

“On Two Wheels with the Gospel”

“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Be not afraid.

Because this is what we are about:

We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.

We plant seeds that will one day grow.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

We cannot do everything,

But we can do something.

So forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That is how the light gets in.”

In a meeting I was in this week on the topic of our worship services,

And what the ministers bring to help them come alive and

what you bring to help them come alive

(because remember I’m not the performer and you’re not the audience,

Which is to say that we create what happens here together - good words

Need good ears and vice-versa),

One of you, when speaking of missed opportunities and disappointments

As it relates to the Sunday morning experience,

Raised your finger and said *‘I have one!.’*

Which made me think *Uh-ho*, fully expecting to hear

How perhaps I speak too loudly or not loudly enough,

Or how there was too much or too little mention of politics,

Or too much or too little mention of God,

*(all fair in a diverse congregation, which is why I say it's not the minister's
Job to keep everybody happy)*

This person, instead, spoke of how the biggest missed opportunity
They feel is how fleeting the feeling of peace, perspective, challenge,
Patience, Good News can be after we leave here.

*“Sometimes, depending on what's happening with kids,
It doesn't even last by the time I leave the parking lot!
I get disappointed with how I can't seem to hold onto this....”*

What do we think...true?

Yeah, true for me, too.

Which is why I remind us that at church we get to *practice* being the kind of
person we want to be,

And *practice* creating the kind of world we want to have,

Practice being the operative word because it reminds

Us that this kind of work requires near constant effort,

which we then screw up, which is also why we believe in forgiveness,

This moving from “me” to “we”,

This singing someone else's song,

this holding someone else's hope,

This shining light into someone else's darkness,

This leaning up against the arc of the universe and trying

To bend it towards justice (King said),

This having compassion for others even if they don't want it,

This listening to the voice still and small, as the song says,

This returning again to the home of the soul,

This trying to practice what we preach,

This trying to take our UUAC/UU Good News (shh...which is what the world Gospel means)

With us out into the world –

Or, heck, even just out past the exit signs.

You have heard me joke – joke meaning the truth told slant –

That I am so bad at living my religion that I needed to make it

My full-time job,

Which is just another way of saying, despite the physical space

Between us right now, and the robe, and MDiv.

That you and I are no different, no more or less holy,

No more or less pious, no more or less Reverend.

Which is an important detail to share as invite you - will you go with me? –

Into one of my experiences this summer

Because it taught me something about living our faith.

Where are we going?

Well, if you are friends with me on Facebook,

Or if you read the weekly email (and we know not all of you do),

You'll know from the photos you saw there

that where we are going is the Pyrenees in Southern France,

It's August,

And though I have a tie on now,

What I've got on then is deserving of the acronym MAMIL.

Any guess what it means?

Middle-Aged-Man-in-Lycra.

Me all decked out to compete in a 7-day bicycle race

On the same mountains that the Tour de France races up,
Which I'm doing because...well...because some of the most
important things we can do in life are those we do without finely
articulated reasons or resumes in mind.

Amen?

And because it is August, and because I am thousands of miles
Away from the pulpit that is my office and the role of minister
That is a big part of me but not all of me,
I am on vacation.

The email auto-respond has been turned on,
The robe hangs resting in the closet at home,
I get to lie to my seat-neighbor on the plane and tell them
I'm in middle-management at Staples instead of
A minister so I don't have to hear them explain uncomfortably why they
Don't go to church anymore.

But even though I haven't had to pray in public for weeks,
And even though we have been with my in-laws in the UK
Where there are more church steeples than there are people
Who want to be near them,
Before the race starts I find myself walking up the village hill
To the locked door of the church build in 1125,
The news of my brother's death a week old,
My father-in-law, Karyn's dad, just home that day from treatment 4 for
cancer,

And I whisper the third-out-fourth kind of prayer (4 kinds being: oops, thanks, gimme, wow),

Saying: *God, please gimme, give me, give all these people peace, health, Strength, you name it....*

The good news, the gospel of our faith reminding me of the truth

That God, holy, pick your word...doesn't provide us protection, but she does promise us presence.

Which isn't frankly, enough, sometimes. Can we admit it?

Because who doesn't pray for protection?

I do. I did. There at the start-line in Anglet, France

surrounded a team of big Russians,

And the Kenyan Pro Cycling Team,

And the British guy next to me who was on a week's leave

From the British Royal Marines,

Me praying '*Good God, what have I gotten myself*

Into? Keep me safe!'

That prayer, btw, surely on the lips of thousands and thousands of people

Not that many miles from me that mid-August morning,

Because remember what was happening then and continues

To happen all over the borders of Western Europe?

Remember?

Yes, the Syrian refugees all lined up at the borders, all trying

To make their way to Germany or England,

Or some other more friendly country,

Which I can't help but think of because there at the start-line

Is a stack of newspapers and on the cover is the photo
 Of 3yr-old Aylan Kurdi, whose body washed ashore in Turkey
 The previous day after trying to reach Europe with his brothers and mother.
 ‘*Come, Come, Whoever You Are,*’ we sometimes sing in church
 (remember?),
 Which I actually do remember, this uncomfortable Gospel singing
 I have in my heart, these thousands of miles away, as I role out on my
 Two expensive wheels, wheels that alone, according the Guardian
 newspaper,
 Could pay for two people to cross the Mediterranean Sea.
 And so I’m thinking, those thousands of miles away,
 “*maybe our church’s message isn’t that far away after all.*”

The first stage was pretty ridiculous.
 7 hours. 98 miles. 12,000ft of vertical feet climbed.
 Me, at the end, surrounded by cows and grazing mountain sheep
 And other riders screaming curse words in all manner of languages,
 And me all serene and minister-like, humming hymns.
 Which is a lie.
 But what is true that I didn’t hate a second of it,
 Because the suffering on the bike helped me to expunge
 The suffering, the angst, the hurt elsewhere.
Grief, I tell you in my office, is like a balloon under a carpet.
We can uncover it on our own terms,
or it will find a way to come out on its own.
 So this is my therapy. Do you know yours?

Stage 2 comes. I survive. Middle of the MAMIL pack.
Which isn't bad.

Stage 3. The same, except for the giant dairy cow
That tried to lick my arms at the feed station at the top
Of the Tourmalet. Nothing particularly religious there.

Stage 4 – Time trial. 14K straight up the Pla da Te.
The winner finishes in 31 minutes and receives a 3K Tag Haur watch.
I come in 20 minutes off the pace, but he's a pro
And I'm a vicar, so perspective is important here.
But at the top the real pay-off: *God*, I say out loud
With my Go Pro camera rolling over the mountains
And blue and green and sky and the river and the beauty,
God, God, God...

What is that last line of our Call to Ministry?
Remember? *Cherish the living earth.*

Stage 5. The longest, hardest day. Ok, I admit. I'm cursing now.
Which is a surprise to Claude, the French guy climbing next to me,
Because just a second ago he tells me how he's a doctor,
An anesthesiologist,
And when he asks what I do, and I realize I'm too tired to lie and so
I tell him the truth,
He falls silent, real silent,
Which is only broken by the Welsh guy hanging onto my wheel
Behind me, who says to no one in particular:

*“Blimey! When I tell my wife I’ve cycled with a vicar I won’t have
To go chapel for a whole year!”*

True story.

But then, this also true:

How after we drop the Welsh guy on the last switchback,

The anesthesiologist says in his accented English:

“I’m a good doctor, but I don’t feel like I’m a good person.

I just look at these people I’m helping and I get so full

Of judgment for the things they’ve done to not take care of themselves.”

Is there such thing as confession by bicycle?

Yes.

“I understand” I say.

Which is really even more than I need to say.

Because even in this age of secular Europeans and death of church

And spiritual but not religious,

People want a way to practice the kind of person they want to be,

And we want encouragement, and we want forgiveness.

Is my listening to him tell me this as we climb some 9% French mountain

Enough gospel enough?

Yes.

Stage 6. Words gets out. There is a minister is our midst.

There is a minister riding with us. There is a minister who curses

And shaves his legs like real cyclists (I’ll that sink in for a second).

First comes the Norwegian, Sven, who says:

You must be very good at listening to people. How do you listen?

How do you listen?

Next comes Trevor, another Welshman, who says with a mixture of pride

And heartache:

I don't believe in anything. I believe in nothing.

Which I doubt. I tell him. But then the climb pitches up, a lot,

Before I can tell him another slice of gospel: that religion

Isn't about belief; it's about relationship.

Horizontal and not vertical, deeds and not creeds.

Stage 7. Last day.

And what city does the last stage go through, Rev. Nathan

Who is on vacation from his job but not his religion?

Of course, the city of Lourdes, site that is a Catholic pilgrimage,

Receiver of 6 million religious tourists every year,

“like a Catholic Vegas” says the Belgian guy riding next to me,

Which is worth a chuckle,

Until we speed through town past the hundreds and hundreds

Of people in all manner of wheelchairs and bedchairs –

Old, young, babies, grandmothers, teenagers

In various states of illness or affliction,

All being pushed to the giant cathedral to pray for healing,

Health, wholeness.

How easy it is, in our distance, to sometimes judge people

For their prayers, their theologies, their beliefs

That God will intervene to make them whole.

How easy it is to be smug.
 But when you see the parade of prayers
 That aren't prayers at all but all actual people
 The words that Love is the *Spirit of this Church*
And Service is its Law takes on greater urgency.

Which is why perhaps the most prophetic thing
 I did in that moment was not chuckle, not laugh,
 Not look the other way...not because I'm all that,
 But because our good news challenges me to be better
 Than I would otherwise be.

So here's the thing:
 We leave the building, Sabbath gets further and further in our rear
 View mirrors,
 Sermons become easy sentiments for Sunday mornings,
 And UUAC can seem like a religious representative for overly bucolic,
 Brigadoon suburbs,
 But in the end all we have to do, everything we have to do is BARE
 WITNESS,
 show to ourselves and others that we are listening,
 that there is a world beyond the world of things,
 that ME matters less than WE,
 that we're paying attention to ache of the spirit
 as much as we all give attention to the bottom line,
 that even though this hour is just an hour,
 the good news travels on two wheels, two legs,

in hearts....all are worthy, all our welcome,
we can be the person we dream,
we can live in the world we dream...

Amen.