

Preach It, Sister

REV. PEGGY CLARKE

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Reading by Rev. Charles Ortman

The story begins at St. Pius X Catholic Parish in Rock Island, Illinois. That was my family's church where I made my first communion and my first confession. It's where I was confirmed, and where I was the first boy in my class to memorize the Latin mass in order to become an altar boy. It's where I began to recognize myself as a spiritual person ...

St. Pius X Church was the largest parish in Rock Island and in all the surrounding towns...It was enormous, seating up to 1,300 people, which it did five or six times every Sunday morning...

I would draw your attention ... to [the] marble walls near to the center of the room where they were at their highest, probably some 40 feet off the floor...Each of them displayed a Scripture message that was part of the liturgy. The one on the right read, "Agnus Dei," Lamb of God. The one on the left, "Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus," Holy, Holy, Holy.

...I was smitten by the words of the Sanctus from a very early age. "Holy, Holy, Holy." But behind those words of proclamation that began with prayer, there were other words, words that carried the heart of the message, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

Sitting there – in that big modern worship space, surrounded by throngs of people, encircled by those thick, chunk-glass windows, the marble walls, the beautiful oak pews and appointments that punctuated it all, and as often as not, surrounded by beautiful music – I would often think on those words – Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. They did not say, "Blessed is the one who came in the name..." The passage read, "Blessed is the one who comes..." It was in the present tense. So was I in the present tense, and so were all the other parishioners of St. Pius X.

Over the years, I came to understand that this proclamation wasn't so much about Jesus, as it was about us. It was about us, and it was about now. Another heresy arose as I began to question just who or what was Lord for Jesus, anyway? Sure, he spoke about his father in heaven often, but that wasn't the core of his message, not from my seat in the pew. Jesus' central message for me was, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

To me, the meaning of the big window...the message of the Sanctus evolved to mean– Blessed is the one who comes in the name of his neighbor. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of justice and compassion. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of love.

By and by, I realized that my theology was out of sync with the Orthodox doctrines and tenets that were taught by my church. I became more and more convinced though, that Jesus had meant for us to hear – just what I was hearing. I came to believe that he had passed the baton to me, and to whomever else might have heard or experienced the invitation inherent in those words – Blessed is the one who comes in the name of love.

So let's flash forward several decades. Now it's the mid-1990s. I've just finished seminary and am a newly ordained UU minister. I've been called to the pulpit of First Parish Church, Unitarian Universalist, of Fitchburg, Massachusetts. My family and I haven't yet made our move from the Midwest to New England, but we are packing and getting ready for it. Then, one night I go to bed... and I have this dream.

In the dream I am an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. And I've been called...to appear before some kind of trial or hearing. There is a panel of judges that is assembled and seated behind an arc-shaped bench, surrounded by all kinds of pomp and circumstance. The inquisitors are all members of the Catholic hierarchy, dressed in their finest regalia. The huge room quiets as the authorities turn to me and ask, "So, what is your message?" What is it you will preach to the people you are called to serve?"

In my dream, I pause for a moment and I look up to think. And there, high up on the wall above the proceedings, I can see the window, the one from the ... wall of the church of my childhood. "Holy, Holy, Holy," it reads. I lower my gaze to face the judges. "What I'll tell them," I said, "I'll tell them – Blessed is the one who comes in the name of love. Blessed are the ones who come in the name of love. Blessed are you who come in the name of love. That's what I'll tell them."

The members of the Inquisition look back and forth at each other for what seems an eternity. But then

they turn back to me. The highest Bishop, or whatever he might have been, finally nods and says, "Okay. That's good. That's good. You go and tell them just that. There will be those who need to hear the message in those words" There were a few pats on the back and expressions of well wishes. Then I was sent on my way. Years later I show up here.

So here's the thing I want you to know, and I suspect that many of you already know it. It doesn't hurt to be reminded from time to time, just the same. And that thing is this – Blessed are you who come in the name of love.

Sermon:

I took an ecclesiology class in college that was required for theology majors. I didn't want to take it. I was interested in radical theologies. Most of my classes used a liberation lens, introducing me to revolutionary ways of being religious and this conventional church-stuff lacked academic adventure. Because of my resistance, my professor exercised his right to assign topics for every one of my papers and each one required an investigation into yet another mundane aspect of church life. His goal, he admitted, was for me to know that what was happening in the pews of the average suburban church could potentially be as transformative as what was happening in the Base Christian Communities in El Salvador or Peru, that he didn't want me to be seduced by the liberation theologians without knowing that the faith was also alive in the 1st world.

While Br. Dr. Michael Horan did introduce me to a world that was somewhat more interesting than I'd previously considered, I spent very little time in parish ministry until my internship in Poughkeepsie almost 20 years later. Until then, I continued to believe transformation happened in squatters villages or on city street corners or in war zones and that churches were where lazy people went to feel good about their dreary lives. Authentic religion, I believed, happened outside church walls. Inside church walls was the religion of the masses about which Marx spoke so eloquently.

I was forced into parish ministry for what I thought would be one year. I tried to get an internship in community ministry, but every idea I had was rejected. I finally accepted that I'd have to do parish ministry for a year and asked Kay to be my supervisor, largely because of the work she'd done in New Paltz for marriage equality. She was living her faith outside church walls.

The truth I didn't know, the truth to which I was introduced in Poughkeepsie and to which I continue to awaken, is that faith is being lived and sometimes lived well in congregational life. And now as the minister at the First Unitarian Society of Westchester, I'm part of a system that can lull us all into sleepy complacency or prepare us for transformative living, and as the one with the microphone on a Sunday morning, the choice is often mine.

I'm going to admit to you, my closest colleagues, that sometimes I want to choose the latter. Sometimes when I'm writing Sunday's sermon, I just want everyone to feel good when it's over. I want them to love being part of this church, love being part of this faith. I want them to love each other and our building and all our programs; I want them to love them so much they pay for them and, of course, for me.

That desire opens the question of what I was called to do. I was called by the congregation, so part of my discernment is about their hopes and expectations, but I was called to ministry a long time ago and there was no congregation involved. In fact, I think we all were. When we first entered theological training, there was no congregation, but there was a voice heard on some level in some part of who we are. For me, that call has remained constant since I was 19 and each time I've sought to hear another voice, this one has gotten louder. So, my congregation has called me and has charged me to their ministry, but that's only part of what gets me into the pulpit each Sunday morning.

The voice I've been hearing, the voice that has propelled me into ministry simply believes in a better world. At my core, I'm an idealist. I suspect every minister is. I seem incapable of ignoring those things that aren't as they could be and I'm quite sure they can be better if only we choose to make it so.

The challenge, of course, is preaching it. I wonder often what I'm doing in the pulpit. What do I have to say? How am I going to pass life through fire? Do I even know how to do that? Where or how might I find fire?

Of course, John Wesley said he set himself on fire. "I set myself on fire and the people come to watch

me burn.” Whether he actually said that or not, I don’t know, but preachers have been repeating it, grateful for the image that somehow feels familiar.

I’ve done that. I know I have. When I preached after the massacre in Newtown, when I preached on reproductive justice, when I preached in the wake of Sandy, I was on fire. Some of you have done it too. I’ve been there to watch you burn.

Fire feels like a good metaphor. Some subjects feel combustible, like one good spark and it will all go up in flames. The spark is lit, often by circumstance, and I allow myself to ignite.

But there’s another metaphor, one that feels more accurate. It’s that of communion. I break myself open and pour myself out. It’s the ministry. An outpouring of my self. But, it’s not an emptying. And it’s not a disclosing. Or, not of the deepest parts of myself. Always preach yourself; never make it personal. I learned that from Dawn.

Ministry is an offering of the self. Preaching combines this offering with a larger truth telling and wraps it in a charge (sometimes explicitly) for living a greater life. A life that’s honest, moral, healthy, peaceful, accepting, welcoming. A life slowly being transformed by the intentional living we have chosen together and the words I howl or whisper from the pulpit every Sunday morning.

And what message might I have? Having broken myself open and poured myself out, what might I have to offer? What truth might I be holding that I’ve now offered in communion? And can I speak that truth knowing I’m just as fallible as anyone listening?

What I know for sure is that I don’t have many truths in my basket. Maybe three. A total of three messages that I preach every Sunday morning, week after week. Likely because of my Christian training I preach the god who is, not the god who was. Because of my impulses for justice I preach the radical implications of the interconnected web. And to my congregation living our particular brand of covenanted faith, to those for whom I am responsible for pastoral care, I preach that we- not he, not I - have come in the name of love.

I imagine these are really the same message, but it’s all I have. It’s what I bring with me on Sunday morning, wrapped in one story or another. And it’s what I’ve learned is the radical life of faith I’d been seeking since I was what Br. Dr. Michael Horan called a young, budding theologian.

The radical theologies of my youth are necessary in the world and I’m grateful for the folks who have made them their own. But I’ve been called to a new ministry. It might be considered safe and it’s certainly suburban. I’m no longer praying in tomato fields with migrant workers or crying about the violation of the black hills with the disenfranchised Lakotah and I’m not flying off to war zones or seeking the poorest of the poor.

But the ministry to which I’ve been called is no less necessary and potentially no less exciting. Parish ministry is only as dull or dreary as human life might be, filled with joy and grief and celebration and anguish. And for the minister, sometimes that’s all in the same day.

I’ve also come to discover, congregational life is an act of defiance. In a culture that encourages consumerism, we create communities of shared resources. In opposition to a national structure that responds to corporate power, we listen to the voice of the individual person. In a society that acts without great consideration of the consequences, our most common activity is deliberation. In a world where too many people are lost, we have made it our habit to pull people in from the margins, to see them when they have become invisible. I have discovered that parish ministry is revolutionary.

So I come to you this morning not with great truth, but with a window into which we can see our ministries. I have been called to a ministry I thought was not necessary but which has proven itself to be vital. I have been called to a ministry I did not understand but for which I am breaking myself open and pouring myself out. I have been called to a ministry for which I’ve felt unprepared, but have discovered none of us can bring any more than who we are. And with all of you, I’ve been called to a life of ministry, a life of preaching, a life of speaking some wild and beautiful truths, to inspire transformation and encourage a new world.