

Sermon for
Sunday, February 28, 2021
Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy, Interim Pastor

Breaking in A New Pastor

Breaking in a new pastor is not the easy job we assume. Take a preacher. Give him a southern accent. Dress in a robe with a gorgeous colorful stole and have him preach a sermon. Now, what are you expecting? "O Lord, here we go again. Another one"? Are you ready for something more? A character in a short story exclaims, "I'm right here, ready. Ready for more."

Here's hoping. That's my best desire for a new pastor and church. At every moment in history, novelist Allan Gurganus tell us "there's a search committee looking for a preacher. And what they want in a preacher is everything they want for themselves at this moment." It's a tough image to fit into one person. I'm hoping that this moment is riddled with hope, that the angels are hanging from the ceiling in joyful exultation. Here's hoping. As a disgruntled church member once blurted out at a board meeting, "Somebody has got to do something about this preacher." The preacher's name is withheld to protect the guilty.

A new pastor presents a plethora of emotions and challenges for a congregation. In the pre-COVID-19 days, a pastoral candidate would show up for a candidate weekend and a trial sermon. It was like having a blind date. The dating game, I have been told, now takes place on the web. It's not ideal is it? Selecting a new pastor, no matter how it is done, is fraught with challenges. A young man once told that he should get ordained, declined by saying, "I'm afraid I might not like the ordainers."

In Louisiana there was a small Methodist congregation in bayou country that asked for a new pastor every year. No matter who the bishop appointed, every year the Pastoral Relations Committee asked for a new pastor. The bishop, finally tiring of this exercise, decided to send them the worst pastor in his

conference. This preacher went to the contrary church and after one year, the PRC asked the bishop to return their pastor for a second year. The bishop, confused by the request called the chairman of the committee and asked, "Why do you want to keep your pastor for another year?" "Well, bishop, our congregation has never wanted a pastor and since you sent us the closest thing to not having a pastor that we have ever seen, we decided to be satisfied with this one. So thank you!"

Barbara Brown Taylor, reflecting on being invited to be the rector of an Episcopal Church in Clarkesville, Georgia, says, "Months later I would learn how many families had left the church when they heard I was coming." Well, you see, getting a new pastor has all kinds of contingencies and exigencies. The problem: The first woman priest in the parish. There is always some difficulty on the journey. A pastor and congregation are on the Psalm 23 journey and it's not all green pastures and still waters, but also the valley of the shadow of death and feasts in the midst of enemies, but Mercy and Goodness keep us company.

Like Taylor, I have struggled with a massive appetite for approval. I also possessed a weary perfectionism that made me resentful of those who did not try as hard as I did. I try not to let my weirdness interfere in my pastoral vocation. Taylor's confession: "I saw that my desire to draw as near to God as I could had backfired on me somehow. Drawn to care for hurt things, I had ended up with compassion fatigue. Drawn to a life of servanthood, I had ended up a service provider and with a sense of some elitism."

The new pastor comes with a responsibility to preach from passages like Luke 6:26 – 38. If we are honest, there are commandments in that passage that don't suit us very well – loving enemies. Think how hard that is in a culture that now preaches getting even and enjoying revenge. I sometimes think that the constant bickering in our churches about liberals and conservatives is a rage against the clear teaching of Scripture that we wish to ignore. It is a lot easier to go about insisting that

you are right and everyone else is wrong than it is to love your enemies. How easy to cry out, "You libtard," or "You right wing nut," than to love one another. As soon as we move from rational deliberation to name-calling and ad hominem arguments, we have moved outside the kingdom of God.

I have observed that when people start attempting to solve their conflicts by appealing to the Bible, that the mess gets worse. Nothing stirs up bad blood like the good book. We end up "defending the dried ink marks on the page" rather than defending our neighbors. Ellen Davis says, "It is a sad fact of history that authoritative texts held in common but read differently are less likely to create mutual sympathy than bitter division between religious communities."

So much effort is expended in fighting over the Bible, that more essential ministry is ignored. James McClendon, Baptist theologian, claims that Baptists have produced few great theologians because our energy has been given to fighting over the Bible. No wonder Stanley Hauerwas makes the provocative suggestion that all the Bibles should be confiscated from the hands of Christians. He quotes Soren Kierkegaard for support: "Where life is concerned [the Bible's] existence is a fortification of excuses and escapes; for there is always something one has to look into first of all . . . before one can begin to live – that is to say, one never begins." The use of the Bible has turned the "priesthood of believers" into a heresy and "sola scriptura" is damaged.

We should not be surprised that there's difficulty between pastors and preachers at times. You may already be wondering Scriptures are chock full of preachers and congregations getting "cattywampus" with one another. I like that word because I like the way it sounds. It's one of my favorite expressions. Now, I get to add Schenectady to my list of words I like to say.

Paul's letter to Titus describes a pastor-congregation relationship. Paul left Titus in Crete. There's something ominous

about being left somewhere. Left in Crete! Make no mistake. This is not the cathedral church in a conference or the best assignment in a diocese. This is not the National Cathedral. Crete is not even a stepping stone to a higher calling. Listen to the description of the congregation: "There are also many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision; they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach. It was one of them, their very own prophet, who said, 'Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.'" Imagine preachers talking like that about good congregations.

Paul's instructions for the first few sermons that Titus should preach means the preacher might as well show up dressed like John the Baptist, breathing fire, and ready for battle: "For this reason rebuke them sharply. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work." I've never taken these verses to heart!

There's another way. I want to offer you a covenant. I expect disagreement and I hope that will be acceptable in your sight, because agreement is highly overrated. I never speak to cause disagreement, but I do attempt to speak the truth. I ask that you make this pulpit a "Free" Zone – where the preacher is free to speak and then we work it out together as we go. It is hard to grasp why people get so upset over the sermon. Will Campbell said that by and large, no one listens to a pulpit sermon any more. I'm surprised that veteran sermon-listeners can get so upset at times. One of the characters in Lisa Alther's *Original Sins* comments on the preacher: "The pastor droned on Mother and I endured the eternal sermon with downcast eyes." Sometimes I miss those people who never missed a Sunday and viewed the sermon as a plague to be silently endured. I swear they saw thought listening to the sermon was due penance for all their manifold wickedness during the week.

I promise you that I will not become a scold or use my

persuasive attempts to make you feel guilty. I'm going to preach the gospel, and I figure that will be enough trouble on its own. I will help us maintain vital worship as the heart of the church. I do have a tendency to get excited in the pulpit and my words will spill out like a gallon-jar of beans on hard brick tiles. I will, even though I try not to do it, get rather loud at times. Please don't be afraid. I get full of the gospel and it breaks out all over the place.

I will pray with you and for you. I will make every attempt to invite you into "more light." I will say with the dying the prayer that needs to be said. I will comfort you in your afflictions. I will listen to you in your troubles, tribulations, and sorrows without passing judgment. I will spend a considerable amount of time reading and studying, because I believe that the preacher's research is one of God's gifts to the church. If a congregation really expects "interesting, stimulating, powerful" sermons, reading and writing in large swaths of time will be required of the preacher.

These are my vows to you: In the name of God, I Rodney, take you to be my church, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, in agreement and disagreement, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by the end of the interim period. This is my solemn vow.

I promise to keep my ordination vows that affirm that I believe in the Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I am persuaded that the Scriptures, as the book of the Church, are our guide and standard for holy living. I will be faithful in prayer, in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures, and with the help of the Holy Spirit rekindle the gifts of God within me. I will be a steadfast disciple of Christ and make every attempt to fashion my life and our common life by the gospel of Jesus Christ. I will be loyal to you, to your order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline. This is my solemn vow.