

"Graced by Trust" by Beth Lefever

(Preached at Berrien UU Fellowship 5/24/09)

Seven years ago, come this July, I first stepped through your doors as a guest speaker, preaching on the topic, "Living a Life That Matters," a title taken from a book of the same name by Harold S. Kushner.

In my sermon that day, I used a quote by Abraham Heschel who said, "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy."

And I shared with you my version of the Ten Commandments:

1. Listen to your intuitive self, for therein lies the voice of god.
2. Stay in the moment, for to do otherwise is to waste the precious gift of life.
3. Feel your feelings; they are your richness and your depth.

And so on.

I had prepared carefully for that service.

Though I had been preaching two or three sermons a year at my home church in Elkhart for the five years prior to that July morning, I had really just begun branching out to provide "pulpit supply" to area churches, an expansion of my ministry experience encouraged by my then-mentor Gordon Gibson.

I had prepared carefully, and was relatively at ease when I stepped into the pulpit here that day, for having met a few of you upon entering the building, I had quickly discerned that you were, at the least, not going to harm me.

And you didn't!

You were warm, gracious, and responsive, and, in the words of Sally Field, "You liked me! You really liked me!" (Field's 1985 Oscar acceptance speech.)

You did seem to like me, and I really liked you.

I liked the caring that was evident in your sharing of joys and sorrows; the sense of real community that I perceived.

I liked your attentiveness to my needs, as a speaker, and more, to my words.

And I really liked your frank and honest exchange of thoughts and feelings in Circle Talk after the service. I hoped you would invite me back sometime, and you did — three more times during that church year.

And then that summer, Charles Long contacted me to sound me out about whether I would consider contracting with you to provide pulpit supply the next year.

Would I?!

Soon after, I had an agreement to provide six services in the 2003-2004 year, and then nine services for 2004-2005, after which Tom Hackley sounded me out about moving to half-time hours and becoming your Religious Leader.

I stepped into that position, still in undergraduate school, trusting that you would guide me in the ways of ministry as I shared with you the not-quite-fully-formed gifts and skills of ministry I already had.

Our ministry would be mutual, as all true ministry is mutual; I would minister to you and you would minister to me -- and to one another.

Sometime within that first year of half-time ministry, Viola Moore, not content to let me idle away my time in undergrad school, hustled me off to Meadville Lombard for an interview.

Meadville waived my final year of undergrad school and admitted me into the seminary, and I was on my way.

September 24, 2006 was my second service of my second year of half-time ministry here at BUUF, and the 39th sermon I delivered from your pulpit.

And it was my first service after a week of orientation at Meadville Lombard. Let me read to you a little from the sermon I preached here that day.

I said:

I can't tell you whether this last week was, for me, more frightening or exhilarating, but it was emotionally intense.

Twelve of us — the entering class of residential students at Meadville Lombard Theological School, eight women, four men, all of varying ages, backgrounds, theological perspectives, all with different strengths and capabilities, all with varying and fluctuating degrees of doubt, anxiety and fear — had gathered.

We were there for orientation into the life and culture of the school and community.

We were there to learn what to expect from seminary life and to bond in our mutual anxiety.

We were there to consider what we stand to lose and what we hope to gain as we step out on this new path, this very particular leg of our own life journeys.

And I continued: I believe there were none of us who did not have some doubts as to whether we should be there; some concerns as to whether we were up to the task; some question as to whether the sacrifices -- emotional, material, relational, financial, and the sacrifice of time -- were sacrifices we would be willing to make over the long haul.

Except in rare moments of spiritual clarity, I said, I expect those doubts will continue to plague me.

The task seems daunting; the purpose far larger than I.

Now, today, I am tempted to ask if you were able to read between the lines of what I said on that day, but I realize there was little subtlety in my message — I was terrified.

I went on to talk with some confidence about my call to ministry, because I was confident of my call.

But I was terrified of the process.

But... you had expectations of me that I did not want to disappoint.

Others did, as well — my loving, supportive home church, UU Elkhart; new friends (my old friends knew my fear well enough that they more hoped for me than expected of me); my undergrad advisor who only finally acquiesced to my plea that he write a letter of recommendation for early entrance into seminary, and then wrote such a glowing letter that I feared he had me confused with someone else; and Evan, though I knew he would support me even if I did jump theological ship.

But of all those people (excepting Evan) — of all those people, there were none whose expectations I wanted to meet more than yours.

And let me tell you why.

I wanted to meet your expectations because you trusted that I would.

You had placed your trust in me from early on, and certainly from the time you voted me in as your Religious Leader.

You graced me with your trust, and that has meant everything to me.

Your trust has been my cloak against the storms of doubt.

Your trust has been the well from which, time after time, I ladled my courage.

You graced me with your trust, and if you trusted me, who was I to doubt?

Now you may think little of that, of the trust in me you exhibited. You may think that that's simply what churches do.

But that's not necessarily the case.

Pastor and consultant Alice Mann wrote about church dynamics in her book "The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transitions in Congregations."

In the book, she delineates characteristics of churches of different sizes, which she categorizes as follows:

The Family Church — up to fifty active members.

The Pastoral Church — fifty to 150 active members.

The Program Church — 150 to 350 members.

The Corporate Church — 350 or more active members.

We here at BUUF are obviously a Family-sized church, according to her criteria, and here, in part, is what she says about the Family Church:

[The Family Church] functions as a family, with appropriate parental figures.

The patriarchs and matriarchs control the church's leadership needs.

What Family Churches want from clergy is pastoral care, period.

For clergy to assume that they are also the chief executive officer and the resident religious authority is to make a serious blunder.

She continues in that vein, though it is not as negative as it may sound in those first brief comments.

Most of her comments are aimed at assisting church members to understand how they operate, and what does and does not work well for them, as well as helping the pastor of the different-sized churches avoid the pitfalls inherent in whatever sized church they have been called to serve.

Here is what she has to say about the Pastoral-sized church, the next largest, and the size of our church in Elkhart:

Clergy are usually at the center of a Pastoral Church.

There are so many parental figures around that they need someone at the center to manage them. A leadership circle, made up of the pastor and a small cadre of lay leaders, replaces the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Family Church.

And just to acquaint you with the other two categories, she says that the Program Church, the church of 150 to 350 members, which is the size of the Muncie Church where I will be

serving my Internship next year, ...grows out of the necessity for a high-quality personal relationship with the pastor to be supplemented by other avenues of spiritual feeding.

Programs must now begin to fill that role [the need for other forms of spiritual nourishment]. The well-functioning Program Church has many cells of activity which are headed up by lay leaders... who also take on some pastoral functions.

In describing these pastoral functions she gives examples of lay leaders making note of a committee member who seems depressed or distracted, or one who has been unaccountably absent, and following up with a phone call to the person, or a word to the pastor.

She also cites leaders opening meetings with a check-in time, or a prayer or a reading — nurturing others within the programs and business of the church.

About the largest of our churches, the Corporate Church, she discusses multiple staff, abundant resources and a church life marked by complexity and diversity.

That is not a church I am interested in serving, and it is not likely one that BUUF will ever become.

What BUUF is, is a Family Church of a different sort.

It is a Family Church with a Pastoral Approach.

In my experience here, though we have wise and beloved elders, there are really no patriarchs or matriarchs who would claim that role, or accept it.

You very willingly, or so it seemed to me, inserted me into a leadership position, even going so far as to nudge me along when you thought I was not exerting enough leadership.

Truly!

"Feel free to speak up on issues where you think we need input," one or another of you would say to me privately.

"Really?" I would ask as I felt my way into my role.

"Yes," you would nod with a smile.

I had not wanted to be presumptuous, but thus given permission, I was granted the opportunity to learn my pastoral role and how I should go about fulfilling it.

I was able to practice being a minister.

I was able to try my wings, and then flutter them regularly.

It was a bit harder for me to make you aware I was available for pastoral care, a role in which I had less uncertainty.

You are an independent lot and did not seem accustomed to calling on a minister when you were ill or hurting or angry or confused.

But slowly you began to turn to me for that; you began to trust me with your stories and your longings, your worries and concerns.

You began to let me in and allow me to walk alongside you as you traversed the course of your lives.

Pastoral care is a charge of the most profound sort, a privilege of the highest order.

I have been both honored, and deeply moved by your courage, your vulnerability, your authenticity, and the ideals so evident as you struggled with life issues.

And in this capacity, too — or maybe even, especially -- you have taught me.

"From you I receive, to you I give, together we share, and from this we live."

Right?

And then there are our Sunday services.

Who has ever had greater preaching cheerleaders than I have had here with you?

I love being in the pulpit!

I have loved it since the first time I spread my notes out on the lectern and looked up to see the expectant gaze of fellow seekers at UU Elkhart way back in 1997; the time when I first heard the words, "You should be a minister," and first uttered the response, "But I haven't even been to college."

When I arrived here at BUUF, the comments had changed from "You should be a minister" to "I don't know why you need to go to seminary."

Marv's comments were always the best, partly because I knew he knew so many ministers.

He would say, not always, but often enough to keep me humming, things like — "I've seen people with doctorates unable to put together a sermon like that," or, "You should take that one to GA!" Don't think I didn't journal those comments as soon as I got home!

Others of you have been equally affirming, and be assured that I have jotted down your comments, both as a continual source of inspiration, and as a learning device; I document your comments alongside the sermon title and topic in a notebook I keep, which I can later study, figuring out what works well, and what is less effective, what nourishes you, and what leaves you wanting.

This is important to me because I have a deep, deep regard for the liberal religious pulpit.

I believe that what we bring to our pulpits — the longing for truth; the insistence on justice and equality; the effort we put forth to respect opinions that vary greatly from our own — and our encouragement to others toward similar respect; the celebration of diversity that goes far beyond mere tolerance — I believe these things can shape a newer, better world, for it is certain that dogmatism of any kind has never worked well.

I respect the power of our pulpits, and never *ever* step into this, or any other pulpit, without taking a few quiet moments to once again consider what I'm about, what our church is about, and what my responsibility within the pulpit is about.

Beyond that serious regard, is my delight.

I love sharing the charm and wisdom of this unique religion.

I love that here, we open up rather than shut down the width and depth of the Infinite; we ask the questions without needing to proclaim the answers, for, truly, how could we?

I love simply exploring the mystery of life, and the meaning, an exploration key to our faith. We believe so little, in concrete terms, and yet it amounts to so much!

We believe in the basic and inherent goodness of people — even when that goodness is buried beneath the destructive rubble of hurt and fear and lashing out.

We believe that no truth is big enough or succinct enough to serve all people — that, as the bumper sticker says, God is too big for any one religion.

We believe that any evidence of God lies in man and woman and the interdependent web of all existence of which they are a part; that God, however we interpret the concept, is to be found in all great works of art, all acts of creation, and the grandeur of that greatest work of art and creativity — nature; human and otherwise.

Though we may disagree on the details, we largely concur that life is sacred, that

"Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy."

We believe that life is sacred and not to be squandered or stolen or taken for granted, or lived less than wholly and richly and thoughtfully.

And these are the things I love to bring into the pulpit, relying on the truths of other religious traditions, and great thinkers current and past, to enhance what I am bringing to you, or what others bring to me when I am not in the pulpit myself.

Mine has been a slow blossoming, begun late in life, but it has been a blossoming of great joy and deep reverence.

And you have played a significant part in my journey.

This is not goodbye, for I am not yet leaving, and when I do, I hope to return. This is not even "I'll see you later," for I still have the year to complete with you, ending June 30th.

I will be at the annual meeting June 7, and I will be preaching again the second Sunday of July. But that will be a sermon bought at the auction on a topic of the high-bidder's choice: Harvey Johnson.

So I wanted to tell you today how you have ministered to me over the past seven years.

You have a history of ministering to students from Meadville Lombard who came here to try their hand at ministering to you.

You have that history, and will continue that practice in my coming absence and, a few more years down the line, when Evan and I have gone.

But none will you have ministered to as well as you have ministered to me.

Jones said, in our opening reading, "When others allow us to enter their thoughts and feelings, we must be ready to step carefully, as in a sacred place.

We walk with them through the forests of their doubts, the caverns of their anxiety, but also across the meadows of their dreams and the high places of their prayers.

Those are the places you have walked with me — my anxiety, my dreams, my doubts, my prayers. And they are the places I hope you feel I have walked with you.

For that is what the church is really about.

That is how we minister, one to another.

May it ever and ever be so.