

The Nevertheless Principle: A Meditation for Sheave Sunday, 2009

- Revelation 1:4b-8; Romans 12:9-18; Psalm 126
- November 22, 2009
- W. Kenneth Williams, First Baptist Church of Rochester

Myron Augsburg, a Mennonite preacher, was challenged by a question from a demanding, cynical man.

"Tell me, preacher, what difference does it make in my life that Jesus Christ died on a cross two thousand years ago?"

I could have talked to him about some theories of the atonement out of theology, but instead I looked at him and asked, "Do you have some friends?"

"Yes," he said, "I have friends."

I said, "Suppose one gets in trouble."

He said, "You hang in with him."

I said, "It gets really severe."

He said, "You still hang in."

I said, "It gets really rough. When can you cop out?"

He looked at me in amazement and he said, "Man, if he's your friend you never cop out."

Then I smiled and said, "And God came to us in Jesus as our friend, and we're in trouble and He hung in. Our trouble got really difficult, and He hung in. When could Jesus cop out?"

The man looked at me and it was almost as though lights went on in his eyes. He smiled. He said, "You mean that is why Jesus had to die?"

I said, "That's one reason. He came and said, 'Your problem is now my problem.'"

He got up from where he was sitting, squared his shoulders and nodded his head and turned and walked down the sidewalk. I watched him go and I said to myself, "Man, you don't know it but you have been evangelized." Once you know a God who says, "Your problem is now my problem," you can never be the same. "

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And this is my job, to remind you constantly that God cares about you and the condition of your life. It is my job to teach about Jesus and the vision of the Kingdom of God that was the basis of

his ministry. My job is to equip the saints – that’s you – with all the energy of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers the life of faith.

All fall we have celebrated the ministries of our church. From Rally Day to Sheave Sunday we have honored in our worship services groups, studies, partnerships, activities, and missions. It is quite a list! All of these we support through our church budget.

The budget supports one other ministry, the one you call me to practice as your pastor.

In point of fact, I do not have a job as much as a vocation. The calling of a pastor is to live out, visibly, for all to see, a life devoted to the principles of Jesus. It is a life of prayer, compassion, covenant, generosity, kindness, challenge, and, occasionally, prophetic indignation. A pastor worth his or her salt both comforts and confronts. A pastor teaches by precept and example. Unless you feel challenged to be better than you are, to live your faith with greater intentionality, I am not doing the job you pay me to do.

My ministry is captured in one word: Nevertheless. And the word has two edges:

- Life is not only hard; it is sometimes painful, sorrowful, and confusing. Nevertheless, we live by faith.
- Life is comfortable. The choice to live with ease is there. Nevertheless, spiritual growth requires making other choices – of selfless service, of servant sacrifice.

Shortly after my wife, Brenda, died last summer, a dear friend sent me a copy of Marion Bond West’s book The Nevertheless Principle. Marion West has, for a number of years, written devotions and articles for *Guidepost* magazine. Her book was about her pilgrimage of faith as she accompanied her husband through cancer and death. Marion’s story was my story with Brenda. To accompany a loved one on their path to death is, simply, the most intimate of all relationships. To live out the vow “to love and to cherish until death do us part” is promise keeping at its utmost. The lover must relinquish the loved. Marion Bond West said as much, suggesting that the hardest but best act of love was to relinquish Jerry to God. Let me give you Marion’s own words: “In order to do it I had to die to every dream, every right, every ambition. My life had to begin again. My neat little mapped-out future of growing old with Jerry had to be erased like a blackboard at the end of a school day. It was a tremendous price to pay for peace and joy, but it was the only way to be fear-free.” (p. 97)

Fear is the power that we bring to church with us each Sunday. It is pervasive. To this we would add the reality that the world is overwhelming in its demands. Nevertheless, you come here seeking a different reality, a renewed and much more positive perspective. You come, whether you are conscious of it or not, looking to overcome fear and frazzle with joy and energy.

In my daily devotions I have been reading through Frederick Buechner’s devotional book Listening to Your Life. Buechner has the writer’s gift. He is able to express that which is hard to grasp. Preparing for today, in prayer a few nights ago, these words leapt off the page at me:

If we only had eyes to see and ears to hear and wits to understand, we would know that the Kingdom of God in the sense of holiness, goodness, beauty is as close as breathing and is crying out to be born within ourselves and within the world; we would know that the Kingdom of God is what we all hunger for above all other things even when we don't know its name or realize that it's what we're starving to death for. The Kingdom of God is where our best dreams come from and our truest prayers. We glimpse it at those moments when we find ourselves better than we are and wiser than we know. We catch sight of it when at some moment of crisis a strength seems to come to us that is greater than our strength. The Kingdom of God is where we belong. It is home, and whether we realize it or not, I think we are all homesick for it. (Entry for November 17, p. 304)

And I am here to call you home, and to beckon you to your own conscious ministry in Christ's name. This is a job far more important than making sure that the church organization is administratively efficient and programmatically relevant. This is a job that is hard and delightful, frustrating and exhilarating. And nearly every day I find reason to give thanks for the work I do and the people I serve. You pay me to be the best *me* that I can be and so that you find the resources to be the best *you* you can be. In the process God sees to it that we all find joy. Life is hard and we have other choices; nevertheless, we are here to live together for Christ.

I pray that the commitments being made today are the best you can do. And, I pray that God will bless us with a sense of nevertheless. Remember that God makes our problems God's own. We are to hang in there! The one who made water into wine and multiplied the loaves and fishes will teach us how best to use the blessings being offered on this Sheave Sunday.

I close with this benediction from the Franciscan tradition. These words capture wonderfully the full meaning of the nevertheless principle of pastoral ministry:

May God bless you with DISCOMFORT...

At easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships,
So that you may live deep within your hearts.

May God bless you with ANGER...

At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with TEARS...

To shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
And turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough FOOLISHNESS...

To believe that you can make a difference in this world,
So that you can DO what others claim cannot be done.

Amen.