



Sunday, January 26, 2020

Putting Myself Out of a Job

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A favorite passage comes from the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis. You recall that Joseph lauded over his brothers that their father gave him a long-sleeved Coat of Many Colors, and that he had dreams of all the brothers, their father and mother bowing down to him; his brothers ganged-up on him, stripped him of that coat, threw Joseph down a well, sold him to a bunch of Hairy Ishmaelites, tore his coat and told their father: Joseph was dead. Years later, when the world was in crisis the brothers came to Egypt for help, and were reunited with Joseph, who said “Be not angry or distressed with what happened in the past, for God used what happened, God sent me before you to provide for you.” On this Sunday emphasizing, Congregational Care, this Sunday of our Annual Meeting, I confess that I am absolutely in awe of you, for God is doing something through you, which Churches never do on their own. Over the last many years you came through some really awful stuff, VPC had its robes stripped, got thrown down a well and felt broken. But you did not simply wring your hands, give up, or go off with a Hairy Bunch of Ishmaelites to another Church.

- Instead you accepted that God might be using you in this time to dream new dreams.
- You made hard choices about who we are as a Church.
- That our mission is about reconciliation in Jesus Christ.
- You went from three full-time Pastors and an Administrator; to your picking up and sharing a great deal of Congregational Care.

There is a subtle but intentional shift here, that what was long considered Pastoral Care, could be done perhaps even better by us as a Congregation, Caring for one another. Someone told me one of my first weeks here, that despite working for years with a Vocal Coach on Broadway, my diction of the word “Congregation” is sloppy, so to be explicit, I should say that you have been about “One Anothering,” caring for one another. DIANE, I have not shared this with you previously, but I truly believe, our purpose as pastors, is: to work ourselves out a job!

Instead of the ministers ministering, preachers preaching, teachers teaching, that the community of faith ALL need to care about one another. Would it not be exciting, if instead of so wide and deep of Polarities, Impeachments, Powerplays and Fear, if we all were the one Body of Christ? I do not believe that is Politics, it is just Common Sense.

Our passage from The Gospel of Matthew is intriguing, in that after his Baptism, Jesus went into the Wilderness where he was tempted. He did not immediately go to Jerusalem or Rome, he did not go to **Seppharis** which was the location of the Jewish Sanhedrin and Universities at the time. No, he went to Capernaum in Galilee. And Only when John the Baptist was arrested and put into prison for being a Political Agitator, did Jesus come forward. Both Jesus and John the Baptist preached the same message “REPENT”. This is not a phrase invented by televangelists. “Repent” means STOP TURN AROUND! Recognize that the direction you have been going is the wrong direction, is away from God. In fact STOP

gets at the point of SABBATH. Quit for a brief time, just quit going where you have been driving yourself, and realize where you are, whose you are.

Immediately before this passage, Matthew quoted the prophet Isaiah... that, "The people who have sat in darkness have seen a great light, those who sat in the region and shadow of death, upon them light has dawned." I would confess to you that while I adore looking up at the stars and constellations here in Arizona, when it is pitch black, I can still be afraid of the dark. I find what I am really afraid of is not the dark itself, it is the feeling of "being afraid" and "my own anxiety in the darkness". On the night of September 11th 2001, we gathered the entire community at the Presbyterian Church. After a long day of each of us ministering in separate places, we united with all the priests and clergy taking part in worship leadership as a united witness. Now decades afterward, what I am told people heard that night and most needed to hear, was: "But the sun will come up tomorrow, God has not allowed a full end." Jesus coming into Galilee, working through Zebulun and Naphtali and Capernaum, was assurance following John's Imprisonment, I guess reassurance against our own anxiety. Knowing that life is going to be okay, that there will be a tomorrow can help us with our anxiety.

I knew a woman who was a great 5th Grade Teacher, and Deacon, Shirley's faith just radiated out of her. Shirley had a husband and two teen-aged kids. AND Shirley had metastatic Cancer, meaning it had already transformed from one organ specific to another and was ravaging her life. Shirley elected that she was going to go in for a Bone Marrow Transplant. To do so at that time, meant that she had to be in isolation for 30 days. During that time, they would remove the marrow, separate the white blood cells that fight infection and disease, multiply them a thousand times, then re-implant that marrow back into her. In preparation, Shirley did something I had never thought of myself. People always say "Let me know what I can do to help" but they never know what is needed, so Shirley made a list for people.

- This is going to be hard on my family, take my husband out to dinner.
- Spend some time playing football or catch with my kids.
- Take them to the Movies.
- Vacuum the Living Room.
- Do a load of Laundry.
- Find your favorite books and bring them to me.
- Bake Cookies.
- Take my husband out for our Anniversary.
- Make sure my family go to Church, even if they argue with you.
- In short, here are the many things I would do if I were able, and these need doing to keep normalcy in our household.

Finally, it was Labor Day, and as a Teacher she was going back to school for the first day. She was thrilled and joyful to be clean, until she spotted a lesion and lumps under her arm. I bet you did not know, but in addition to Doctors and Nurses, Pastors are able to make a referral to Hospice. A few hours later, Shirley had a hospital bed, Visiting Nurse, Pain Medications, and a plan for what was going to happen. When my phone rang, and it was Shirley's 15 year old son John. "Pastor, Mom wants something else. Could people from the church come and sit with her and us, while she dies?" I thought "Wow, it sounds so simple but she is asking for the moon." It is one thing for a Pastor, Doctor or Nurses to come and sit with her, but this could go on for weeks or more. How many people who go to worship together want to be around someone when they are dying? Yet, I put out the invitation. Shirley lived for 8 days and nights.

Throughout that time, someone from the congregation was with her constantly. She was never alone. They brought in supper and sat down and ate with Shirley and her family. They brought in their babies for her to hold and cuddle. They prayed with her and laughed and cried with her. Life was completely Normal. That was Congregational Care, where the Church did not need the Pastors to be able to care.

Last week, I received another phone call. This one from someone in our congregation, saying “Pastor, I have been concerned about Ruth for the last three weeks because I could not find her.” It turned out Ruth had fallen, breaking her hip, had been in the hospital, but because of HIPPA no one had shared this concern. PLEASE if you are going in the Hospital, or know someone who is, tell your pastors. That is not Gossip, Sharing your Concern is part of Congregational Care. Friends visited Ruth. I visited Ruth, spoke with her family, the Hospice Chaplain and Administrators. Then yesterday, I was told by someone in the Church that Ruth had died. At 102, I cannot be sad. Ruth was loved by family and friends and church. She was without pain, in her own bed in her own home, and she drifted off to sleep in the arms of God. That is Congregational Care.