

Lord, I Love the Church and We Need Help

by

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Chapter Six
Relationship to the Vocation of Ministry and
Full-time Christian Service

*Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you."
They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

*Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was
Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?"*

*They answered him, No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and
you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because
there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!"*

*When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked,
and jumped into the sea.*

John 21.3-7

Go Fish!

Those who are ordained in The United Methodist Church are ordained into a life-long vocation of connecting people to God. In order to live out that call, we too have to be caught.

Do you love to fish? Really? Do you love to fish?

My Daddy is the reason I love to fish. He loved to fish – I don't *think* it was just to get away from Momma – he really loved to fish, and he shared that love with me. Next to hunting 4-leaf clovers, I think more than anything else he loved to do... my Daddy loved to fish.... Don't get me wrong, he liked to *catch* fish... but more than that, he loved *to* fish!

Daddy took me fishin off the dock at the Capital Rod and Gun Club out on Lake Travis in the blazing heat of Texas summer. We fished together inside the marina when it was below 30 degrees outside (remember this is Texas so it was not 30 degrees below). We fished in shallow water. We fished in deep, deep water. My Daddy just loved to fish.

And Daddy wasn't satisfied with just fishin on Lake Travis. We went way south and fished off the Texas coast. We fished off of jetties... and piers... We fished early in the morning and late into the night. I vaguely remember one trip we took deep sea fishing...all I can really recall about that trip was... it was swell....over and over again.

It was just two years after Daddy died that my husband Ken and I took a group of high school kids on a wilderness canoe trip to Ontario, Canada in the Lake of the Woods. We had been on the water for eight days. That is eight days without seeing another human being besides those in our group. Eight days of paddling, fighting the biting black

flies and mosquitoes. Eight days of eating dehydrated food, peanut butter out of a squeeze bag, and trail mix. On the evening of that eighth day, it was time to go fishin.

When Alzheimer's sets in I want to remember that time of fishin. The sun was just beginning to bow its head in the western sky. We found a spot full of reeds and lily pads. It looked like an awful place to fish with lures. But we did it anyway.

This is no fish story. There were four of us in two canoes. As soon as a line hit the water we caught a fish. Bass. Big Bass. Three-four-five-six pound bass. Fighting bass. Hungry bass. And Walleye too. There was even a Northern Pike on somebody's line. We reeled them in so fast that I started bringing them in to the *William Tell* – ta dum, ta dum, ta dum, dum dum. It was wonderful. When we had caught more fish than we knew our group of 20 could eat for a late-night supper and for breakfast the next morning, we stopped. I have the slides if you ever want to see them. Fish this... THIS long. It was wonderful. I caught the biggest. Really, I did!

Now, there's one thing about that time of fishin. It was the RIGHT time. It was absolutely clear as the sun began to set, and as we remembered that patch of reeds. It was time to go fishin. The air was cool. The mosquitoes and flies were quiet for the moment. It was time.

How do we know when it's time to go fish? Sometimes it takes the shadow of death before it begins to dawn on us that it is time to go fishing. Sometimes we have to be near starvation before we realize it. Sometimes we have to be spiritually empty. Void. Hollow. Maybe it takes something tragic, like the loss of someone we dearly love. Or maybe it is something less drastic, like general malaise or depression. Maybe it's the bottom of a bottle, or the end of a rope.

Then it begins to dawn on us. "It's time to go fishin." Time to take a break from the over-wrought business of our lives and sit and listen to the wind in the reeds and the frogs on the lily pads. Time to be still and wait. Time to collect our wits so we can then move forward in life with a purpose.

Being Caught

In order to catch a good fish, we must first be caught. We first have to be convinced that we are doing what we need to be doing--otherwise fishing is the most miserable thing in the world. Time drags on for an eternity. And those mosquito and fly bites are almost unbearable. Have you ever been fishin when you just couldn't catch a thing? Sitting on a hot, Texas tank dam in about 98 degree weather....sweating in the afternoon...locusts buzzing in the pasture nearby?

The line coming up empty.

That's when Jesus tells us, as he told Peter – "Put your nets into deeper water!"

Peter didn't like hearing that – and really, we don't like it much either.

I can hear Peter saying, "Lord, look, we've *tried it that way before!* And it just won't work!"

Isn't that what we tell Christ? "Look Lord, we've tried all the church growth ideas, all the evangelism techniques, all the fancy-schmancy do-it-up-right schemes. We've started new programs, we've tried doin' VBS again. We've worked harder and smarter. And it just won't work!" My brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to be caught.

Just One Thing

I was in my first appointment... down in Navarro County. Our little school was having some problems – a 6th grade boy shot himself in the head playing Russian roulette – with six other children from kindergarten to sixth grade watching. Some of them had made a suicide pact and they had been involved in gang activity. After I went to a program to learn about gang intervention, I spent a day with six of the juvenile probation officers of Ellis County. They were wonderful and helped me learn so much.

Toward the end of the day, I gathered up all my courage and I asked that group ... that group who knew more troubled teens than most of our churches will ever meet... I asked them, "If there was one thing, one thing you could say to our churches what would it be?"

I promised that if I ever had an opportunity to address this great body of United Methodists I would share with you what they said. Now, I am not going to use their exact words... but it will be close.

They said, "Tell your people to get their *backsides* out of the pew and on to the streets, because THAT is where our kids are! Gangs know that – that is where they recruit. And tell your church ... tell them that if... IF one of our kids should happen to wander *inside* the church (but don't worry, that probably won't happen) – but if they do, they only get one chance. Don't treat them like they are weird, or bad. Just love them."

Do you LOVE to fish?

There is a difference between fishin because we love to fish... and fishin to boost the numbers... or bring in the bucks.... Friends, those are NOT the reasons we are supposed to fish! We are supposed to fish because that is what we are called to do! It is the fabric of who we are! It is the air we breathe. When we fish because we love to fish... when we love to fish so much that we are willing to put our nets into deep water, or as the language in the similar story in the gospel of John says... when we cast our nets on the *other side* of the boat... when we fish because we *know* it is time to go fishin... Well there is just nothing as magnificent as that.

Bait on the Line

The numbers of those retiring and those coming into ministry are frightening – on that we can agree. I know the process is long and arduous. The last time I counted I think it was a minimum of eight years from beginning to end – that is a long chunk, one-third of a 24-year-olds' life. In I Timothy 5.22 (NRSV) we read, "Do not ordain hastily." Okay, so this is one passage of scripture that United Methodists follow to a "T." If we are going to have clergy in place – deacons, local pastors, *or* elders – by the great tsunami of retirements over the next 10 years then we must change. The solution is not in adding yet

one more layer of lay ministry! We have plenty of youth and young adults who are willing to make the sacrifices of ministry. The form of how ministry looks is going to have to take a different shape.

It seems odd that Betsy should be the first one who taught me about this shift. Betsy was a woman who had endured more misery in her lifetime than I could ever imagine. To say that she had a hard life is a drastic understatement. Betsy was the survivor of a life that had battered her with one bitter assault after another. She grew up lost somewhere in the midst of the birth order of sixteen children. She watched three of her siblings die at a very early age. Her father, husband, and son were all coal miners. Her son alone had been in the mines on seven different occasions during cave-ins. Betsy was well acquainted with standing at the mouth of the mine, holding her breath, trembling in fear, as they brought the flattened bodies of broken men out of the mine.

One afternoon, as we sat in the cool breeze that blew across the mountains, Betsy told me a story about a time when the cave-in was so severe that a large number of men had been injured, and several had been killed. She said, "You know, them mines, they wasn't safe. Even as they was pullin' the last of the bodies out of the mine, the foreman was tellin' 'em to go back in and get to work."

"The miners din't have no choice." Said Betsy. "They went on strike. And Oh Lordy! Was it a long one"

"The union tried to stand behind us, but soon 'nough the money ran out. They wasn't even enough to buy beans. And the coal company jacked up the prices so bad at the company store that none of us could afford to eat. We would go for days with nothin' to put in our bellies." "Then the day finally came," she said, "When my husband couldn't take it no more. He broke the picket line and went back to work. Ever'body in the whole town hated us. But that was the last stretch of his time. Not long after, he took black lung and died."

Betsy was stricken with grief at her husband's death. But maybe there was just a breath of life in that grief. You see, although his death meant the end of her means of support, it also meant the end of the beatings he used to inflict upon her when times were really lean and hard.

Shortly after, Betsy's son moved her to a little piece of land. That's where I met her. He built her a little shanty out of tar paper and plastic. After he tapped her into the neighbor's "borrowed" electricity, the son left, and Betsy spent her days cultivating the wild poke and dandelions that grew in her yard along with an occasional wild rabbit for food. Just when things began to look a little brighter for her, a violent storm blew up. Lightning struck near-by and her little shanty caught fire and was burned to the ground.

So Much and So Little

I don't know about you... but I for much of my life I have had so much, I've been insulated and isolated from people like Betsy. I have tried to fill my life with peace from the world... and I am here to tell you, it won't work! My relationship with Betsy was a

step along the journey that called me back and moved me forward into hearing God's call.

Unlike most mountain folks who are born and die in the same area, Betsy was a stranger to those who lived around her. Because she was a "newcomer" to the area, Betsy was the topic of most of the community gossip. The boys in that old holler used to torment her with mean tricks, and would steal the few possessions she had managed to accumulate. It seemed that the whole world was against her. Even when her son did manage to build her a new place to live--this time out of 2x4s and tar paper--the rats were so bad they ran her out.

That wasn't the end of her troubles. She developed a skin cancer on her face. By the time she got to a doctor to have it treated, the cancer had eaten into the bone. Betsy had to have extensive surgery to remove the cancer. The surgery left the side of her face paralyzed. Her mouth drooped to one side and she constantly drooled. Her shoulder was drawn up toward the side of her face. She had had extensive skin grafting done, so not only was the side of her face and neck disfigured, it was also discolored. After her many surgeries, Betsy was ashamed to go out in public. She stopped going to church where she had frequently led worship and singing. Before long, friends stopped calling on her. Betsy was totally alone.

So it came to be, that when I met Betsy she lived like a hermit, in an old, broken down yellow school bus. Had I known her story, it would have been no surprise when she met us at the door of the bus with a double-barrel shot gun in one hand, and a flashlight in the other.

I thought I had gone to minister to someone like Betsy. I thought I had gone there to share my gifts, my graces and my talents. I thought the group of youth I had taken could actually bring about some wonderful change in Betsy's life; that we could in some way influence and improve her conditions. I was dead wrong.

During those few days we spent together, I noticed something about Betsy that I had never seen in anyone before. It seemed to me that life had hit her with one blow after another – and yet, she managed to smile, to laugh, and to joke with us all. I just couldn't figure it out.

I can still hear Betsy's soft southern drawl as she told us, "My daddy was a fireside kind of man. Each evenin' after the dishes was done, our beds turned down, and everybody was in their night clothes, Daddy would say, 'Now chil'ren, take your places!'" She clapped her hands in quick succession, and then continued, "We each took our special seat around the fireplace. At that time there was 13 of us, so we each had to have our own place so we could all fit. Daddy would read to us from the Bible, then take out his guitar and we would all sing.

"We used to the old hymns" she said. "What's that one? It starts out, '*Amazin'... Amazin' grace...*'? Her voice cracked as she tried to sing the words. "Do you know it?" she asked.

"Yes," I quietly replied, "I know it."

“Sing it.” she commanded. As Betsy's tired old voice blended with mine, God was palpable. “*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound....*”

Culture of the Call

Perhaps what the phrase “culture of the call” identifies is not the need for some special program or youth rally; but instead the willingness on the part of those of us who serve in ministry to speak up when we see someone else who has the gifts of ministry. We are the ones who need to stop with our business and take the time to *do* some ministry. Perhaps it is the adult leadership – laity and clergy alike – who ought to attend “culture of the call” weekends so that we can practice having the courage to be on level with others and vulnerably admit that we felt God moving and ask, “Did you feel God tugging at your heart too?”

What I wonder is, is our crisis really that of clergy who are bitter and burned out to the point that we fail to encourage those who are passionate and eager to give their entire lives in service to God. I wonder if we have a crisis of Christians who are mature in years of service, but not in discipleship. Kenda Creasy Deanⁱ offers this challenge in a powerful way:

Since the religious and spiritual choices of American teenagers echo, with astonishing clarity, the religious and spiritual choices of the adults who love them, lackadaisical faith is not young people's issue, but ours. Most teenagers are perfectly content with their religious worldviews; it is churches that are – rightly – concerned. So we must assume that the solution lies not in beefing up congregational youth programs or making worship more ‘cool’ and attractive, but in modeling the kind of mature, passionate faith we say we want young people to have.ⁱⁱ

About two years ago my district started talking out loud about young people who felt called to go into ordained ministry and full-time Christian service. Three brave high school youth responded at the beginning. Then we conducted the first youth lay-speaking class in our annual conference and utilized the participants for pulpit supply. Eighteen months later we had 17 on our contact list and 12 to 15 regularly show up at our gatherings! Increase of attendance and involvement hasn't taken a program or any special advertising, or fundraisers, or even tee-shirts. Conversation and fellowship are generally the means by which we share together, build relationship, and receive God's grace – with a little Methodist food thrown in for good measure. For this passionate group of teenagers (high school and college) life is all about relationship – relationship with God, relationship with each other, relationship with the world God “has created and is creating” – each of these relationships is mediated by God's grace.

Mentor in Christ

“Who ordained you into ministry?” is a powerful question and one worth pondering. “Who ordained you into ministry?” Perhaps the Bishop laid her hands upon your head and ordained you to serve God through the Church; but who first ordained you

to serve God? Who helped you hear and understand that God was, God is, calling you? Who helped you to clarify that God was, God is, calling you to be set apart?

For Esther, it was her uncle Mordecai; for Samuel, his mother and then later Eli; for the Ethiopian Eunuch, Philip; for Peter, Cornelius. In every generation God raises up people who are courageous and bold, who are willing to follow God and encourage others to do the same. For whom are you a mentor in Christ?

How many of us pray for our children to live out their call in God? Is there anything sweeter than seeing one of our own being baptized in the waters of God's grace? What about on the other side? Do we continue to encourage our beloved to live into the fullness of who God has called them to be in the world?

When that same child announces that he is going to give the rest of his life serving as a missionary teaching farming to the people of Africa; when she proclaims that in order to follow God she will serve a gang-infested inner city and work with the children there; when he quietly says, "Mom, Dad, this is what I am called to do!" and you know that decision may cost him his life, and at the very least will evoke times of bitter suffering; how do we respond in *those* times? Did we once have those "I can change the world!" dreams... only to watch them fade with the graying of the years?

In who have you observed God at work? Who have you noticed that God might be calling to be set apart? What have you done about that observation? Are you intentionally mentoring that person? Have you had coffee or at least a brief conversation? Are you helping others see that God may be calling them into full-time ordination or Christian service?

A New Day in Ministry

This day is a new day in ministry for many of us. Maintaining the status quo is no longer good enough. Reading a *Barclay's Commentary* and preaching based on what is found there won't make the grade. I've heard it said repeatedly, "There just isn't a call for 'nice' pastors anymore." The Church – The United Methodist Church needs those who can exercise the art of leadership; who have great vision and dream big dreams; people who have courage and are willing to risk in profound ways.

We are not alone in this arena. Educator, administrator, and teacher of teachers, Tony Wagnerⁱⁱⁱ would relate to our situation. He reflected on his first administrative role saying,

I had a *real* problem. It quickly became clear to me that virtually all the teachers in this school felt that the school in general, and their teaching in particular, was just fine the way it was. More than fine, in fact – they thought it was truly wonderful!^{iv}

Later he says of the teaching profession, "As a profession, we are extremely reluctant to criticize or evaluate one another" He continues, "The reality is that, even if administrators wanted to evaluate their teachers more effectively, they have not been trained to assess teaching or to coach teachers."^v Get a group of Bishops or DSs together; it won't be five

minutes until you hear this kind of conversation almost verbatim. There's more. Wagner offers, "We know that isolation is the enemy of improvement in education – and in all other professions. . . .^{vi} This statement is profoundly true in ministry. We are learning in many times and places that sharing and collaboration are a key to surviving and thriving in ministry.

There is another major consideration. We live within a system that is not a call system – it is an itinerant system. In the best moments, the itinerant system and appointive processes are about the dissemination of effective leadership. In the course of making appointments a pastor who very well may deserve a particular move may not be available at the specific time the move is open. Five years later when the pastor looks back he may think, "I should be at that church. I deserved that move." She very well may have. But in the process the pastor may forget (or may never have known) that they were in the middle of a building program, a capital campaign, or a personal challenge that precluded them for being considered for that move at the time and perhaps other moves as well. The point is this: The appointive process is designed to help our churches be *effective and fruitful* for the Kingdom of God.

Show Us the Way

Church after church asks the question, "But pastor what are we supposed *to do* in order to grow?" then they expect the new pastor to offer the "right" answer. Listen to what Heifetz and Linsky^{vii} have to offer us:

When people look to authorities for easy answers to adaptive challenges, they end up with dysfunction. They expect the person in charge to know what to do, and under the weight of that responsibility, those in authority frequently end up faking it or disappointing people, or they get spit out of the system in the belief that a new "leader" will solve the problem. In fact, there's a proportionate relationship between risk and adaptive change: The deeper the change and the greater the amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be and, thus, the greater the danger to those who lead.^{viii}

It sounds as if Heifetz and Linsky have been in on some of our cabinet meetings, or have visited our annual conferences.

Wheatley^{ix} asserted that organizational intelligence is a system-wide capacity to interpret what is going on within the organization. Organizational intelligence is directly linked to how well information is disseminated and the openness and communication of its leadership. She posited, "Everybody needs information to do their work. We are so needy of this resource that if we can't get the real thing, we make it up."^x That's how rumors get started and gossip is spread. Wheatley argued that the way to facilitate organizational intelligence and quash rumors is to share ample accurate information, to take a step back, and focus on the processes that are at work.

Annual conference leadership would do well to heed Wheatley's assertions. Dissemination of accurate information regarding the appointive process and disclosure of

criteria used in making appointments could benefit both elders and local churches. Local churches and pastors must be honest and open with conference leadership as well.

The Banner of the Lord

Do you recall the story of Israel fighting the people of Amalek at Rephidim found in Exodus chapter 17? Moses held his staff up with both hands. As long as the people of Israel who were fighting in the valley below could see the banner they won. But when Moses' arms grew weary and the banner dropped below their vision they began to lose. It was the banner of the Lord that reminded them who they were and encouraged them to give with all the gusto and courage they had.

I am beginning to realize that I need to lift my eyes up from the valley a little more frequently these days and recall the “banner of the Lord” and why we are here; what we are supposed to be about: God is at the TOP of the list – that is the only way we are able to make it through any of the valleys of life and come out on the other side better, stronger, and fit for the next place to which God calls us – even if it is back to the same place.

In our conference, it may not be a coincidence that the appointment season begins just about the same time as Lent each year. Perhaps it is no mistake that we are called to a time of repentance and self-denial as the first phone calls are made – calls that ask us (churches and pastors alike) to step up to a higher standard, to be held accountable for measurable, intentional growth.

Formed in a Spirit of Generosity

My daddy's real name was Melvin, but most of his friends called him “Mike” – Melvin is a pretty old fashioned name, even for my dad's era. Melvin Olaf Olson. Please let us be clear – that's O-L-S-O-N. Norwegian, not Swedish. My grandfather was an immigrant from Norway to the United States as a young boy. I am very, very proud to be the daughter of Melvin Olaf Olson. Daddy was the kind of fellow that would give someone the shirt off his back. I have literally seen him do so – and more.

When I was in high school we lived in a town east of Austin. In his later years Daddy worked at Brackenridge Hospital in downtown Austin. He worked with a wonderful man named Luna. Mr. Luna (as I called him) and his wife had ten children. Luna was in a terrible car accident and totaled his car. So for at least two years that I remember, every morning my Dad drove from our house, 20-plus miles to the east, picked up Mr. Luna and then they drove back to Austin to work together. In the evening they reversed the process. That's over eighty miles a day and about an hour-and-a-half my dad drove out of his way to go pick up a co-worker. Eventually Daddy convinced my Mom they could afford a new truck for Dad to drive, and Daddy gave Mr. Luna his truck.

My Dad was a remarkable man. There is a reason for it.

I am thankful to not know the details, but I do remember hearing stories about how my grandfather would pummel my dad when Daddy was a boy. Not with a spanking

– with his fists. So it is really not much of a surprise to me that about the time my dad was about seven or eight years old he found First Lutheran Church of Northwood, Iowa. He started by going to Vacation Bible School one summer. Are you paying attention VBS teachers? This kid who had the snot literally beat out of him by his father gained entry to the church through Vacation Bible School. After that, Daddy he getting himself up on Sunday mornings and walked to church. I don't know how long he did that – but I do know it was reported to be a long time – a very long time. Eventually he was baptized and confirmed in First Lutheran Church. I proudly display that portrait in my living room.

Somewhere along that childhood journey... one day he went home from church and Sunday school and I suspect his gait was a little different. Determined. Intentional. He walked straight up to my 4-foot-8-inch grandmother and he said, “Ma! Ma! (That’s what he called her...) Ma! Did you know you’re a *heathen*?! Ma, if you don’t start going to church, you’re goin’ straight to hell!” John the Baptist or Billy Graham didn’t have anything on my dad! My grandmother started going to church with him the very next Sunday. She went to church the rest of her life.

The work of those early VBS days, Sunday school, and high liturgical worship carried my Dad through a lifetime of tumult. They formed him into the kind of person that would drive eighty miles on a daily basis to get a friend to work, and then give him his pickup. Why? Because ultimately Daddy knew he was God’s child. He knew because of people like you that God had named him and claimed him and made him God’s own.

When we know that – really know – that we are God’s child – it makes a tangible difference in the way we live our lives! When a child is delivered from the fists of an angry man... and delivered into the arms of the mother church... that child is a changed child – for life! That doesn’t mean he grows up to be perfect. It does mean he has the possibility of growing up to be better than the generation before.

We have lots of opportunity church!

Daddy was caught by the love of God! It was my Daddy’s love imperfections and all that set an example and led the way for me to be caught. Once we are really caught we love to fish. We love fishin so much that we are willing to spend the rest of our lives fishin off a dock, or in a marina; off jetties and standing on piers; at home or away. We fish early in the morning or late into the night, in deep and in shallow water. Once we are caught there is just nothin better than fishin and catchin fish for The One who calls us to throw our nets on the other side of the boat, far into the deep water.

ⁱ Dean, Kenda Creasy. *Almost Christian: What the faith of our teenagers is telling the American church*. New York: Oxford, 2010

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wagner, Tony. *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even our Best Schools don’t Teach the New Survival Skills our Children Need – and what We can do About It*. Basic Books: New York, 2008.

iv Ibid., 140.

v Ibid., 156.

vi Ibid., 164.

vii Heifetz and Linsky. *Leadership on the Line*, 2002.

viii Ibid., 14.

ix Wheatley 2006.

x Ibid., 99.