

A Delicate Balance

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Thank you for the invitation to be the baccalaureate speaker today. I am honored to share this day with those of you who are graduating and receiving graduate degrees. I think I'm honored.

I say that because as I was preparing for today's sermon (what those of you who are preachers will recognize as "sweating over the text") I was trying to find something that I thought was a word from the Lord for today. My spouse, Carlisle Harvard, who works at Duke University shared with me an article from the Duke University Press. The title of the article was, "And the speaker was...." It seems that a group of noted professors at Duke University were asked, "Who spoke when you graduated and what did they say?" "Oh, that's not a fair question," laughed a distinguished historian, "that was too long ago." "I don't remember anything that was said," commented a noted botanist, "but I remember being there."

Well, I have come to know some of you who are graduating and receiving your degrees today. You are an exceptional group. I am sure you're going to remember not only who spoke, but what was said. Just in case you don't, I want to offer you a text. Now I know that you have been given many texts during your time at Columbia Seminary. You have texts to exegete and texts from which to preach. I want to offer you a text as a gift. It was a gift given to me thirty years ago when I was ordained and it has supported me, sustained me, and guided me in my ministry. It is indeed a text that I consider a gift from God. Listen for God's Word.

Therefore, since we have this ministry by God's mercy we do not lose heart.... For the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed (II Corinthians 4:1,6-9).

Losing heart is a temptation common to the ministry. We call it by different names; burnout, depression, a need for new direction. It's easy to lose heart as ministers. We live in a culture that seems to be coming apart at the seams. So how do we keep our balance? How do those of us who have been called to serve God in the church of Jesus Christ keep our balance? I guess another way to frame the question is the way it is often put to us as ministers. "Why did you want to go into the ministry, anyway? You know you can make more money doing something else. You know there is so much stress and strain. Look at what's happening to mainline churches. They continue to lose members. They're fighting. Why bother with the church?"

Why are you a minister in this church? The same question must have crossed the mind of the Apostle Paul. He understood the challenge of burnout. Just take the church in Corinth for example. What a handful of conflicts: jealousy, sexual misconduct, questions of faith. "What do you believe about the resurrection?" "Whose side are you

on, Apollos or Cephas?"

The Apostle Paul wrote, "We have this ministry by the mercy of God." You have been called by God. That's the reason you are ministers of Word and Sacrament. Why else would anyone give up a good summer and go to Greek school? Or learn that strange Hebrew language? Or get abused in Clinical Pastoral Education? Or read John Calvin or Karl Barth or Letty Russell or struggle with systematic theology? Why would you come back to seminary to get an advance degree? Somehow, someway, God has laid a hand on you and God will not let you go. You're always "changing...growing...becoming." "We have this ministry by the mercy of God." Don't ever forget it. That is how we keep our balance.

As you try to balance all the responsibilities of ministry and being a good spouse or a good friend, don't forget who called you into this sacred service. And don't forget why you were called. You were called to serve the God who created the world. The God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," and who has been revealed to us in the face of Jesus Christ. You are to preach that Christ, and not yourself. You are keepers of a treasure, but it's not a treasure that floats around in thin air. It is a treasure contained in earthen vessels. "Earthen vessels," the noted ethicist James Gustafson says, remind us that the church always has a historical and social character.¹ The church is always rooted in the lives of people. Each congregation is unique. Every one has a history that tells us how God has been at work in the midst of their people.

I think I learned this best from a colleague who joined me a decade ago in the First Presbyterian Church in Durham. She had been a pastor for ten years in a rural congregation in the state of New York. She decided to migrate south so she came back to Durham where she had attended Duke as an undergraduate. Her name is Arabella Meadows-Rogers. When she came back to work with me, I learned almost by chance that she was the great-great-great-granddaughter of Thomas Smythe. He was a pastor in Charleston, South Carolina, in the nineteenth century and his library formed the basis of Columbia Seminary's early library. Erskine Clarke made sure I knew who he was. So I was impressed to be working with one of his descendants.

Soon after Arabella arrived to work with me at the church, I walked into her office where she was sitting in front of her desk. On the desk was a stack of old newsletters from the First Presbyterian Church. Thinking she was trying to find something and I could help, I said, "Can I help you find something?" Being a woman of few words, she responded, "No." Persisting, I said, "What are you doing?" She said, "Reading old newsletters." I said, "Why?" She said, "I'm reading them to learn about this congregation so that I can be effective as a minister here!"

She understood about earthen vessels. Treasures are always in earthen vessels. Births, deaths, weddings, baptisms, session notes, invitations to work for Habitat for Humanity, to work at the soup kitchen, to teach Sunday school, to spend the night at the shelter; that's how God works in the lives of people to shape them.

God so loved the world that God dared to get involved in our stuff, our clay, our humanity. God also loved the world so much that God got involved in those events that shape us, those things that make our public life what it is.

I do remember who gave the baccalaureate sermon at my graduation thirty years ago. The speaker was Albert Kissling, pastor of Riverside Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, Florida. I also remember what he said. As a graduate student, he had spent some time at Union Theological Seminary in New York. While he was there he

studied with Dietrick Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was struggling with whether to stay in this country or to go back to Germany. The clouds of Nazism were rising over the church in Germany. People had offered him teaching positions here and it would be dangerous to go back. But Bonhoeffer said, "I must go back because the church needs me. I have been ordained into the Church of Jesus Christ in Germany which is now suffering great conflict."

He went back. He was the guiding force behind the Confessing Church. It was a courageous group within the church that dared to stand up and say "No" to Nazism. They said, "Nein" to the persecution and the holocaust that killed millions of Jews.

The church still needs to be the confessing church today. We still fight against all kinds of injustice. Racism is still rampant among us. In John Hope Franklin's new book, *The Color Line*, he asks if racial oppression is going to be our legacy for the twenty-first century. Who will say "No" to racial injustice? Who will relate the gospel to the important issues of today? The births, the deaths, the struggles of our lives, are where God calls us to be ministers and what our ministry is about. It is always in the earthen vessels.

We have this treasure in earthen vessels. The vessel often needs to be reshaped. New occasions teach new duties and we are always being reformed. I learned this recently from my current colleague, Lori Pistor, who graduated from Columbia Seminary in 1992. We had a woman in our congregation who was stricken with a rare disease. It is called Jacob-Kreuzfeld disease and has also been called "mad cow disease." It is like Alzheimer's in that you begin to lose your ability to communicate and your memory. The woman could not communicate with her family or anyone else. It was a very painful situation. Finally they had to put her in a nursing home. She was in her fifties. She loved the church. She especially loved the old hymns of the church. So Lori would gather a group of church members on Sunday afternoon, and we would wheel our friend into the library at the nursing home. The group would gather around her and sing old hymns.

I am musically-challenged which means I cannot carry a tune but they allowed me to attend. I'll never forget one Sunday afternoon as we were singing "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand." Our friend, unable to communicate as the world understands communication, had a huge smile across her face and she was tapping her foot, keeping time with the music.

As the church of Jesus Christ enters a new millennium we need vessels that will enable us to communicate the gospel where people are struggling and seeking to be faithful. The Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago has gone a mile and a half away into a housing project where life is literally hell. Most of the families there are single mothers raising three or four children. There are drugs being sold all over the place and children dodging bullets.²

This congregation has rented two apartments in the housing project. They have cleaned them out. They have painted them. They have put carpets on the floor. And they asked the mothers in that housing project, "What do you need?" The mothers replied, "We need some help with parenting. It's hard to be a parent in this environment." So they have hired counselors to come in and counsel them on parenting. Then the mothers said, "We need to know how to survive on the meager resources we have."

So the church has counseling on what you can buy on a limited budget. Every Thursday morning one of the ministers and an elder go to the housing project where they gather twenty or thirty folk who come for Bible study. At the close of the Bible study they celebrate the Eucharist. "The body of Christ broken for you, the cup of salvation given to you." We have this treasure in earthen vessels.

The treasure is God's gift to us in Jesus Christ. God raises up vessels to carry the treasure. The vessels are clay lest we become careless and forget that the power belongs to God and NOT to us.

Last fall I read a story about a missing Stradivarius violin. As I said I am musically-challenged but I do know what a Stradivarius violin is. David Bartlett, who teaches at Yale, wrote about this incident in the Yale Divinity Alumni magazine.

The violin was owned by UCLA, and had been placed in the charge of a faculty member who was also the second violinist in a University string quartet. The second violinist reported the priceless instrument missing. Authorities were suspicious that the musician had stolen the violin either for his pleasure or for vile gain. He, however, said he thought he'd put the violin on top of his car when he was loading groceries bought on the way home from a concert. Then he got in the car and drove off, simply forgetting the Stradivarius.

Decades later, just this year, the hapless violinist's story was confirmed when the instrument showed up at a music shop to be tuned. The present owner said he had bought the violin from someone who found it lying beside an on-ramp to a Southern California freeway.

You'd think if you owned a Stradivarius you'd guard it day and night, never let it out of your sight, certainly never stick it on top of your VW in the Safeway parking lot. But of course we all do get busy, and life intrudes even on the stewardship of priceless gifts. We've got to eat, and we've got to shop, and it's easy to put the Strad out of the way just long enough to get the Wheaties into the trunk, and then—oops!

So it wasn't greed or treachery, it was just carelessness that lost the treasure. Lots of people think there's a conspiracy abroad as (other people) try to destroy Christianity for their vile purposes. I think we're more in danger from carelessness than from enmity.³

You are keepers of a treasure. Treat the treasure with care. Treat it with care because it is essential. It may be the only thing that can heal this society that seems to be coming apart at the seams.

Recently in the community where I live we found ourselves in the midst of tragedy. Five young people were burned to death in a fraternity house in Chapel Hill. Throughout this week people were gathering in congregations and ministers of Word and Sacrament were standing up in front of those people saying words like: "Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth." "Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ." Ministers have the audacity to break bread and offer a cup to people whose lives have been downsized. We stand before people who don't fit in at the workplace or in society and offer words like, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God. The Creator of the

ends of the earth.”

To be carriers of this treasure, this priceless treasure, is the most difficult, demanding, rewarding job you’ll ever love. Treat the treasure with care. Let its music sound so that others may hear and find comfort, joy, and hope.

“Having this ministry by the mercy of God, don’t lose heart.... For we have this treasure in earthen vessels so that we will never forget that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.”

God bless you on your way!

Notes

¹ James M. Gustafson, *Treasures in Earthen Vessels* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 5

² John M. Buchanan, *Being Church, Becoming Community* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 35. This book gives an excellent account of one congregation’s attempt to be a faithful “earthen vessel.”

³ David L. Bartlett, “Playing it Safe, Playing it Right,” *Reflections*, Yale University Divinity School, (Summer-Fall, 1995) 28