

rites of passage in 31 years of ministry

THE GREENFIELD GROUP – Chapel Service

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When I began my ministry at the First Parish in Norwell on April 1, 1969 I never dreamed I would still be preaching from that pulpit 31 years later. At the time I was 32 years old and had been in the active ministry for only four and a half years. My first Sunday service in Norwell was on Easter, April the 6th. I had two Christenings that day, one before the service and one during the service. God knows how many I've had since. Or how many weddings and funerals. They all flood the memory and remind me that the greatest privilege of the ministry is to be able to share the heights and depths of life with people in those rites of passage that mark our journeys from birth to marriage to death. No doubt about it, they are the most important tasks of personal ministry that ministers are called upon to perform--they touch lives, bind hearts and minds together, and create bonds of affection and support that last a lifetime.

First Parish Norwell has been important to my family in some rites of passage of our own. Our adopted daughter, Jennifer, was Dedicated here on May 30, 1971, by then Student Minister, Terry Sweetser, and our Minister of Religious Education, K.B. Inglee. Three of our four children were married in the Norwell church and I had the pleasure of Christening our grandchildren on five different occasions. On our 25th wedding anniversary Elizabeth Tarbox led my wife and I in a service of recommitment before a cadre of family, friends and parishioners at a surprise party celebration at the church.

Every ministry has its embarrassing moments. I remember when funeral director Spike Wadsworth escorted a grieving family out of the front pew during the musical interlude of a memorial service. He thought it was over and I had yet to offer the eulogy. I had to run down the aisle to the back of the church to ask him to please bring the family back for the rest of the service. Then there was the time I performed a back yard wedding for the daughter of parishioners, and during the recitation of the vows, I misread her name as well as her fiancée's name, and didn't even know I messed it up. Maybe that's why their marriage didn't last. I married the wrong people. In another backyard wedding the best man and maid of honor both fainted. I thought it was something I said, but it was only the hot sun.

There have been some difficult deaths in my 30 plus years of ministry. One of the most difficult in my memory was the death of John Meyer at age 13, son of Ernst and Harriet Meyer, Pulpit Committee Chair and Parish Committee Chair respectively, who was struck by a car as a pedestrian not far from his home. The car was driven by an elderly member of the parish in his 80's, Earl Newton, who had been failing in health and alertness and never should have been driving. I had to minister to both families in what was a double tragedy. It was a painful loss to bear for all.

Then I remember Helen Fogg's sudden passing at age 80 in 1984 when she was doing research on her memoirs. She had been the director of international programs for the UU Service Committee for 20 years. I was visiting the Meyers who had moved to Virginia at the time, during my sabbatical, and our Ministerial Intern, Jose Ballester, called me on the phone with the sad news. Twenty-four hours later he called me again with the news

that another parishioner, Clarke Atwater, had also passed away. I remember Clarke's beautiful tenor voice which he shared with our church choir until old age and shingles ended his ability to sing and perform. So I came home from my sabbatical visit in Washington to prepare two funerals, only a day or two apart. It was not exactly my idea of what a sabbatical should be. But in the ministry you learn to expect the unexpected.

I shall never forget Pascal Webster's untimely death at age 44, from a brain tumor, such a bright wit and intelligence and a good friend and neighbor, and a wife and seven wonderful children bereft of a husband and father. It broke all our hearts--the church, the family, the community. There must have been four hundred people in the meeting house for the memorial service. Months later he came back to me in a dream to say goodbye and thank you.

I felt the pain of Allen Lester's death by his own hand at age 81 because he could no longer bear the loneliness and depression following his wife's passing a few years before. In his despair he lay his head on the MTA track in Newton and was decapitated. I was both touched and stunned by the heroic death of Charlie Vieira who was electrocuted in a ballon accident in N.H. when he tried to prevent a descending dirigible from drifting into an electrical high tension wire. One of his two sons nearly died with him.

And I will never forget the tragic suicidal death of young Ben Kimball at age 15 who hung himself from the swing set on a play ground early one morning not far from his house. A memorial sundial in his memory sits outside the window of my office, a loving tribute to a talented young man, just across from the Japanese red maple planted by the parish in memory of my father, Maxwell Fewkes, who died in 1990.

Very few deaths are easy, most are hard to bear no matter when they happen, but some touch to the quick and stick in the mind and heart forever after. These are the trials and challenges of the ministry. To bring a measure of comfort to people in the difficult passages of their lives is what the ministry is finally all about. If I have been able to do so in some small measure then I am thankful.

I consider myself fortunate indeed to have been chosen by the Norwell Pulpit Committee in 1969. First Parish Norwell has helped me in countless ways to grow as a person and as a minister, and we have grown together, both in terms of numbers and the quality of our spiritual life. It hasn't always been smooth. There have been a few disagreements along the way, but the communication between minister and congregation has always been open. We've been able to laugh at our mistakes and to forgive one another for our failures and shortcomings. If I had it to do it over again I would do it in a minute, with no regrets. I have been richly blessed by my ministry in Norwell. And I pray that whoever my successors may be they will be equally blessed.

Gracious giver of Life, we thank you for the opportunity to love and to serve, to be ministers to and for one another, to rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep, and to know one another as friends who care and share what they have and who they are. We are especially thankful this day for the extended spiritual family of our

free churches, tolerant of our beliefs, supportive of our persons, demanding of our best thought and moral conscience, and asking only that we love truth, do justice, practice mercy and compassion, and serve the Most High. Amen.