

PROMISE AND PERIL

A sermon preached at Edina Morningside Community Church, UCC

Sunday, October 9, 2016

On the occasion of the Installation of

Rev. Obadiah Ballinger

as Pastor

The Rev. Dr. James Gertmenian

Minister Emeritus, Plymouth Congregational Church, Minneapolis

I can't imagine a place I would rather be today than here with all of you and with my dear friend, Oby. You and he are both to be congratulated for choosing one another – this good community and this good man. What a wonderfully mutual gift! I have known Oby for almost ten years now, and I'll just say this to you members of Edina Morningside: I hope that you are ready to be loved – loved for you you are and loved for who you may become, loved with your strengths and loved with your weaknesses, loved when you are warm-hearted and loved when you are stiff-necked, loved when you are doing well and loved when you're hurting – for Oby, as much as anyone I know, has a pastor's heart. Loving the church and its people is what he does. And I trust that you are ready to love him in return – when he's up and when he's down, after the good sermons (which will be most of them) and after the sermons that might have been a bit better (which will happen from time to time), when the treasury is flush and when it's running short, when he soothes you with words of comfort and when he upsets you with words of difficult truth. After my lifetime as a pastor, with a full catalogue of my own missteps, I know how easy it is to lose sight, from time to time, of the most obvious truth: *Love* is what undergirds ministry – not programs or pledges, not theologies or themes or theories of management, not committees or consultants, not even powerful worship or prophetic witness – but love. It's that simple. Ultimately, nothing matters more. Love. I could let that be the whole sermon and just sit down now, but – sorry! – no such luck. I have a bit more to say. Will you pray with me?

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be ever acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock, our Redeemer, and Friend. Amen.

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A young man rises from his seat in the sanctuary and takes his place in the pulpit for the first time. He is slender, earnest, barely thirty, with all the energy of youth tensed in him like a coiled spring. Every eye is on him, every ear intent, and no one knows what to expect. The fact is, *he* doesn't know what to expect either. What is this going to be like? Why would they listen to me? Is this where I belong? What am I supposed to do? As he stands there, uncertain and hesitant, there is a silence, and the silence opens up in him like a yawning pit, and he is teetering on the edge of it, and for a moment he's afraid that he may fall in. His breathing turns shallow. His knees weaken. His mouth is dry. A long, difficult pause. And then, inexplicably – almost

imperceptibly – a turning, an inner resolution. He senses his feet taking root in that place, in that pulpit. His legs are now two tree trunks, and an unaccustomed confidence rises in him like sap from somewhere unseen. His hands, which before shook like leaves in a stiff wind, are now perfectly still. His heart slows and calms. Somehow, now he knows. He *does* belong here. He is sure of it. And now the words are placed before him, as on a scroll laid across the pulpit, clear as day, and though he cannot explain it, he senses that the words have become his very own, are budding in him, and they begin to drop from his lips like ripe fruit: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus says, (for it is Jesus of whom we speak):

The spirit of the Lord is upon me
because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

And then, for good measure, he adds: “Today, these words have been fulfilled in your hearing.”

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” “God has anointed me.” These were – and are – outrageous claims . . . breathtaking presumptions to be made when you’re just starting out. The beginning of a ministry, after all – then just as now – is a teetering time, an uncertain time. It is a time full of promise, to be sure (a great murmuration of dreams!) . . . but it is also a time of peril (a troublesome flock of challenges, and the ever-present possibility of failure). I wonder if you feel some of that today. Who knows what lies ahead for this congregation? Who knew what lay ahead for Jesus on that first day when he stood up in the synagogue to read, and the words of the prophet Isaiah were given to him, and he claimed those words as his own:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me
Because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

And what if they became *your* words? What if you – not Oby, but you *together* with Oby – made that same outrageous claim . . . that same breathtaking presumption? “The Spirit of the Lord is upon us” and “God has anointed us . . .” to do some amazing things. So much promise in those words! So much hope and possibility! But wait – you also are wise enough to recognize how that same claim is saturated with peril. Good news to the poor? Really? Think about the people in Minnesota who are struggling – and failing – to get by on an inadequate minimum wage. Does the church – this church – have some good news for them? Imagine the danger when a congregation takes on *that* mission! Release for the captives? Are you sure? Think of them, too: the people caught in a system of mass incarceration while white collar criminals – including some who have wreaked much greater havoc on the social fabric – walk. What if communities of faith talked about reversing *that* system? What if *you* did? Letting the oppressed go free? Call to mind the people put down by misogyny, held down by homophobia, pressed down by rampant

consumerism, knocked down by voter disenfranchisement. The question hangs in the air: Will you claim the good news for them? It all starts to sound pretty controversial, pretty political, pretty dangerous. Make no mistake. *Somebody* is going to be upset if you preach the Good News. *Somebody* is going to object if you make it your business – your calling – to live the Gospel. Oh yes, these words of Jesus – words of good news – for all their promise, are rife with peril. To prove the point, you might take note of the fact that on that day in Nazareth, the people were so incensed with Jesus' presumption – his overstepping certain boundaries – that they ran him out of town.

But here is the interesting conundrum: when I speak of the beginning of your ministry as a time of promise and peril, it is not an either/or proposition. I'm not saying that it might end up going well or it might end up going badly. I'm not saying that you might be successful or you might not. Nor am I simply saying that it will be "promise" on some days and "peril" on others. I mean . . . obviously *that*, but it goes deeper. You see, the conundrum (and this is true, I think, of all of life) is that the promise is *in* the peril. There *is* no promise without the peril. No possibility of greatness without some heart-stopping, knee-knocking, opposition-engendering risk. Someone getting upset? You bet. The reputation of the church being questioned? For sure. But as Carl Jung said, "No night, no light." Or, in more colloquial terms: "No pain, no gain." And I wonder, today, whether, out of the love you have for the world (for love is paramount), you are ready to embrace the *peril* of your ministry so that you may give birth to the *promise* of your ministry. In the next few minutes, I want to think with you about what that might mean.

Just days after that episode in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus was standing by the Sea of Gennesaret (usually known as Galilee). Now he was attracting crowds because of his healing and teaching. Seeing some fisherman nearby, he said to one of them, named Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." I doubt if there could be a more apt and instructive metaphor for a congregation about to open a new chapter of its ministry. "Put out into the deep water . . ." The best fish, after all, aren't in the shallows. They're out where the waves are the most dangerous and the winds can knock a boat about like a toothpick on a tempest. The promise of your ministry won't be found in the shallows, either. Not in the shallows of church business as usual. Not in the shallows of safe and predictable programs. Not in the shallows of non-controversial endeavor. The *promise* of the Gospel is in the *peril* of the Gospel, and so Jesus says: "Put out into deep waters and let down your nets for a catch." For God's sake – for *God's* sake – take a risk. Do something you might fail at. Put your church's reputation on the line. Are you beginning to imagine what that might be for this congregation?

Of course, we have our natural resistance to such a demanding call. Just like Simon. "Master," he said, "we fished all night and we didn't catch anything." The contemporary church in America might say the same thing. "Look, we aren't catching much. Worship attendance is down. Membership rolls are dwindling. Church budgets are stretched. And who pays attention to the church, any more? What effect do we have on the culture?" Some people are surprised that it has turned this way. After all, we went through a period in the late twentieth century where religion (or should we say, religiosity) veritably dripped from the pinnacles of power and politicians flocked to prayer breakfasts and prosperity preachers packed stadiums week after week. Religion was all the rage. What good came of that? By some accounts, America has been one of the most overtly religious nations on earth, and what do we have to show for it? A

deepening gulf between rich and poor. A consumerism and an unfettered capitalism that threaten to foul and destabilize the environment. Ever more investment in swords, ever less in plowshares. A crude, sophomoric, and demeaning political culture. Millions of foreclosed homes sitting empty while families live on the streets, or in their cars, or in temporary shelters. If we Americans are so damned religious, why aren't the most vulnerable in our communities doing better? "We fished all night," Simon said, "and we caught nothing." As Americans, when we have sown piety, we have reaped ashes. One could argue that our religion – as it has been widely practiced – just isn't working.

A similar set of realities were present in Israel at the time of Isaiah. The people had returned to Jerusalem after years in exile. They had rebuilt the temple, taken up again their worship practices, the offerings and sacrifices, their prayers and their fasting. But none of it was working. Early in Isaiah's 58th chapter, we read that the people are complaining to God, "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why do we humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" "Why are our nets coming up empty?" "Why is our religion not working?" And God, speaking through Isaiah, dismissed the way they had practiced their religion and offered a better way:

Is not *this* the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

This is the deep water into which Jesus calls us. This is the kind of worship that God seeks from us. Not ceremony but service. Not piety but practice. Not catechism but compassion. Not a religion that is about MY personal salvation but one that is about the salvation of the world that God loves. This is the peril in which our promise will be found. To risk the church's very being for the sake of God's poor. It begins with simple acts of charity – bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked. And, the fact is, I know that wonderful acts of generosity emanate from this congregation! The fruit of your love and compassion is prodigious. But there is deeper water than that, beloved, for the implication of the passage is that something yet more difficult is required of us. What is called for – and this can feel dangerous – is not just generosity but *intimacy* across the class divide. What does the verse say? "Bring the homeless poor into *your* house." And, bless you! For I know that some of you are already volunteering through Beacon's Families Moving Forward program to shelter homeless families in a church nearby. Some of you know what it is like to sit up with a parent whose child is sleeping on a cot in a Sunday school room, to hear her story, perhaps to share something of your own story, to really be together in that space. It's rarely comfortable at first. What do you talk about, you who come from such different worlds? Now, looking into her face, you can feel the swells of deep water beneath you, your whole sense of yourself and your privilege heaving on the waves and being buffeted about by the unforgiving wind. There's often an impulse to pull back, but the text, the challenge, the calling is clear: God says: "When someone is naked, clothe them, and *do not hide from your own flesh!*" That's who

she is. That's who you are, together – kin, family, one flesh. So bless you for going to that place! God knows, a congregation needs steadiness of purpose for this work. Ask the people at Simpson Methodist Church in Minneapolis where every night since 1981, approximately 40 homeless individuals have found shelter, food, counsel, and community. Does it put strains on the church? Of course it does. Does it involve some peril for the congregation? Oh, yes. But, oh, the *promise* . . . If I had to name a church in Minneapolis whose quiet light is *Gospel* light – that's where I would point.

And neither does it end there. Jesus would draw us out into deeper waters, still. For when God calls us to “loose the bonds of injustice,” and to “let the oppressed go free,” the implication is that there is a depth of service that goes beyond charity, beyond personal compassion. It is the work of justice – the work of dismantling the very systems that trap people in poverty and seductive consumerism, that oppress them with racism, that marginalize them with homophobia. You've heard the image before: when we see helpless people floating in the river, our job isn't only to go out and pull them to shore. It is to go upstream and find out who is throwing them in in the first place. Those waters – the waters of public policy – can feel especially dangerous for church folk. When churches take a public stand, when they become a moral witness in an immoral time, people will get upset. The church's protected place in the community will be threatened. Congregations can experience profound inner stresses. Oby and Javen know this from the work they did to help congregations organize for marriage equality. I'm certain that there was not one congregation that didn't have some inner struggle about that issue. It's so much easier if religion is about my personal relationship to God. Or my personal discipleship and service. No one gets upset that way. But the church's calling isn't so much to save individual souls as it is to save the soul of the nation, of humanity. Providing food for the hungry is vitally important. But the heart of God burns with the question: “Why, beloved church, are they hungry in the first place? Why do you, my people, allow this to happen?” And so the church must burn with those same questions. The voyage from charity to justice is a perilous one. This is the deep water into which Jesus calls us. This is the peril of living the Gospel. But, dear friends, nothing else we do – nothing – will be so pleasing to God (“Is not this the fast that I choose?”), and nothing else will bring to life our true promise, our true possibility. For, as God said through Isaiah, *if you do these things,*

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn
and your healing shall spring up quickly;

...

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
You shall cry for help, and God will say “Here I am.”

...

[*Then*] The Lord will guide you continually
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong.

...

[*Then*] your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

By the grace of God, this congregation and this pastor are called into a ministry of great peril. And, by the grace of God, *through* the peril, you are called into a life of even greater promise. What a journey you have ahead of you! Thanks be to God! Amen.