

Additional Tributes to Frederick Buechner

We reached out to several other pastors and asked them to share their thoughts about Frederick Buechner. Here are their thoughts.

Sometimes, some times but rarely, one hears the spoken word and is astonished by it. A person comes along who is able to put language together in such a way that draws us nearer to the living Word. As a college senior, I first heard Tom Long preach and was astonished. Here was a new kind of preaching. I still remember the text from Galatians and a story Tom told, which forever shifted my impression of Paul's passionate letter. Within a year, I was a student in Tom's preaching class at Columbia Theological Seminary. Our assigned text that Spring of 1981 was Frederick Buechner's book, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairy Tale*.

Also that Spring, Frederick Buechner came to Columbia as guest speaker for our lecture series. Understated in every way, Buechner sat, as I recall, at a plain table in the church's chancel. Each day he read quietly from the manuscript before him, rarely looking up at us. We leaned forward toward him, listening intently to his soon-to-be-published memoir *The Sacred Journey*. There was a collective hushed astonishment. His memoir became an invitation to see our own lives anew. The power of his words invited us to imagine what each of our lives, and what the life of this world, could be and already are in the truest sense, now that the Word has come to dwell among us.

Like many preachers I know, I have a whole shelf of Buechner books in my study. Though he set the bar higher than I could ever attain, in my own way through all these years of ministry, I have been trying to put words together in such a way that invites, draws people nearer to the astonishing Word, which in the end is full of grace and truth.

- Kimberly Clayton, *The Presbyterian Church, Fredericksburg, Virginia*

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Frederick Buechner did not convey the kind of overconfident, arrogant Christianity too often on display. He modeled a faith deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, while also understanding the legitimacy of ancient and modern doubt. This is evident when Buechner reflects on the challenge of believing that Christ's death on the cross reveals God's love. That God can subject God's self to violence in the incarnation without legitimizing that violence. That God can save humanity in Christ by dying at the hands of human evil. This is what Buechner conveys when he wrote, "Jesus Christ is what God does, and the cross where God did it is the central symbol of New Covenant faith." On this point, Buechner reaffirms Paul's proclamation: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).

- Joe Scrivner, *Stillman College and Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa, Alabama*

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No other writer has served as my vocational guide more than Frederick Buechner. His words are both aspirational and inspirational and leave me feeling like there is more to be done, more to explore, and more to become. The Buechner quote I have memorized, and I assume the one all Buechner fans know by heart is “Your vocation in life is where your greatest joy meets the world’s greatest need.” This quote has served as my litmus test in determining the integrity of my call and the contentment of my soul throughout my ministry and before ministry. Buechner suggests that there is a place in the world where our greatest joys and the world’s greatest needs meet, and at that moment, something holy happens. He believes that our greatest joy and the world’s needs are meant to meet and become dancing partners, and he dares us to go looking until the two are united and become one.

- Shelly Wood, Orchard Park Presbyterian Church, Carmel, Indiana

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In Fred Buechner’s memoir *Telling Secrets*, he describes what it was like to be a father to his daughter as she battled anorexia. What stands out is his own helplessness and the way he likens that helplessness to the mysterious power of God: “The best thing I could do for her was to stop trying to do anything,” he writes. “I think in my heart I knew [the medical professionals] were right, but it didn’t stop the madness of my desperate meddling....”

“What saved the day for my daughter was that when she finally had to be hospitalized in order to keep her alive, it happened about three thousand miles away from me....I have never felt God’s presence more strongly than when my wife and I visited that distant hospital where our daughter was...the passionate restraint and hush of God.”

Among his many gifts was Buechner’s ability to capture God’s love and presence in the everyday helplessness through which we all live. He didn’t do it with formulas such as “God has a plan” or “God’s got this.” He did it by describing his own faith, in all its doubts and limitations, in a manner that made it easy to recognize. It remains one of Buechner’s most enduring gifts to many of us.

- Ben Dorr, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina