

**“The Plans I Have For You”**  
**Vermont Conference Annual Meeting, UCC**  
**J. Bennett Guess**  
**Saturday morning, June 4, 2011**

Sometimes, “when the world is too much with me,” I find it helpful to remind myself why I ever thought I wanted to be a minister in the first place.

Starting back in Junior High, people around me, especially in the church, told me I should consider going into the ministry.

My high school guidance counselor, Ethyl Rideout, mistook these traits as the makings of a good funeral home director, an idea she kept repeating to me for three solid years ... and, with all respect to any funeral home people in the room, it’s a suggestion that doesn’t sit real well with a 16-year-old who just wants to be “cool.”

The truth is: I thought I wanted to be a journalist, a reporter... or more so, I liked the idea of journalism school, because, by design, journalism majors are expected to be well-rounded and to take a broad array of electives. So, in a way, it’s possible to remain indecisive about your future, while appearing to your parents to be headed in a purposeful direction.

So, in en route to becoming a reporter, I studied the history of political upheaval in Central America; took a course or two in mythology and the philosophy of Ancient Greeks; and spent a semester reading up on the notable campaign strategies of post-Civil War presidential candidates. I took advanced classes in foreign policy and international diplomacy. I studied Latin, and I took lots of music theory and composition classes. I interned as a theatre stagehand; and I took statistics and logics courses to satisfy my math requirements, thinking they would be easier. ... Boy, was I wrong.

Meanwhile, I did the journalism thing too. I worked at Kentucky Educational Television and wrote for the campus newspaper, and completed required courses to master my knowledge of the Associated Press style guide; learn the history of American media; study communications law, and practice how to say more by writing less.

And, in college, I was political too. I was president of College Young Democrats and led the ill-fated “Students for Mondale/Ferraro Campaign” on our campus, convinced beyond all rational argument that Walter and Geraldine were actually going to pull it out in the end.

And, as a budding activist, I participated in regular and frequent small protests in front of the U.S. Federal Building, where we wanted to bring attention to the evils and the inconsistencies of U.S. foreign policy in Central America.

It was there, on a Lexington, Ky., sidewalk, that someone gave me a copy of a slim book by the Brazilian priest and scholar, Leonardo Boff. It had a blueish-green cover and was entitled, “An Introduction to Liberation Theology.” Only God knows why but I had the good sense to take it back to my dorm room and read it.

Boff opens that book by asking “How is it possible that we can be Christian and live in a world of destitution and injustice?” And he begins with the story of a 40-year-old woman who asks forgiveness from her priest for receiving the Eucharist without first going to confession.

When he inquires why, she admits that she had arrived late to mass, about the time of the offering, and had not eaten a single morsel of food, only water, for three consecutive days.

“But when I saw you handing out the hosts,” she said, “those little pieces of white bread, I went to communion just out of hunger for that little piece of bread.” The priest’s eyes filled with tears as he recalled the words of Jesus, “My flesh is real food...whoever feeds on me will draw life from me.”

He goes on to tell another story of the spiritual-political transformation of a shell-shocked Brazilian bishop who had just encountered a fainting woman on the streets, with three small children and another baby clinging desperately to her neck. This mother was attempting to nurse her infant, but she was too hungry herself to produce any milk. The woman’s blouse was stained in bright red as the tiny baby drew the only nourishment this woman could offer – her very own blood.

From that moment on, the Bishop declared, he would personally feed one hungry child each day for the rest of his life.

“Every true theology springs from a spirituality – that is, from a true meeting of God in human history,” Boff writes. “Liberation theology is born when faith confronts injustice.”

Whew. Now, I had been raised in the church. My family attended most Sundays, except when Dad had an unusually early t-time at the Country Club. I was president of my Methodist Youth Fellowship. I sang in choirs, performed the occasional solo, even preached a time or two on youth Sundays.

I spent nine summers at Camp Loucon, a rustic campground outside tiny Leitchfield, Ky., where I first thought I felt God tapping me on the shoulder.

It was there that I first experienced a hot dog bun and Welch’s grape drink as the consecrated body and blood of Christ. It was also some of the first times in my life that I wiped away tears after being asked to consider the depths of God’s great love for me.

Even in college, I attended worship -- not often but sporadically – yet far more frequently than my friends, or my sister, ever did.

So I knew church, or so I thought I did.

But now this Brazilian priest was challenging all my assumptions about what it meant to be Christian.

“We can only be followers of Jesus and true Christians by making common cause with the poor and working out the gospel of liberation,” Boff was telling me. “The poor are not simply those who have nothing. The poor are made poor by others, and their strength to resist, to understand their rights, to organize themselves politically and transform their subhuman situation ... this is the work of God’s people. Not only to provide aid or charity, but to allow them to become their own liberators.”

A faith worth living – This is what I had encountered. A faith more profound than just helping me get through a bad week, but a faith that had the audacity to believe that systems could be changed and lives transformed through the power of Christian love and action. A faith worth living.

After college, I went to work as a reporter in Bowling Green, Ky., covering local school boards and city governments, topics I was generally interested in, but (really without understanding why) I also found myself sending away for brochures and catalogues from theological schools. I became fascinated with the types of courses they taught, and began wondering why – if the ministers I had grown up with – had taken such fascinating courses, how come I had never realized it? or benefitted from it?

Not long after, the United Methodist District Superintendent called me up and asked if I’d be willing to do pulpit supply for a year at two rural churches. I had not a clue what that would entail, but I said yes.

It was in these two congregations that I first realized it was a really good idea to actually have the Apostles Creed in front of you, if you’re expected to lead it, no matter how many times you’ve said it from the pew.

And that “pastoral prayers” worked better if you thought ahead about what you really wanted to say.

That sermons were somehow something more than speeches, and that I had far more to learn from these gracious country church folk than I had to teach.

It was there I learned “to count my blessings and name them one by one, to count my blessings and to see what God had done.” It was, again, a faith worth living.

It was there that I first tried on “ministry” and despite feeling like a “little boy preacher” in a grown preacher’s suit, I decided I’d give it a try and see if I could grow into a clergy person’s wardrobe.

At the conclusion of that year, I quit my job at the newspaper, enrolled at Vanderbilt Divinity School and had apparently done such a stellar job at leading two churches, they sent me to pastor four. I had become a bonified circuit rider – the Smithland Circuit, to be exact -- about two hours west of Nashville near Paducah. There I preached five times every Sunday – three times in the morning and twice at night – thoroughly plagiarizing what I had gleaned from my professors and the mid-week chapel services back in Nashville.

I thought I was brilliant; my parishioners found me promising at best. They loved and nurtured me in my clergy formation, and in turn, I kept the pulpit supplied for a few more years, performed way more funerals than baptisms, and eventually graduated from that four-point pastorate, as well as seminary, and became the sole pastor of a single congregation ... my seventh church at the ripe old age of 25.

It was there that I learned that young pastors are expected, somehow, to bring scores and scores of young people with them ... and to build a mega-churches in towns of fewer than 100 people and to do so with the resistance at every turn from the church's current leadership. Needless to say, a mega-church .... I did not build.

It only took me another year to confess that life in rural Kentucky was not my calling (And just to clarify, rural Kentucky is quite different than rural Vermont) And although I had come out as a gay man to my family and friends while at Vanderbilt, I was leading a secretive and scary life (to me) as a Methodist clergyperson. I was literally in the closet: My sister had helped me install a deadbolt lock on a closet door in one of the parsonage bedrooms, where behind lock and key I kept my seminary books on sexuality and LGBT issues, my worn copies of *The Advocate* magazine, and even my stash of warm beer, lest my church folk ever discover the real person who was shepherding their flock.

I had discovered the United Church of Christ while in seminary. It seemed that the students and faculty that I respected the most were UCC. After wrestling a bit with the limited options available to me, I took the UCC polity course at the same time I took the Methodist one. I knew it was only a matter of time before I would jump ship.

That ship-jumping moment presented itself in the summer of 1992 when the UCC church in my hometown of Henderson, Ky., came open and a search for a pastor was underway. Henderson is a small city of 30,000 people adjacent to the larger city of Evansville, Ind.

To my surprise, I didn't even know that this old UCC congregation, formed in 1871, even existed. It had been in such a state of perpetual decline and insignificance that it had never registered as much as a blip on my hometown radar screen.

It's not hard to understand why. The church was deep and long on its German heritage and, to their chagrin, there weren't many more German immigrants arriving in Henderson in the early 1990s. The congregation consisted of 12 – count them, 12 – members, all in their 80s and 90s. Mattie and Bertha Hartung, Florence Kockritz, Marie Schuette, Clarence Feix, and Bertha Haag, to name a few. Churches don't come more German than that.

But they were a smart and worldly group, so much so that they called me to be their out-gay pastor. No one else would be foolish enough to offer or accept such an assignment.

And as much as they frustrated me at times -- and as painful as it must have been for them as well, they participated with me in the renewal of their church. They talked of the future they envisioned: a vital, engaged and pew-filled congregation once again. It's totally amazing, really, that a group of individuals who had such limited futures personally could actually yearn for a collective future for the church they loved. I am forever indebted to them.

Over the course of eight years, that church did grow from 12 to 300. But most importantly, thousands within a two-hour radius came to hear and see and know a version of Christianity that they had never experienced before ... at least in that part of the world. We became ONA church #139, opened a Planned Parenthood clinic on church property, created elaborate works of outdoor public art during our annual Peace With Justice Week, brought to town leading liberal religious thinkers, and endured regular protests from Fred Phelps-like right-wing fanatics. We pretty much rocked the world of all who heard about us (or so I liked to think.)

It was that "faith worth living" – A faith more impactful than arguing over what committee had the right to make which decision, but a faith that had the audacity to believe that even little Henderson, Ky., would be missing something central to that town's growth and maturity if it were denied the experience of a loud and liberating Christian perspective, something I believe every community deserves, be it UCC or otherwise.

"Ministering to brokenness" came to be that congregation's central mission and, proving that God has a sense of humor, the Spirit sent us some real doozies. While the base membership attracted some amazingly committed and generous people, there also was no end to the line of messed up folk who streamed in and out of our doors. People with destructive behaviors, mounting bills, bad credit, foul odors, poor health, violent relationships, you name it.

I never worked harder in my life. I sensed my role within the congregation demanded that I never waver in keeping the spirit of renewal and growth alive. I allowed no cracks in the façade of my confidence that our little church was heading upward and outward. There was to be no diminishment in the quality of lively worship and uplifting music that people had come to expect. The good word about us was spreading. And even though the church budget was growing exponentially so was the pressure to find new dollars to sustain what we were building together.

Outside the congregation, insistent that our church be engaged in every justice issues across the board, I felt my presence was required at every community organizing event, every labor unrest, every political function. As a very public, very out-gay pastor – in a region of the country where that just didn't make a whole lot of sense, even a trip to the grocery store or the post office, in time, became an emotionally draining experience. I started yearning for anonymity.

And I could feel myself growing cynical. I'm not proud of it, but I started to grow weary of those sick puppies who had demanded so much of the congregation's focused investment, only to see them stay around for a season and drift away soon after, as if their adult baptism – finally being accepted and loved for who they are – was their graduation from the church instead of their new immersion in it. I found myself privately reserving my applause for their pledges of undying love and monetary support for this place they “never thought existed.”

“Yeah, we'll see how all that turns out,” I'd murmur to myself.

I knew I was a bit raw when I would find myself starting to cry while reading scripture aloud in worship. Words like,

“Strengthen the feeble hands, and steady your weak knees; say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, your God will save you.”

And there I am with tears running down my face; visitors and old-timers alike wondering what on earth has happened to the pastor: “Are you okay?”

“Sometimes the beauty of all this just gets to me,” I remember saying to them.

“The beauty, yes, and the exhausting work.”

I'm telling you all this, certainly not to impress you or attract your pity, because I still believe in Leonardo Boff's faith worth living. And I still am deeply in love with the United Church of Christ, which I believe embodies the best of what I believe the Christian faith is all about.

But my history and confession are really meant to convey one thing only. I understand. As I look around, I see sisters and brothers in this room.

Ministry is very hard work, especially when you're trying to keep it all together, including yourself. It's too easy to feel like a failure, even when you're not, especially when we derive our sense of self from listening too closely to the complaints and the compliments that can serve as awkward parentheses around our lives, hiding us from the larger, graceful word that comes from God: “I have a plan for you. Plans for good, not for harm.”

I know I'm not alone in having reached that moment, and I'm glad to report that I'm not there any longer. But I suspect that's probably the place where some of you find yourselves this weekend: Still committed to the call that brought you here, but wondering how you will sustain it for yet another season of difficult work in a rapidly changing environment.

Whether you are clergy or a lay leader, you're here first and foremost because you love that little church of yours, you believe in its mission and you want the best for it and for your people. And you're here, I suspect, in search of what this moment of deep-change in the church means for us, what it asks of us, and in good time, if not already, what it will extract from us.

As frightening as it sounds, we're all in the wilderness. But the good news is that we're here in this exile place TOGETHER. We may feel alone, but we're not.

It's not often (in fact it's quite rare historically) that a whole religious people have the opportunity to go into exile together. And that's exactly what's happening to all of us now, as Gil Rendle teaches.

It feels as if the future is arriving more quickly than the present has prepared us for it. And, naturally, that type of abrupt change causes us to yearn for things the way they were before someone or something tossed us out of the comforts of yesterday – back in Egypt before the exodus or back in Jerusalem before the exile.

Phyllis Tickle observes that every 500 years the whole church conducts a great big rummage sale. And lucky us, we were born into that 500-year cycle. We're in the process, as Christians, of sorting through the church's attic and deciding what to keep and what we shall discard.

I like that image, because it speaks to the angst we're all feeling, because rummage sales are exhausting: practically but more so emotionally. It's hard to let go, but it's even harder to decide just what needs to be discarded in the first place.

“What is a faith worth living?” and “What is a faith worth discarding?” That's what this exile period is all about.

But the church always responds best when it discovers what is essential, what is primary. What we must take with us and what we can we leave behind. What's weighing us down vs. what can propel us forward?

Those are the kinds of questions we've never had to ask ourselves, back home in the safety and comfort of the Temple. But, here in this wilderness place, only in this place, can we learn to live in a new way.

Jeremiah spoke to a people in exile, a people wondering just what their future holds. A people who thought they had been faithful, and now look what has happened.

And so he counsels them:

“Build houses ... and live in them.”

“Plant gardens ... and eat of them, says the Lord your God”

“Seek the welfare of the city where you find yourself.”

In my greater treadmill moments, it’s my tendency to obsess about the building of my house, but to forget where I live.

To focus all of my thoughts and energies on the planting of my garden, but when it comes to enjoying the fruits of it, that part eludes me.

I am always tending to the welfare of the place where I think we should be, instead of this place here in exile – IN EXILE – where I am being asked to be purposeful, alongside you and so many others, what is this particular wilderness experience meant to teach us.

“For thus says the Lord, I will fulfill to you my promise and I will bring you back to this place.”

But will the place look the same? Will it be as we remembered? The place we knew before all this upheaval? Will someone describe it for me, explain it to me? Give me a timeline? Draft a resolution that ignores all the “whereas-es” and goes straight to the “therefore-s”?

“I will let you find me. ... I will let YOU find me.”

Thus says the Lord.

Thankfully, that search does NOT begin today. This exile experience has been going on for a few decades now. And some good news, some promising new directions, a lot of signs from things we’re trying and learning ... they are emerging. I look forward to discovering and sharing with you ... about all we’re finding out, together.

AMEN.