

*Leaves from the Notebook of an Untamed Preacher*¹

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In the practice of ministry, the way forward has always seemed fairly clear even when it was not a pretty picture. On the other hand, for me, the call to ministry has been seen in nothing but hindsight. I have always been envious of my colleagues who are cocksure they have discerned the call of God as clearly as Samuel in the night or Paul on the road to do damage in Damascus. For me, call has been more vision than voice; and, what vision of call there was, has been as through a fogged-over rearview mirror. Nevertheless, after four decades of squinting at those clouded images, I have discovered with some certainty and a fair amount of humility that I am, in fact, called by God to be a parish preacher. Moreover, along the way, I am equally sure I have been called by God to preach first in this, and then in that, and, so far, always in yet another congregation. Looking back, I can see there have been too many times when I have wound up at the right place at the right time for it to be any other.

For saying yes to all those calls, God owes me no favors.

I was ordained at The Church of the Good Shepherd (Presbyterian) in Anniston, Alabama, on a hot Sunday night in the summer of 1966, a bit shy of two years before Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot down on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Though I didn't know it then, at the time of my ordination, Henry Loeb was mayor of Memphis and Paul Tudor Jones was pastor of the Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis. By all accounts, Henry Loeb was scared of Paul Tudor Jones and the gospel truth being preached at the Idlewild Church. It was the same truth Paul Tudor Jones regularly repeated on visits to the mayor's office.

It's pointless to speculate what might have been had the mayor heeded the prophet's cry. He didn't. But the mayor knew the prophet well. More to the point, the mayor trembled in the presence of the prophet.

Twenty-six years later, in the spring of 1992, when I was installed as pastor of the Idlewild Church, Willie Herrenton was the mayor of Memphis. The first African American to hold the post, he was highly effective and widely popular. He still is. When Herrenton and I were thrown together at some social or public event, he could never quite remember me. When I would remind him that I was pastor of the Idlewild Church, Herrenton would invariably say something like, "Oh, yes, that's the church with the community recreation program,"² or "Oh, yes, that's the church that provides transitional housing."

Where once the important call to ministry in Memphis was to be a prophet, a short quarter century later, the important call to ministry in Memphis was to be a servant.

The story of that shift in emphases at the Idlewild Church, in some ways, is a parable of the many similar shifts that have taken place in my own ministry. In those early days, when I was starting out in Anniston and Paul Tudor Jones was in Memphis, like Jones, I took all the right stands on race and other issues of a public nature, and I took them publicly. I don't claim any particular bravery in that. Though my entire ministry has been either in the southeast or in the mid-south, my job and safety were never threatened, unlike the experience of many of my contemporaries who took

similar stands. Without a doubt, I sometimes made my congregations nervous, but I never felt anything less than their support and admiration. Moreover, as often as not, it was I who supported them when in their daily lives and professions they took far braver stands than I. What faithful people they are—so very many of them!

Exactly when the shift from prophetic ministry to servant ministry took place is impossible to determine. Maybe parish ministry is never at one of those poles or the other but always on some continuum between them; and the truth is, they are seldom if ever contradictory. In any event, soon enough white people were neither needed nor welcome in the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War did finally end. At about that time it seemed clear enough that the way forward was less to stand and say with Amos, “Thus says the Lord,” and more to stoop and heed the word of Jesus when he said, “I was hungry and you fed me; I was naked and you clothed me,” and all the rest. There were refugees to be resettled, there were released prisoners to be reintroduced to the community, there were hungry people who needed soup kitchens and food banks, there were homeless people who needed night shelters, there were people living in shacks who needed affordable housing, there were sick people who needed affordable health care, there were schools in poor neighborhoods that needed tutors, and, above all, there were ministries needed to help people break the cycle of poverty. The congregations I served did all of that and more. Occasionally I had to nudge them. More often I needed only to encourage them. Sometimes all I had to do was stay out of their way. What faithful people they are—so very many of them!

Along with that shift from prophetic to servant ministry, there have been other significant and closely related changes. While some registered no more than three or four on this preacher’s Richter scale, others registered eight or ten. Some were encouraging. Some were frightening. All were seismic.

For example, on the positive side of earthshaking change, grateful for being schooled and grounded in neo-orthodoxy, I am now greatly instructed by narrative theology. Similarly, grateful for being schooled and grounded in critical methods of Bible study, I now approach our ancient texts seeing them first in their narrative form. Moving up the Richter scale of positive change, I now know there is extremely important gospel truth that I just could not see until I shifted from working with all male ordained leadership to working with both female and male ordained leadership.

As to frightening seismic shifts in ministry, I have experienced the bitterness of one senseless major split in my denomination, and I fear we are on the cusp of another. I have also felt the impact in our General Assembly’s shift from a mission oriented body with some legislative and judicial responsibilities to a largely legislative and judicial body hanging on by fingernails to a few tired and under-supported missions. And, of course, by virtue of serving Christ in the southeastern and mid-south regions of the United States, I, along with my colleagues of a similar age, were present and presiding when the grandest seismic shift of them all settled in on us. Ironically, it came more with a whimper than a bang. As far as I can tell, it was precisely in the region where I have spent the last forty years living and preaching that the last vestiges of Christendom died. Now, everywhere in the world, even in the southeastern U. S., when the people of God are being faithful to gospel truth, we are strangers in a strange land living out that truth among those for whom it is utterly foreign.

Looking ahead, I am absolutely convinced there is nothing is so clear as the future. The future is this: Empires, economies, and cultures are hell-bent on self-destruction

or mutual destruction, while the gap between the haves and the have-nots is growing exponentially. In that context, the church is yet the body of Jesus Christ; and, in that context, we in the church can no longer choose to be either prophet or servant. The clear way forward for the church is to stop talking about sex and to be both prophet and servant.

As to discerning a call to ministry in the face of such a challenge, for me it is still as looking through a clouded rearview mirror, hoping to unravel some clue as to what God would have me do in retirement and what advice I might have for young preachers struggling with their calls to ministry.

About that I can say this much and not much more: At this end of forty years of squinting at clouded images in hindsight, I am discovering again, with some certainty, that the help of God in ages past is yet our hope for years to come. With equal certainty, I am discovering that, if we will carefully and diligently care for the pastoral needs of God's people, and, if we will go weekly to our ancient texts and return to God's people with a message from God passionately and imaginatively delivered, God's faithful people will follow us wherever God is calling them and us. Moreover, if we care for them and preach truth to them, they will support us in the strong prophetic stands we must now take in a world gone mad and in the servant roles we must now assume for an ever more desperate people. The thought of doing that while in exile is both exciting and daunting.

At least that's the way it looks in my rearview mirror.

Notes

1. With apologies to Reinhold Niebuhr for the play on the title of his famous book.
2. Idlewild's large recreation ministry was started during Jones's tenure as a way for black and white people to play together because they wanted to rather than because they had to. With Robert Fakkama, Roger Manass, and now Brian Manass as succeeding directors, it has grown under the leadership of several pastors.