

THE IMPERFECTIONS OF MINISTRY
(Four Stories Out of the Ministry of Dick Fewkes)

Text: “We have these treasures in earthen vessels...” (2 Corinthians 4:7)

Responsive Reading: The Call - Elizabeth Tarbox

I trod the heavy beach in winter and the wind insulted my face and the ocean bared its white teeth and I cried in the wind:

I am a person who wants to be mighty, all too often, I’m a grain of sand. I mean to blow strong across the ocean, but I never do more than ruffle the surface of the shallows.

Sometimes I’m delighted with my uniqueness and my capacity for love, but that is the time when the hungry gull spies me and snatches up and devours me. And then there is the anger...

There was no disembodied voice that day, only the warning cry of the gull, no bushes burned in my path, only the sunlight making fire in the water, no strangers bearing good news, no angels of the Lord. I was quite alone.

But then it seemed that somewhere inside me there was a shift, some one of those many little currents that link idea and action, started rippling a little bit faster, and I imagined the voice of the Creator saying:

I’ll take you as you are—fragile like the shell, irritating as the grain of sand and unreliable as the wind—and I’ll use you.

And your work will be impossible, like finding a perfect sand dollar, and often you’ll be as abandoned as the beach in winter, and your reward will be the unforgiving beak of a hungry gull, but I’ll use you.

And I walked on filled with joy and gratitude.

I.

Back in 1968 I was in the search process for a new ministry. I had recently gotten married to my beloved wife Ellie and had taken on the responsibility of being not only a loving husband but also a responsible father to three stepson’s ages 9, 11 and 15. It soon became clear that my modest \$5400 salary in Middleboro was not going to make ends meet. So I threw my ministerial hat into the ring in hopes of landing a better paying pulpit.

One of the churches that we were looking at was the First Parish in Sudbury. I believe that Carl Scovel had recently gone to King’s Chapel so Sudbury was looking mighty attractive. My wife’s sister and brother-in-law were living in Sudbury at the time so if it turned out I got the pulpit there we would have been neighbors. I don’t remember the event or occasion, but Ellie and I were at a BCD UUMA social gathering somewhere and Jan and Lorna Knost happened to be there.

In the course of our conversation we discovered that both Jan and I were on the list for Sudbury. We chatted about the prospects and possibilities of what Sudbury might have to offer. I really wanted Sudbury because my wife’s sister and her family lived there and it would be nice to be in the same town with them. As we parted, dear beautiful Lorna graciously said to me, “Best of luck to you with Sudbury.” And you know what, I can’t believe I said it, but I replied, “I wish I could say the same for you”, or something like

that. God, what a stupid remark. I mention that embarrassing incident as a reminder to all of us that even our ministerial relationships are sometimes tinged with jealousy, small mindedness and competitiveness, but that nonetheless we should not let these things get in the way of our mutual respect, deep friendships, and positive encouragement and support.

The irony of the matter is that neither Jan nor I went to Sudbury, but each of us went on to more productive ministries elsewhere, Jan to Dedham and yours truly to Norwell. They were both better ministries for us than Sudbury ever would have been. In any event I can now say it after all these years, "Best of luck to you, Jan and Lorna, with Sudbury. You have great ministries ahead of you." Yes, and one of those ministries was to the First Parish in Norwell following my retirement in 2000. Thanks, Jan, for a job well done and preserving a healthy congregation for Vicki Weinstein to inherit.

II.

Sometime in the mid 1970s the Norwell church had invited Bill Baird, the controversial pro-choice leader, to speak at a social concerns forum in the church parish hall. We wanted the community to have an opportunity to hear the leading advocate for providing safe medical abortion procedures for women in Massachusetts and elsewhere. As some of you may recall Bill Baird was a real pistol when it came to making the case for the right to abortion for those women who wanted and needed to make that choice. He had no patience with the dogmatic position of the Catholic Church and made no bones about his vigorous disagreement with their point of view. Protesters were known to picket places where Baird was scheduled to speak. So, we were ready for anything. As it turned out there were no public protests and the audience who came to hear him was quite modest in both size and demeanor.

After the meeting Bill Baird mentioned to me that he had tried to get the First Parish in Scituate to sponsor a similar program in their church, but that he had received less than enthusiastic support from their minister, the Rev. Tom Goldsmith. He asked me if I would mind putting in a good word for him with my colleague in hopes that he might get a future engagement in the Scituate church. I said sure and sent Tom a note mentioning Bill Baird's concern about failing to get sponsorship at the Scituate church and that he had done a good job for us in Norwell.

Well, Tom called me on the phone and let me know in no uncertain terms that he did *not* appreciate my note. If I had only thought to call him I would have found out that Bill Baird had a way of alienating not only his enemies, but his friends as well, by making unreasonable demands. I forget the details of the issue, but what Bill wanted from Tom and the church board was indeed unreasonable, I think he refused to share the limelight with other pro-choice advocates, and so they reluctantly declined to sponsor the program. Tom had known Bill Baird for a number of years and had some similar experiences with him in the past. Bill could sometimes be his own worst enemy in promoting the cause he felt so passionate about.

The lesson for me was don't be taken in by the fame and glamour of those you admire from afar. It's not just a matter of "trust but verify", but of "verify first and then maybe give provisional trust." No one has all the facts and the truth about anything, not the Catholic Church, not Bill Baird, and certainly not Dick Fewkes. Above all give your colleague the benefit of the doubt until you know otherwise.

III.

Some years ago I was invited to be a pulpit guest at my former church in Middleboro. I preached what I thought was a fairly safe sermon about "Bibles Stories I Have Known and Loved." Early in the sermon I told a joke about Adam and Eve—that since Eve was made from Adam's rib he was parent to his own wife so technically she was his child. Which means that the sexual union of the first parents was a form of incest, but that was okay since incest is alright as long as you keep it in the family. That got some laughs so I figured I was off to a good start and I had my audience with me.

Not so my friends, not so, at least for one very important female parishioner in the congregation. She waited until the end of the line to greet me and then told me she did not appreciate my little joke since she herself was a victim of incest by her own father. Her entire experience of worship that morning was ruined by my thoughtless attempt to be a comedian in the pulpit. It opened an old wound in her soul and turned the sanctuary where she worshipped into a place of personal pain rather than pastoral comfort.

Needless to say I felt terrible and later that week sent her a note expressing my regrets that my sermon had caused her such unexpected anguish and distress. It was the farthest thing from my intention to do so. I hoped that she would continue to attend services in Middleboro and would find the sanctuary there a safe space in which to worship. I shared my unfortunate experience with the minister Elizabeth Tarbox who had been my ministerial intern in Norwell. Talk about unintended consequences of pulpit perorations—this one was certainly the worst I had ever inflicted upon an unsuspecting soul. Sometimes we screw up even when we think we're being cute. Especially when we think we're being cute. That does not mean we should never use humor in the pulpit. It means that whatever we do or do not do we run the risk of unintended consequences.

IV.

Last year I received an email from a former parishioner now living on the West Coast. She said she had some "unfinished business" from when she was part of the Norwell church. She was getting ready to join another UU church out there and wanted to clear something up. Would I mind? Not at all, I replied. She waited a couple of weeks and sent me a second email in which she told me about her feeling let down by my ministry and the church during a time of grief, stress and loss.

Her father had been quite ill and on death's door. She called me to let me know about it and I failed to follow up. When he died a few weeks later she also let me know and again I failed to follow up. During the Lighting of the Chalice and the Sharing and Caring portion of the service no one lit a candle for her father or for her grief. She felt let down by the congregation as well. She eventually left the church because she felt unconnected

to the rest of the parish. Naturally, I felt badly about what had happened, and told her if anyone was at fault it was no doubt me.

I don't remember the details of how I happened to forget to follow through. Perhaps I forgot to write it down, got distracted, was in the middle of writing my sermon, was emotionally concerned about other matters, failed to call the head of our pastoral outreach committee who would have called her or written her, I really don't know. I assured her that the people in Norwell were a warm and caring congregation and that if they had known about her need would have responded accordingly. The problem was that for whatever reasons I had dropped the ball when she needed a minister. At least that's what she felt and believed. I figured it might be true, after all I had once forgotten a wedding, and came close to forgetting a funeral.

In 31 years I did not have a perfect record. This was one that got away. I told her I admired her for her courage to share her feelings with me, and that I was pleased she had found her way back into a UU church. I wished her many years of happy association with a new church and a new minister and hoped she would at last be able to let go of an unhappy memory. She responded with a very warm email note in which she said she had no more unfinished business and was glad we had at last been able to communicate.

Those of you who are just starting out in your ministries need to know that you will have your times of having to come to terms with the imperfections of your ministry. Maybe you already have. Those of you who have been at it awhile already know whereof I speak. We could all tell our own stories of failing to measure up to the expectations of our calling. But as the apostle tells us, we have these treasures in earthen vessels, and though we may fall short of our best intentions, nonetheless amazing things sometimes happen, lives are transformed, forgiveness is offered, healing and wholeness is manifest in the midst of brokenness and human imperfections.

The ministry is a strange and wonderful business. No matter how much we try to do there will always be some unfinished business we wish we could have finished. It's nice to know that once in awhile we can finish a piece of it and leave the rest to God and the still small voice of conscience and compassion in our souls. We have these treasures in earthen vessels.