

Professional Pilgrimage: A Testimony

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What was an intelligent eighteen-year-old Episcopal choir member like me doing at a tent revival? First of all I was there because I was curious, having heard quite a bit about the “sawdust trail,” but never having attended a religious service under a tent. The more compelling reason, however, was that when I was a teenager there weren’t many choices of things to do on a Sunday night in Lexington, Mississippi. Even if you were a committed sinner, there were not many choices.

It was the custom in our town that when any of the four non-Catholic churches was in revival, the other churches dismissed Sunday evening services to support the sister church. So if you wanted to attend church on this steamy July evening, you went to the revival in a tent set up on the elementary school grounds.

I decided to go. It seemed like a fun thing to do. I sat midway, on the aisle, in case being there turned out to be a mistake and I could leave as quickly as possible. When the song leader invited members of the congregation to come to the platform and sing in the choir, I remained smugly in my seat. I wouldn’t have been caught dead in that revival choir. It would have spoiled the intellectual, genteel image I had of myself.

The sermon was everything I had expected it would be: unadulterated hellfire and brimstone. The preacher fired his sermon at us with all the grace and subtlety of a machine gunner. It was an impressive performance.

At the conclusion of the sermon there was the customary invitation to repent of sins and be converted to escape eternal damnation. I watched as people went forward, some I knew whose Monday to Saturday morals would be remarkably unchanged by this Sunday night ritual. I had seen them walk other aisles.

As for me, I was unmoved. I had loved church for as long as I could remember. One of my earliest memories was of going to Sunbeam meeting in a small Baptist church and singing with other four- and five-year-olds, "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam." At four years of age that seemed a splendid idea: to be a sunbeam for Jesus. I soon outgrew that childish idealism, however. The institutional church as well as the world saw to that.

I made a sincere commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord of my life when I was twelve, and joined the local Southern Baptist church. However, I had been singing in the Episcopal church choir for a couple of years, for I loved the Episcopal liturgy.

I had no intention of becoming a religious fanatic and doing anything as absolutely uninteresting as "fulltime Christian service," as it was called. Not only did I have no female models for ministry, I had few male ones. The only persons I knew in Christian vocation were the male pastors of churches. Besides, the passion of my life was theatre.

So what was going on around me in that tent seemed alien to me. I just stood there, singing the interminable invitation hymn with the rest of the congregation, hoping (against hope, I knew!) that we would not have to sing all five verses through at least two more times.

Suddenly, with no warning, and in a moment of sheer divine irony, it seemed that the ceiling of the tent split open, and I was drenched in liquid love. God's love poured down, enveloping me in indescribable bliss. I felt for the first time in my life that God knew my name, and that for some reason known only to Him, He wanted me to know that He loved me.

Somehow I kept singing. At the conclusion of the service I left in a daze. My father came with two or three of my brothers and sisters to take me home. I sat on the back seat of the car in silence, tears of purest joy coursing down my cheeks. And I knew I was bound to serve that divine Lover for the rest of my days. Life would never be the same again.

But how do you dream an impossible dream? How do you envision reality outside the realm of reality as you know it? How do you shape the form and content of a goal that, as far as you're concerned, does not even exist? My lips and tongue could not have articulated the words "gospel ministry" with reference to my call because such a thought would never have entered my

head. It was likewise unthinkable that any counselor, pastoral or otherwise, would have suggested such an unseemly thing for me, a woman. Standing here as an ordained Southern Baptist minister is only a miracle of divine grace. I did not perish for want of a vision because the word of love God spoke to me had in it the power to create a vision *ex nihilo*. I am who I am because from the consuming fires of a crippling Southern culture that included a perverted Southern Baptist ecclesiology, the Holy Spirit chose to rescue me and to forge of my misshapen life a useful instrument.

Frederick Beuchner says that we are called to serve in that place where our own deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger. It didn't take long for me to discover that the deepest hunger of most people in the world (if not all) is to know that they are loved, that they are unique and special, that their existence in the cosmos matters. I discovered also that I am gladdest when I am in contact with the world of ideas, especially theological ideas.

All of that, in addition to the memory of my painful struggle as a college student to find my own identity, just seemed to propel me into ministry with college students, whether in a local church or on a college campus. Most of my ministry has been as a volunteer. Now, since 1982, I have served as chaplain at Mars Hill College in the mountains of western North Carolina.

College students live in an age described as one of "brokenness and fragmentary visions." Just as I did, many of them also dream impossible dreams, and try to envision goals for themselves outside the hope of personal realities. I want to be present to them, to help them put shape and substance to their dreams, to encourage them to dare to be the whole persons they were created to be. I want to speak the word of blessing that gives life over against the world's words of cursing that give death.

In 1977, four years after my husband's death, I sold our house and went to seminary. One day I stopped to chat with a man who asked, "What do you want to do when you graduate?" I replied that I would be interested in serving a pastoral role on a church staff or as campus minister on a college campus. He laughed out loud and asked, "Who do you think will hire *you*?" I didn't know whether anybody would, but I knew God as the God of great surprises, and I knew also we had to play to the

finish a scenario He and I had begun back there in a tent in that Mississippi wilderness.

At this point in my life certain long-range professional goals are probably out of the question. However, I expect to continue to grow as a person and as a minister. Above all I intend to will one thing and that is Jesus Christ. What that may mean for me will be my joy to discover.