or see what's ahead. If we did, would we even start the journey, let alone hang in for the long haul? Then again, can we ever find the hope that holds us to persevere for the long haul?

"We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God," wrote Paul. "And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5:2-5)

In those tough times on the journey of ministry, we are forced to look inward to see what's inside us, to look inside our shepherd's bag, because what's inside that bag will help carry us along over the long haul.

I share my five smooth stones, not because they should be yours. You may not even like mine. I share them because they serve to carry me in the call over the long haul. The stones we choose to put into our shepherd's bag are there for that renewing, refreshing, long-haul persevering work of the Spirit in us and through us that holds us in hope. And "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the

Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

One of my stones is this: Wherever I am in my calling, I am not alone. I take my cue from Walter Rauschenbusch on this matter, along with several others. Early in his eleven-year ministry at the Second German Baptist Church in New York City’s Hell’s Kitchen in the late 1800’s, he took the initiative to not be alone and to meet with two other friends--Leighton Williams, pastor of the Amity Baptist Church, and Nathaniel Schmidt, pastor of the Swedish Baptist Church. The three met each week for Bible study and reflection, and every Sunday afternoon for years they gathered together to share the Lord’s Supper. After the model of Ignatius of Loyola, they formed a new “Society of Jesus.” They were together, and met together in weekly study, discussion, mutual give-and-take and common worship, their thinking clarified, their devotion deepened, and their communion with one another led them to make a difference in the community around them as participants in God’s transforming work in the world. When their ministries eventually took them to other settings, they still reunited once a year in upstate New York for a long retreat. Out of that small group of pastors came “The Brotherhood of the Kingdom,” which eventually became an international movement of personal and social spirituality. They were not alone in ministry.

To persevere over the long haul, I need spiritual friends and soul mates and ministry colleagues. I need to hang around with people who replenish me in ways that restore me.

Another stone is this: Just as I am, I am unfinished. One of the many fabulous places to visit in Florence, Italy, is the Uffizi Museum, the oldest art gallery in the world. Some of the greatest works of the Renaissance and a host of ancient Roman statues grace the walls and halls of this unrivaled house of art and beauty, culture and history.

My wife and I roamed those halls and then came to room fifteen, which contains works by the young Leonardo da Vinci. That’s where I saw it—one of the most important paintings in all of Italy. It was his “Adoration of the Magi.” It has left a lasting impression on me.

He was commissioned in 1481 to paint it for a monastery near Florence. It’s a large painting on wood, nearly eight feet square. He completed the underdrawing but left for Milan without completing the painting. Only a portion is painted, and that much later by a hand other than da Vinci’s.

That is what speaks to me. And what I have reflected on so often is that it was never finished by

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- To assume responsibility for the faithful practice of the ministerial calling;
- To develop and promote ethical standards that both guide and shape the way in which the vocation of ministry is performed;
- To assume personal responsibility for and to encourage physical and emotional well-being in the practice of ministry;
- To inform, support and encourage one another in the deepening of personal and communal spiritual life;
- To work together to develop the skills necessary to become effective servants of Christ’s church
- To encourage growing friendships that inform and correct the leader as she or he seeks to faithfully respond to the call of God in Christ Jesus.



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- Serves as an advocate for its members in times of difficulty and conflict;
- Is solely focused on the well-being of clergy as they engage in the ministerial calling in all of its dimensions.

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Leonardo. That's what makes it so important. It is his unfinished "Adoration of the Magi."

How fitting, because the Magi's adoration is unfinished without my adoration and your adoration and all creation's adoration of Christ. And I am an unfinished Magi. My adoration of Christ in the call to ministry is incomplete, my homage to him is unfinished. My coming closer to Jesus is in progress. My formation in the call is still ongoing. I persevere on the long haul knowing I am unfinished and the Magi in me is incomplete. The painting of my adoration of Christ has more to go. This keeps me going over the long haul. I am unfinished. The call is unfinished.

A third stone: Pulled as I am, I must focus more on approachability than availability. That's what struck me years ago while reading Eugene Peterson's The Contemplative Pastor. Obviously, we make ourselves available to others in congregational life and the community. But what does being available 24/7 really communicate? Being busy. We work hard to be omnipresent as busy pastors.

The disciples, we are told in Mark 6, were too busy even to eat, with which I can identify more often than I like to admit. That's when Jesus told them to get in a boat and get away for a while.

To persevere over the long haul we have to be careful that we are not so busy that others see us as unapproachable. There are two doors into my church office. One is through my administrative assistant's office, and the other directly from the hallway. That direct door has a double lock on it to secure entry from the outside. When I came to Baptist Temple, I began opening that hallway door. As people passed by, their first comment was always, "I never knew this door was here!" They thought it was a door to a closet, not to the pastor's office. Evidently in the past it had been kept shut to get work done without being bothered. Full calendars, frenetic schedules, closed doors to get work done, all shout, "I'm important. I'm busy." But here's the thing: When people don't feel free to approach us because they see us as very busy, it is, as Peterson warns, the death knell on a ministry. For a variety of reasons, when being busy as available pastors is more important than being available as approachable pastors, the haul won't be long! So, I carry with me the stone of approachability over availability.

And I carry this stone: As careful as I am, I embrace failures. It's not always easy. It took traveling down the road a good distance before I added this smooth stone to my bag. Being successful and productive are such powerful and popular drives. When I came to realize and truly affirm that my calling is not

to be successful, but faithful, not to produce results, but to bear witness, I began holding myself more lightly over the long haul.

I find one of the important dual threads in the Gospel of Mark to be failure and faith. Jesus' parents (3:21), his hometown (6:1-6), the authorities (3:22-30, 14:63-65), and his disciples (4:35-41) all fail. Not only are the disciples shown failing to understand what it means for Jesus to be the "Son of God," they are shown thinking that success means being popular and attracting big crowds. In writing about Christian discipleship Bonhoeffer said, "Never let (disciples) of Jesus pin (their) hopes on large numbers." The disciples were distracted by that temptation, which was but one of their failures.

Yet the disciples' failures never caused Jesus to give up on them. At the empty tomb the divine messenger told the women to tell "the disciples and Peter" that they would see the risen Jesus. The women fled in fear and failed to tell anyone. Nevertheless the church formed and the message spread and the church is here today despite their failure. Somehow their failure was overcome by God's promise.

From this good news I receive great consolation and comfort. I persevere over the long haul by remembering and believing and trusting that God's power and love will triumph over my failures, which gives me the grace to embrace them.

In his novel, Wheat that Springeth Green, J. F. Powers has a priest, Father Joe Hackett, say, "After years of trying to walk on the water...it's good to come ashore and feel the warm sand between my toes." I wonder how much of what we do every day is driven by this desire to show we can walk on water. It often takes those tough stretches on the long haul in ministry to let go of this illusion and false self, this "I can walk on water" self, as a pastor. We fail over the long haul and we are held in a grace that will not let us go. Faith on the long haul is not trying to be infallible water-walkers. Faith is trusting God to overcome our failures.

Like Father Joe, I can tell you it is a wonderfully liberating day of grace when I can say that it feels so good to accept my fallible followings and misunderstandings and missteps and mistakes, my humanness and pastoral limitations, and come ashore and feel the warm sand between my toes. I can no more be omnipotent than omnipresent, and I've stopped trying hard to be either one. Approachability and fallibility are precious smooth stones in my shepherd's bag, and they help me persevere over the long haul.

Here is the fifth smooth stone in my bag: As hu-

man as I am, I share wounds. I understand “truth” in scripture to mean not “fact,” but “unhiddenness.” To persevere over the long haul, it’s more important that we bring our wounds out of the darkness and share them rather than hide them as if pastors never hurt. It is in sharing our wounds that others feel free to share their wounds and together we become, as Nouwen said, wounded healers to one another, so that together we can persevere over the long haul.

There is a wonderful passage in Zora Neal Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when Janie, the young southern black woman who comes into her own and courageously finds herself in a time and place that didn’t come easily or make life easy, says: “When God made The Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So, they beat him into nothing but sparks, but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each one over with mud.” When the shine of our real self cannot be shown and our unique song cannot be sung, covered over with mud by all kinds of forces, it hurts - it is wounding. When we cannot show our shine or sing our song as the persons and pastors God created and called us to be, it is painful, wounding. When pastors are not allowed to be human, when spouses are pressed to play a role rather than be themselves, or when our children are expected to be different as children, or worse yet when we as parents and pastors won’t let them be themselves as children, they hurt. And the hurt should not be hidden. That is un-truth.

With the sensitivity of the Spirit, it is good to share our wounds and become wounded healers to one another, wounded soul to wounded soul. At the beginning of his story, *Dr. Fischer of Geneva or the Bomb Party*, Graham Greene has one character say to another: “Do you have a soul?” “I think so.” “Well, I’m sure you have a soul.” “How do you know?” “Because you have suffered.”

Not only do I believe people are hungry for God, I also believe people are hungry to see our souls, which means to know we suffer, we hurt, too. I believe that sharing our woundedness, as Frederick Buechner does for me in his most healing book, *Telling Secrets*, is the essence of Christian community. When we share our wounds, others come to see that we are people, with sand beneath our toes, whom they can trust with their own pain, and they can then feel free to share their wounds. We become wounded healers to each other in the image of Jesus as a community. With that, the call continues over the long haul.

So often the five smooth stones draw me back to what de Chardin once wrote: “Trust in the slow work of God.” Yes, the slow work of God. Rest in the slow work of God. The call is a long haul.

One of my favorite theologians, writers and story tellers is John Shea. His writings have helped me persevere over the long haul, and here is a piece of a prayer he wrote for the long haul to the *Lord of Blood, Lord of Bone, Lord of Flesh*:

Give me, Broken Lord,
the long courage for compromised truths,
small justice, partial peace.
Keep my soul in my teeth,
hold me in hope, and teach me to fight
the way farmers with hoes defeat armies
and rolled up manuscripts survive wars.

What a gracious way it is to prayerfully persevere over the long haul in ministry with your soul in your teeth, being held in hope and fighting the good fight the way farmers with hoes defeat armies, and rolled up manuscripts survive wars.

Because truth is, over the long haul, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

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- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means of expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches USA
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