

What I Have Learned As a Minister

(An expanded version of a sermon preached by Neil Swanson at the First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa on October 13, 1991. This written version will differ somewhat from the spoken versions, since they were based on an outline.)

Introduction

The possibility of becoming a minister had not entered my mind until I was a senior in high-school. The associate minister of the large church I attended asked me one day if I had ever considered being a minister. My immediate response was that I intended to be a writer. He proved to be a good salesman (or perhaps I should scripturally say he was a good fisher of men), because he quickly said, "A writer needs to know people, and there is no better way to know people than by being a minister." This statement was what started me on the road to the ministry.

When my friends learned that I was seriously thinking about becoming a minister, they were genuinely startled. (I won't go into any details as to why they were startled, but they definitely were!) The mother of one of my best friends was not only surprised but indignant about what the minister had told me. She vehemently said, "Ministers don't really get to know people. Doesn't he realize that people are always on their good behavior in the presence of a minister?"

In over half a century as a minister, have I learned which one was right? Let's delay my answer to that until I share with you some selected items from the many things I have learned as a minister.

First, I would like to share some thoughts about basic religious concepts.

As I have thought about this, I realize that a major idea that has been meaningful to me through the years is the concept of growth and development as it applies to religion. Everyone is aware of physical growth from childhood to adulthood. Most people acknowledge that there is emotional and mental growth. Fewer people are aware of the possibility of social growth, and there are many people who simply do not understand the nature of religious and spiritual growth -- the need to get beyond immature religious concepts and practices. I feel fortunate to have become aware of the importance of this concept early in my ministry.

For example, I have always remembered the creative activity of the members of the Board of Christian Education of this church back in the early fifties when they produced a detailed chart concerning the objectives of Christian education -- thirty-one objectives in the areas of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that we wanted children and young people to achieve by the time they graduated from high-school. But that was not all. In regard to each of the general objectives, the chart shows what we hoped to accomplish at each age-level, so everyone could see the development from simple beginnings to the ultimate goal, and also so those involved in teaching youngsters and young people would have a guide to help them know what they were trying to

accomplish. I have a copy of the chart with me here today, and it still impresses me after all these years. More than that, it is still having an impact on me, for one of my current writing projects is a book which will be entitled: "How To Become Spiritually Mature". I have just recently completed the process of setting up a charitable trust that will publish and distribute this book.

An eye-opener for me early in my ministry was a book by Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick called "A Guide To Understanding the Bible" in which he devotes a lengthy chapter to each of six basic Biblical ideas -- showing the way each idea grew and developed as recorded in the Old Testament and New Testament. It was a unique approach which no one had ever attempted before. The opening chapter on the idea of God is particularly impressive. At one point I tried to persuade the publisher to authorize the distribution of an edited version of that chapter which I had prepared for young people. At that time they were not ready to do this, but they did give me permission to write my own version -- basing it on Fosdick's chapter and quoting liberally from it. (That is one of the writing projects on my list.) If you have not been aware of Fosdick's book, I think you should take a look at it. The concluding words of the first chapter are especially illuminating, as well as being beautifully expressed. I quoted only one sentence in the oral versions, but I thought it would be of value to quote Fosdick's full statement in this written version.

In retrospect the road traveled by the idea of God through the Bible as a whole presents a fascinating spectacle.

Beginning with a storm god on a desert mountain, it ends with the awareness that "God is a Spirit; and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Beginning with a tribal war god, leading his devotees in bloody triumph over their foes, it ends with the insight that "God is love; and he that abideth in love abideth in God, and God abideth in him."

Beginning with a territorial deity who loved his clansmen and hated the remainder of mankind, it ends with a great multitude out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation worshipping one universal Father.

Beginning with a god who walked in a garden in the cool of the day or who showed his back to Moses as a special favor, it ends with the God whom "no man hath seen ... at any time" and in whom "we live and move and have our being."

Beginning with a god who commanded the slaughter of infants and sucklings without mercy, it ends with the God whose will it is that not "one of these little ones should perish."

Beginning with a god from whom at Sinai the people shrank in fear, saying, "Let not God speak with us, lest we die," it ends with the God to whom one prays in the solitary place and whose indwelling Spirit is our unseen friend.

Beginning with a god whose highest social vision was a

three

tribal victory, it ends with the God whose worshipers pray for a worldwide kingdom of righteousness and peace.

As I complete my thoughts relating to growth and maturity, I am reminded of a translation of the Bible by a scholar named Moffatt. You are aware that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus makes the statement: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." Well, Moffatt replaced the word "perfect" with "mature" -- "Be ye therefore mature, even as your Father which is in heaven is mature." I had a strongly negative reaction about this change. I thought it undercut the concept of perfection, and I undoubtedly said this in at least one sermon. But I have come to realize that the word "mature" is a reference to becoming what one ought to be, fulfilling one's highest potential. It is even sometimes defined as "perfected" -- a condition of full development. So I now feel that Moffatt's translation is a good one, and I think the highest goal one can achieve is that of spiritual maturity!

This leads me to the second point I want to make about religious concepts.

Many key words and phrases in the Bible have not been understood properly -- sometimes because they have been taken out of context, and sometimes because they have not been translated adequately. Even though this may be overly abbreviated, I would like briefly to share just a few examples.

In the Lord's Prayer the phrase, "Lead us not into temptation...", has puzzled many people. According to Pastor Philotheos Zikas, the Greek word translated as "lead" could also be translated as "leave". Ever since I learned this, I have said, "Leave us not in temptation, but deliver us from evil." (Incidentally, the missionaries who translated the Bible into Hawaiian used words which the Hawaiians understand as : "Free us from our temptations, and rescue us from wickedness.")

There are three instances in the Sermon on the Mount which illustrate misunderstanding of key words. The first is meek. Most people today think of meekness with a "Mister Milquetoast" quality. Actually, it means "trained" or "disciplined". At least one modern translation changes "Blessed" in the beatitudes to "Happy". There are many who feel that this was an unfortunate choice of an English word. It is far better to understand "Blessed" as referring to God's approval. God approves of (gives his blessing to) those who are pure in heart, to the merciful, to the peacemakers, etcetera. The third illustration from the Sermon on the Mount is "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The Hawaiian translation is much better: "Blessed are the humble of heart."

Remember that these are just a few samples. I could go on and on with references to unfortunate translations. Pastor Zikas has one explanation for this. He told me that the various committees of scholars which have been set up to prepare a new translation of the New Testament have never included a scholar whose native language was Greek! Idiomatically idiotic is a kind way to express my reaction to such an incredible oversight.

Because of time constraints I will cite only one illustration

four

of the distortion of meaning which occurs when a phrase or even a full sentence is taken out of context. The illustration I have chosen has had a major impact on my career as a minister, and a significant impact on this and other Congregational Churches. I am referring to the phrase, ... that they may all be one, which became the motto of the ecumenical movement. It comes from the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John -- a portion of a prayer of Jesus. In this case not only is the phrase taken out of context, but the word translated as "one" is a different Greek word than that used in other places in the New Testament. (Pastor Zikas indicates that the word has a qualitative meaning in this passage, and not the quantitative interpretation it has usually been given.) But listen to the statement in its context: "... that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us." To me it is quite clear Jesus is praying that all of his followers may have the same "oneness" with God that he has. It truly saddens me when I think of how many people have been misled!

The third thing I want to do in regard to basic religious concepts is to lift up a few of the insights that have come to me as a minister.

1. When the Women's Liberation movement began, I hoped that it might have an influence in moving people beyond an anthropomorphic concept of God. Women's Lib has done a lot of good things, and I support many of them. But in the area of theology I confess that I have been disappointed. Instead of getting beyond the conception of God as a being with human characteristics, the major impact of Women's Lib has been to add feminine characteristics to the masculine qualities of God. I say to you that God is spirit (as Jesus said), and that a mature religious person goes beyond both feminine and masculine aspects to worship God in spirit and in truth.

2. One of the most important statements of Jesus is this: "Not all who say unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but they who do the will of my Father." I have used this as a text each time I have taught a college course on the New Testament, for Jesus emphasized the doing of God's will.

3. One day a Hawaiian lady was the speaker at my Rotary Club in Maui. At one point she said: "The opposite of love is not hate, but apathy." I never heard it stated better. If love is an outreaching concern for the genuine welfare of another, the opposite of love is a lack of concern.

4. St. Augustine is supposed to have been asked: "What are the three greatest Christian virtues?" It is reported that Augustine replied: "The first Christian virtue is humility. The second Christian virtue is humility. The third Christian virtue is humility." I agree that, rightly understood, humility is a very important Christian virtue, but I do not agree that it is the greatest. After all, a person could be humble, and not have a loving concern for others. If someone were to ask me such a question, my response would be: "The first Christian virtue is sacrificial love. The second Christian virtue is outreaching (initiative-taking) love. The third Christian virtue is responsive love."

five

As you undoubtedly know, there are frequently wise insights in the Peanuts comic strip. In one of them Charlie Brown is telling Lucy that he has had a really good day because he managed to get through the whole day without doing anything stupid. Lucy responds (with her talent as a put-down artist) by saying, "Yes, but did you do anything smart?" I think a practicing Christian could paraphrase this. If someone (maybe you) was feeling pretty good because he or she had not done anything bad for a whole day, someone might quite legitimately ask: "Yes, but did you do anything good!" It is the doing of God's will that is important.

5. One of the most astounding truths that is implied in the Christian awareness of the possibility of being guided and strengthened by God is that all of us have the opportunity to be in contact with the Supreme Being of the universe. We have the awesome potential (perhaps even the responsibility) of serving God, of working with God, of being channels through which God can work, of cooperating with God to help develop the Kingdom of God on earth!

This is enough (perhaps more than enough) about basic religious concepts. Let me turn now to some of my thoughts about the church, especially concerning what a church might be.

Churches vary -- large and small, urban and rural, etcetera. There are a variety of individuals in any church. Each church has unique needs and opportunities. Every individual is a unique bundle of potentialities. So, how can a church most effectively function in the midst of such variety?

When I was at the First Congregational Church in Toledo, we got involved in raising questions as to what a church could be, as well as what that particular church might be. I brought with me today two summary memos which came out of those discussions. One of them outlines a variety of roles a church might play -- a homogeneous fellowship, a center for training, a mission enterprise, a serving church, a reconciling church. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they represent the kinds of emphasis that a church might consider.

If I had to pick one of these, my choice would be for a church to be a center for training. Of one thing I am sure, Any church ought not to be a mutual admiration society or a hand-holding fellowship, but a spiritual gymnasium, a center for training in the life of the spirit, a powerhouse, a fueling depot.

Elton Trueblood, Gerald Heard, and others have emphasized that churches need to find ways of training people to be more effective "ministers" in their daily pursuits -- the emphasis being on spiritual growth, on ways of communicating, on the ability to help people with problems, on how to be meaningfully involved in community affairs, on how to live effectively with family, friends, and neighbors.

Such an approach could be structured in various ways, but I strongly feel that there should be opportunities within the church for those who have grown spiritually to function at levels beyond that at which others might be interested in functioning. The whole

six

church should be a fellowship, but there can be small fellowship groups within any church with special concerns and interests. In other words, there can be and ought to be "churches" within each Church.

To make this more clear, perhaps I could quote one paragraph from the memorandum on what a church might be. It is the paragraph relating to a reconciling church:

Taking seriously the teaching of Jesus to follow him in seeking out the lost, in loving enemies, in overcoming evil with good, such a church deliberately sets out to find the areas of tension, to locate those who are in need in an effort to win them to a better way of life. Depending upon the community, such reconciliation could include a ministry to emotionally disturbed, to alcoholics, to the illiterate, to criminals, and on a broader scale to racial and cultural and international and religious tensions. One person or one church cannot do everything. But our call is to use our "talents" to produce the best possible results. We should know what we are doing and why!

Not everyone would want to be involved in such reconciling activities, but I feel that those who wanted to be should have the chance for learning how to be a "reconciler" and should be strongly encouraged to carry out such activities -- not in the name of the whole church, but doing it because of their personal concern -- and perhaps even doing it without publicity. (Giving alms in secret is the way Jesus described it.)

There is a third area I would like to emphasize in this recital of what I have learned as a minister. Actually, it is what I consider to be the most important aspect of a minister's calling -- working with people.

What I mean by this is not only working with people in a variety of church activities, but in various areas of need -- when those connected with the church are hospitalized, or when they are having problems, or at times when there is a baptism, a confirmation, a wedding, or a funeral -- what we usually describe as pastoral concerns. Some of my most satisfying experiences in the ministry have been when I was involved in such contacts. I think it is probably true that a minister has more frequent involvement in hospital-visiting, baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals, and counseling sessions than would be true of any vocation I can think of. One thing I have learned is that the emotional shifts in a minister's life are often abrupt, and that it is important not to carry over the emotions of one type of experience into another.

I have taken these various pastoral activities seriously. As an example, before the rehearsal and the actual wedding I always tried to have four consultations with those who were going to be married in the church -- once with the couple about two months before the wedding, then an individual session with each of them, and finally a session with both of them about a week before the wedding. I have

often wondered if this made any difference in the success and permanency of those marriages.

While I was here we moved the annual confirmation class from the 6th and 7th grades to the 9th grade level -- feeling that this would mean a better understanding on the part of the participants. I was involved in the weekly sessions that began in the fall and culminated in the spring. I had individual conversations with every member of each class in place of a final written exam -- and this usually involved 65 to 70 young people each year. In those sessions I wanted them to express their personal answers to a variety of relevant questions. I also gave each one a chance to join a "secret" organization called "FYS", and I more fully explained that they had a choice about being confirmed and about becoming a member of the church. (We had separate services for being confirmed as Christians, and for joining the church -- and there were always a few who for valid reasons chose not to join the church.) Would you like to know what "FYS" stood for? I wonder if anyone who was a member of one of those confirmation classes would remember after all these years. The letters stood for First You Seek -- emphasizing their continuing need to learn more and more, and also recognizing that it was a mirror image of Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God. Again, I have often wondered if putting so much emphasis on the confirmation process made a difference for those who were in the classes in their later religious experiences as young people and as adults.

Oh! (This is an extra in the written version.) I have suddenly recalled that each Confirmation class visited at least four different religious services -- including a Catholic church and a Jewish synagogue. We usually went to a Catholic church for a Sunday evening service. One of the priests would give a brief talk to the class after the service, and then answer questions. On one occasion in explaining baptismal practices, the priest said that the baptismal font was usually not in the front, but in an alcove at the side or back. He pointed to a spot about halfway back on one side, saying, "Our baptismal font is over there -- right under the fire extinguisher!" I thought that was a very appropriate symbol. He obviously did not realize the humor of what he had said, and I was proud of the class members and of the adults who had helped with transportation that evening. Some of them probably smiled, but no one laughed about this new symbol until we were outside of the building.

Now, finally, I have saved for last what I consider to be the most important part of my ministry -- what is usually described as personal counseling. I still remember my first pastoral call at the small church in Iowa where I began serving when I was 19, as a sophomore in college. That call turned into a series of counseling sessions. And I still remember the first counseling contact I had here at this church. That earlier call revealed a serious marital problem complicated by the husband's drinking problem, and the one here involved a mother's deep concern about a very sick child. No, I won't give you any details because such person-to-person sessions are definitely confidential -- even after this gap of 53 and 40 years respectively. I will tell you that the marriage survived and the child recovered -- but that's all!

eight

What happened when I was the minister here is that more and more church members wanted to talk with me about personal problems, and I was having a time problem. We thought about the possibility of developing a counseling center with a trained professional counselor. But we decided to ask a man who taught counseling at a theological school in the Chicago area to give us advice as to the best way to deal with the problem. He said (in essence) that it would be a valuable service to the broader community if we were to sponsor a counseling center, but it would not be the solution for my time problem because most church members would still want to talk with their minister. He suggested that another approach would be for me to get more training in counseling, and that the church could employ another minister to take over some of the other things I would normally be doing. The committee (and I) agreed that his suggestion was a good one. This meant that over a period of a couple of years the church made it possible for me to receive special training in personal counseling -- which I squeezed into my normal schedule of activity. This not only improved my ability to be helpful to people who were troubled, but it became a major part of my ministry. I have always been grateful for the opportunity I had -- both to be more fully trained, and to be more involved in what I now consider to be the most important facet of a minister's vocation.

Before I come to my concluding comments, I would like to share something I learned several years ago about Allan Knight Chalmers, who was an outstanding minister for many years in New York City. Whenever he answered the phone, no matter how hectic and busy a day he was having, he would always remind himself: "A child of God is about to speak with me." I think this is a terrific preliminary for any kind of personal contact. I thought I'd include it in this sermon on what I have learned as a minister. It is a great way to keep things in proper perspective.

Conclusion

I began this sermon by relating an anecdote about the minister who said that there was no better way to know people than by being a minister, and the lady who insisted that ministers could not really get to know people because they only show their good side to a minister. I have learned that both of them were right. There are some people (not all) who "dress up" their language, their attitudes, and behavior, but even many of them, when they are troubled, are able to confide in a minister things they would never think of sharing with anyone else.

I have been grateful for the opportunity to get to know so many people and to have been able to help, and I am especially grateful for the opportunity I had to be a minister of this church. Without any question, I learned a lot in those seven years!

I strongly feel that it is personal relationships that are the most important -- especially within the church. We should always remember that Jesus said to his followers that they should love one another, even as he had loved them, as well as his statement: "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, my brethren, you have done it unto me."

nine

There is a quotation from William Wordsworth that sums up what I feel is most important in anyone's life -- whatever one's larger vocational and community responsibilities may be. (Parenthetically. isn't Wordsworth a great name for a poet? Especially for one who had such a gift for providing a word's worth!) Wordsworth says: "That best portion of a good person's life -- the little, unremembered deeds of kindness and of love."

Amen!