

Answering the Call

Commencement Sermon

Meadville Lombard Theological School

June 8, 2008

Forrest Church

First, congratulations. Years of unstinting effort, daunting personal challenges, and academic hurdles have led you to this moment of commencement. Now your life as a minister, the most blessed calling I know, can begin.

I can't tell you how sorry I am not to be with you in person, to look into your eyes, to hold your hands in mine. Over the past five years I have come, albeit from afar but with growing interest and enthusiasm, an unabashed fan of Meadville Lombard. What you have done together in rebuilding this venerable institution and enhancing its prospects for a shining future is nothing less than miraculous. I stand in awe at your accomplishments to date and harbor the rosiest expectations for an ever more significant future.

Which leads directly to my first charge to you this afternoon. Be true to your school. Represent its highest ideals in your ministries. Mentor those who follow you through its ranks. Support it with a meaningful part of your Unitarian Universalist tithe. Hold it to your heart.

Some of you may feel apprehensive stepping out of the academic womb to embrace and practice your calling. I know that. I've been there. For what it's worth, if any one of you heading toward the parish is less qualified to assume the pulpit and lead a congregation than I was when I first arrived at All Souls thirty years ago this coming September I would be shocked.

The first thing I did, in self-protection, was to lower the All Souls pulpit fifteen feet. After all, I'd preached fewer than ten sermons my entire life, three of them about Thomas Jefferson. Relying on past experience alone, projected over a thirty sermon preaching schedule my first year, that would translate into nine sermons on Thomas Jefferson, in other words, about nine sermons too many.

I spent the summer before I assumed that pulpit reading the collected sermons of A. Powell Davies and Harry Emerson Fosdick. This made me an expert, of sorts, in the linear, left-brained pulpit style of the 1930s and 40s. Then I put together 30 manila folders, alternating between social action, spirituality, theology, history, Christmas, you get the idea. Then I started looking for jokes.

At years end, I received a visitation from the church president. She told me that I had done a wonderful job my first year, that I was proving to be a real asset to the church and then, after an awkward pause, she said, "Forrest, a number of people have asked me to speak to you about your sermons. Could you, perhaps, spend a little more time in sermon preparation?"

Ouch. I'd been preparing my sermons all year by the numbers, 20 hours a week mulling books and articles in my study, at least eight hours writing on Saturdays and then up at dawn on Sunday to polish my mighty efforts with a final sheen. If I'd spent any more time preparing my sermons, I'd have precious little time left over to perform my other duties.

Time, of course, was not the problem. Life experience was. The experience of love and death. I didn't really become a minister until I performed my first funeral. From that day forward my congregants took me by the hand, leading me, one by one, through the valley of the shadow and all the other valleys they traversed in their often difficult lives. I began telling stories in my sermons, their stories. I shared their courage and faith. I became a preacher.

In the brief time allotted me, let me share a little of what I have learned about answering the blessed call to minister. First, remember the word itself, what it means. Not magister, the greatest of these, but minister, the least. To minister is to serve. Though I earned a Ph.D., I quickly put the kibosh on those who tried to call me Dr. Church. I was Rev. Church. I know the Calvinist tradition from which we stem honored the magisterium above all other offices. We still wear, as Calvin did, academic robes. But don't fall into the trap. Even after you receive your honorary doctorate or D. Min. Reverend does carry a whiff of elevation, but in practice, a reverend is a minister, the least of these. Pride is the greatest and most seductive sin, so many there are ready to abet us in it. When tempted remember the most instructive of all etymologies: human, humane, humanitarian, humility, humble, humus. Dust to dust. Which in pastoral terms becomes heart to heart.

Second, though I know that many of us go into the ministry out of a need to be loved, get over it fast. The pastor's job is to love, not to be loved. Unconditional love. Agape, which unlike eros or even philia, comes with no quid pro quo attached. You may not like all your congregants. In fact, I can promise you that you won't. But you must love them. And pray for them. And serve them. If you do, they will love you in return, which is wonderful, but not at all what makes your ministry successful. In fact, looking for love will lead to pandering, corner cutting, trimming your prophetic sails, remaining silent when you should speak

out. If your congregation knows, truly knows, that you love them, they will forgive you your forthrightness, when hard words are the order of the hour. In fact, they will honor it.

Third, minister first and foremost to the health in the congregation, not to the sickness. If you spend all your oil on squeaky wheels, you'll have none left for the crankshaft. My dear friend John Wolf, who has loved and supported this school all his days in the ministry, told me early on in my ministry that every congregation has 17 problem parishioners. If your church has 100 members, four of them will be on the board. If it has a thousand, and you are doing your job right, they'll be there, you just won't know who they are. These 17 people, if you let them, will bleed your ministry dry. Don't let them. Love them. Here them out. But balance every hour of damage control with a day's worth of lifting up the hearts and spirits of all those who want to be part of a healthy church. Shame your board members into saying something nice about any new idea, before they criticize it. This actually works. It's the sort of thing a minister can get away with. We can get away with being a little innocent, even a little naïve, a little goody goody. At times a minister is like a kindergarten director, calling for time out, and making people play nicely. After awhile it becomes a habit. Most people actually enjoy how they feel when they play nicely. Some don't. But you, in turn, don't need to spend a disproportionate amount of your time letting them set the church's agenda. You will be ministering to the church's health, not spending all your wit, time and energy dreaming up new ways to turn goats into sheep.

As for the goats themselves, the best thing you can do is to pray for them. Fix them in your mind's eye. Pray that they will find some peace and satisfaction that is missing from their lives. Remember that they too will die, that the mortar of mortality and mystery bind us fast to one another. It's impossible to pray for someone and hate them at the same time. It may not change how they feel about you, but it will change how you feel about them. When you next encounter them you will see the face you prayed for not the one you dread. And over the years, as you grow in your ministry, you will learn to love them, which, after all, is your job.

Fourth, never forget that you have, with the possible exception of professors, the cushiest job in the world. Your time is your own, to spend exactly how you will. The doctors on your board and the lawyers work 70-hour weeks nonstop and still have time to serve the church. The hardest working minister spends about half that, and then doubles it by factoring in the enervating down time between appointments

Why then do so many ministers complain about being burned-out, about having no private time, no time for their family or themselves? Simply because they lack self-discipline. If you go into the ministry to be loved and feel that you have no right to turn anyone down, then you will spend your day like this. You'll have a breakfast meeting, a ten AM appointment, lunch with a parishioner, a 4 PM appointment, and an evening meeting at the church. You will work, by the way,

about 6 hours max, but it will seem like 12. Pile one day like that upon the next and of course you will be exhausted. You will also be ineffectual.

If a minister complains of being too busy, just remember, it's her own fault. I've never been too busy. In fact, my life has been carved out of free time, with more time to spare, even waste, than I dare to confess.

Here's your job. First, to be ready, at the drop of a hat, to be at the bedside of someone who needs you. Then your time is their own. Nothing takes precedence. Second, block your hours out. Never spend an entire day at church. Every day reserve either the morning or afternoon for yourself. Don't attend every meeting. In fact, attend as few as you can. Let your congregation know that you trust them. As long as you are fully present when they really need you, they will forgive your absence when they don't. When they really need you, apart from times of crisis is Sunday morning. Make sure you secure at least 35 hours a week for your reading, reflection, and writing. Sunday worship is the most important hour in your week. You are ministering to everyone. Cut yourself into little pieces during the week and you will fail to meet the vast majority of your parishioners' needs, which you will meet on Sunday morning with a thoughtful sermon that they may mull over for days, time that you, virtually, are with them.

Let me close with this. Every Sunday there is one person present who is giving church, perhaps even life, one last chance. You won't know her. She'll come in late and be sitting in the back pew, ready to sneak out. Make sure you include a place for her, a prayer for her, a time of peace for her, in your liturgy. For instance don't so cleverly weave all the pieces of the service together that each one includes a call for the end of war in Iraq. She's fighting her own war. She's come to church looking for bread. Don't throw stones at her. So if you are preaching on public events, tilt the rest of the service to private matters and needs, and vice versa. Use your prayer to counterbalance your sermon, not to reinforce it. Make sure there is room in your liturgy for confession, forgiveness, consecration. Speak always to the heart, not just the mind.

That all said, you will learn things over the years that I missed entirely. You will each, in answering your call, find authentic words and deeds that will be uniquely your own. I ask you only to be grateful, always grateful, for the privilege of practicing the most rewarding and life changing of all vocations. It has changed my life, one tiny epiphany at a time, and so will it change yours and all those you love, all those you give your heart to in ministry.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless you all.