

**Gary Harder, 20 October, 2013**

**Why I am still a pastor**

**Or, “Why do I still love being a pastor”**

Texts: Mark 1:9-15

1 Cor. 1:1-9

1 Cor. 3:5-11

Introduction.

Our series on “why I am still...” Today, “why I am still a pastor”. Why do I still love being a pastor? Why am I still a pastor after being one for 48 years already? Don’t I know when to retire or how to retire? Why in the world am I still a pastor (an interim pastor), and that in a church in conflict?

The simple answer is that I am eternally grateful to God for my calling to be a pastor, and that, mostly, I love doing what do. Not every day of course, or even every week, but I wouldn’t still be a pastor, wouldn’t be here in Montreal, if I didn’t feel a sense of calling from God, and if I didn’t love where this calling takes me. So today is my testimony to that calling and to that love.

Over the years there have been three texts that have become especially important to me as I have tried to ground my ministry in something deeper than only my likes and dislikes. Probably most pastors would go elsewhere for their grounding. But this is where I have gone.

- 1) Mark 1:9-14. The Gospel of Mark lays out a very careful sequence of stories around the ministry of Jesus. Jesus is baptized. Then Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. And only then does Jesus begin his public ministry. That is the sequence. Baptism, temptation, and then public ministry.

The story begins with his baptism. “When Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘you are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

I think Jesus needed to hear this blessing, this affirmation from God, his Father. I think even Jesus needed to know that he was truly, deeply, profoundly loved by God. He needed to hear this voice and this word so that he would be strong enough inside to deal with the temptations in the wilderness. He needed to hear this blessing before he was ready to begin his public ministry.

Then follow the temptations in the wilderness. The temptations placed in front of him by the devil are temptations to use his power – power as the Son of God named Saviour – in self-serving ways. Turn stones to bread and become a “bread Messiah” and you will become immensely popular. Do a spectacular event like jumping off the pinnacle of the temple and be rescued by angels and you will have the whole world paying homage to you. Bow down before

Satan and receive all the wealth and power of a true king. These are all things Jesus could reject because he had that voice ringing in his ears, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” That freed him to live out a ministry of service and compassion and healing – and suffering – instead of a ministry for self-aggrandizement.

As a pastor I am tempted to abuse my power and to try to get my way and to try to solve all the problems of the church and everyone in the church. And I too need to hear the voice saying that I am already loved, and I don’t need to try to earn God’s love by my hard work and by how successful I am as a pastor.

Yes, sometimes I do feel like a failure. Sometimes deep inside of me I do question my “worthiness”, my “beloved-ness”, my value as a person and as a pastor, and then I try desperately to please God by my hard work. But it is when I am most tempted to insist on my way, to stop really listening to people, and think that surely I can “fix” everyone’s problems, that God gently reminds me that I am already loved, already acceptable, and that these don’t depend on my overwork or on my measurements of success.

- 2) A second Biblical foundation for me as pastor is what Paul says in 1 Cor. 3:5-9. The context is that there is conflict in the church in Corinth, and some of it centers around its leaders. Church members are choosing sides among leaders.

To which Paul responds, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each...God gives the growth...We are God’s servants, working together...” (and, everything is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ).

I as pastor am not the fixer, not the healer, not the saviour, not the one who can make everything come out right. God is already at work in people’s lives. God is at work in the church. God is at work in the world. If I didn’t believe that there would be times I would despair. My own best efforts will never be enough.

When I am tempted to believe I am indispensable and it’s up to me to fix everything, I sort of hear God whispering to me, “Relax, Gary, I am at work here. There already is a saviour and it’s not you. Do your small part, but leave the saving and healing and growth to me.”

- 3) A third Biblical foundation for my work as pastor is the beginning of every one of Paul’s letters, including the one from First Corinthians. Listen again to how he begins his letter to a church in deep conflict. “ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him...Christ has been strengthened in you...God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Each of Paul’s letters to the churches begins with this kind of affirmation, blessing, and love. That is the given, the framework for everything else Paul will say. Yes, he will say some very difficult things to the church in Corinth. He will challenge them deeply. But the bottom line is still this affirmation and this love.

My testimony is that God has given me a love for each of the churches that have called me to be their pastor – certainly including MFM. If I didn’t love the churches, didn’t love

the people, didn't love my work, I couldn't do it. I wouldn't do it. I would have retired long, long ago. I have had the awesome privilege of becoming a part of, and forming relationships with, and loving, the people of seven different churches. When we go back to any of them, we go back with a great deal of anticipation and with joy. What a gift this has been to me.

These three Biblical foundations have become very important to me. 1) God names me "beloved". I don't have to earn God's love by how good a pastor I am. 2) I am convinced that God is working in the church. I try to do my small part, but I will leave the saving stuff to God. 3) The bottom line for me is to love the church and the people of the church even when saying some hard things sometimes.

### My stories

I want to share with you a series of stories that have made a special impact on me over the years. These are stories about situations that have pushed me and challenged me and wrenched me out of my comfort zone, and stories where people have given me the gift of opening their lives so fully and vulnerably to me. (By the way, one of the reasons that I continue to enjoy preaching and struggling with Biblical texts is that I am constantly challenged to learn new things and to wrestle with difficult to understand Biblical texts. I thrive on that).

### My call

I had no intention of becoming a pastor. No one in my home church would have seen me as pastor material. I went to CMBC to study music so that I could come back to Rosemary and become a farmer and conduct the church choir like my father had. But strange things happened at CMBC. After being a very poor student in High School, I discovered a love of learning. And I especially enjoyed the Biblical and theological studies. And when I first heard the word "Anabaptist", I became excited about my heritage. So when I graduated I had both a music degree and a Christian Education degree. But that certainly didn't mean I saw myself as a pastor.

By my last year there Lydia and I were married and had been accepted at Bethel College to finish our B.A.s and, for me, further music studies. And then on a Thursday evening in spring Menno Wiebe came knocking on our door. Menno was the executive director of the mission board for the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, and was responsible for finding pastors for our so called "mission" churches.

Said Menno, with very little preamble, "There is a little church near Sudbury, Ontario that needs a pastor for a year. I think you are the right person for that Gary. I'll be back on Monday to get your answer". Total shock. I was leaving the next morning for Camp Assinaboia to lead a music workshop. Lydia and I had no time to process this huge, life-changing challenge. On Monday morning Lydia and I looked at each other and both said yes at the same time. I still don't understand it.

And so I became pastor of Waters Mennonite Church at 23 years of age, way too young, with no pastoral training, and totally inexperienced. And absolutely loved our two years there.

Two stories, among many, stand out.

- 1) That first summer I was teaching DVBS to young teens 14-15 years old, most of whom were from the community and not part of the church. The lesson was about who God was. I was full of enthusiasm, explaining that God was like a beloved father –God the beloved heavenly father. I was going to tell them the story of the prodigal son and the waiting father. A 14 year old girl looked me in the eyes and asked, “God is like a father”? “Yes”, I said. “If God is like a father, then I hate God.” I had absolutely no clue how to respond. Nothing had prepared me for that. Obviously she had been abused by her own father, and then projected that abuse onto God. And I was unable to help her, a failure that I felt deeply, but a failure that informed some of my later training.
- 2) A second story comes from my last day as pastor there. The seventeen year old leader of the youth group came to see Lydia and me, partly to say goodbye, but also to inform us of his decision to leave the church because he didn’t believe in God anymore. “I want to enjoy life”, he said. “I’m going to do what I want to do and have a good time. I respect you, and that’s why I am telling you this, but I don’t believe in what you preach anymore”. Out of somewhere within me I asked him, “If your decision doesn’t work out as you want, if it leads to a dead end and unhappiness, will you have the courage to come back?” He said, “Yes”, and left. And eventually became one of the biggest drug dealers in Sudbury, and ended up in jail. And, like the prodigal son, he came back. He has become a pillar of that church, a deacon, a choir director, an occasional preacher

Several years ago we were invited back to Waters Mennonite Church to help them celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as a church. And there was this once jailed drug lord conducting an invited community choir with exquisite sensitivity and musicality.

I want to tell two more stories, both of them from my time at TUMC. There are so many other stories I am tempted to tell, but I don’t want to add to them the story of everyone at MFM leaving church because of the long winded preacher.

- 1) Anne(a pseudo-name)

I want to tell you the story of one particular funeral I officiated. Funeral stories abound, many of them rather profound because of what happens in them. This one had a particularly difficult and troubling family dynamic in its planning. Anne came to our church in a wheelchair as soon as our new church opened. “It’s accessible” she said. “So I thought I would try you out”. Anne came to us with both physical and emotional struggles, and with a history of abuse from her father. But she was already on a healing journey. “I know I need help from the church”, she said, “but I also want to contribute to the church”. And that she did. She developed good friendships. She wrote fine poetry. She had a special sensitivity.

Finally she was able to quit smoking. But then her apartment still reeked of smoke and the walls were yellowed. Our youth group decided to scrub her walls down and repaint her entire apartment. She glowed with her thanks.

Now her biggest struggle was with her alienated family, with four brothers who refused to have anything to do with her. They rejected her for insisting that father had abused her. They just didn’t believe her. Or rather, they didn’t want to believe her. She did mend fences a bit

with one brother, her gay brother, whom she had rejected for being gay. After our process around homosexuality she apologized to him for her homophobic attitude.

And then, in her mid-fifties, she died. Her brothers, three of them from out of town, gathered most reluctantly to say farewell. At the visitation I talked with them and tried to invite them to help plan the funeral. They wanted nothing to do with funeral planning for their sister. "We don't even want to be here", they said. "We have come out of duty. Only duty. We will attend the funeral, but nothing more". So I planned the funeral without family input - friends to offer tributes. Reflections from her favourite Scriptures. Prayers. And Hymns. That evening Al called. Al is a wonderful Saxophone player. He offered to play at the funeral. Said he felt called to do it. Saxophone is not my favourite instrument, but I said yes.

The funeral is underway, three of the four brothers looking glum and grim and uncomfortable there in the church. There are opening hymns and scriptures and prayers and tributes. Their faces are wooden, closed, frozen with discomfort and denial. But then Al starts to play. He plays her favourite hymns, including "Amazing Grace", and something amazing is happening. I see it as I watch the brothers faces. They unfreeze. They soften. They melt. Soon there are tears. God is working a miracle and that through a saxophone I had not requested.

Right after the service ends one of the brother's rushes outside to grab a cigarette and try to compose himself. At the coffee time afterward in the church basement there is an open mike. A niece gets up and says, "I did not want to be here today. My mother made me come, out of family duty. Our entire family is kind of messed up, very alienated. I think today is the beginning of some kind of reconciliation, the beginning of us as a larger family trying to get together again."

And then one of those brothers, face now very soft, takes the mike. "The service today gave us a picture of a sister we never knew. Thank you for that. It was so honest, and yet so loving. I'm sorry I didn't believe her".

Miracles can, and do, happen at funerals. And I have the privilege of witnessing them.

#### A retirement story

I want to tell a final story, a story that grew out of the most difficult time in my entire ministry.

You are probably aware of the intense conflict we were embroiled in at TUMC in 2002-3. My associate pastor Shannon Neufeld had named herself a lesbian who had fallen in love with another woman. The church was struggling to know how to respond, what to do with that. We spent 1 ½ years processing our decision, most of which went exceedingly well. We studied so much, learned so much, conversed so much, studied the Bible so much. But when it came to voting day our anxieties and fears won the day. We stopped listening for God's Spirit and said hurtful things to each other, and thought only of winning the battle, whatever the cost.

In the end we voted, and Shannon "lost the battle" by one or two votes. I felt more discouraged and more broken than I had ever been as a pastor. I was asked to pray to close the meeting, and had to admit to the congregation that I felt too broken to pray. My distress was not mostly about the decision

that was made, though certainly I wanted Shannon to stay. In my opinion, as she more and more came to terms with her sexual identity she became a much better pastor. My distress was more about how a very good process had totally deteriorated into political fighting when it came to crunch time.

That was on Saturday. On Sunday morning we all came back to church. One of the things I have always done coming into church was to greet everyone with a handshake. We were all feeling down, and didn't want to talk about the day before, but we still greeted each other. I came up to "Tim" (pseudonym) reached out my hand to say "Good morning". He pulled away. "I'm not shaking your hand" he said angrily. A half-dozen other people were observing this. It was a very public thing. I knew that Tim was very angry at me. Partly it was because we were on opposite sides of the vote. But I think it was deeper than that. I think he felt betrayed by me. I think he felt that I as pastor had the power, and should have used that power to dismiss Shannon right from the outset, thereby saving the church from the turmoil it was in – and that he was in. He felt this whole process was unnecessary, and would tear the church apart. And I was largely to blame for that.

I responded to Tim, "I can understand that you are angry with me. But I think we need to talk this out. Can we get together to do that"? To which Tim responded, "I have nothing to say to you, and you have nothing to say to me", and with that he stomped off. By now a number of people are observing this.

Time moves on. I did knock on his door some months later, and he did let me in, though we never talked about that incident. He did have a health crisis, and I prayed with him in the hospital. And then came my retirement in 2007, four years later. The church kind of overdid that good-bye party. There were events on Friday and Saturday and Sunday. The last thing, Sunday afternoon, was a "blessing" service for Lydia and me. Muriel Bechtal led it. She invited anyone from the congregation who wished, to come forward to lay hands on us in a final blessing.

The first person to rush forward, coming from the back corner where he always sat, was Tim. He wanted to make sure that he could lay one hand on me and one on Lydia. I was overwhelmed with emotion. This was his reconciliation. He was not the kind of person who could ever put into words what he was doing. But his action was powerful. And much of the congregation was aware of what was happening, a kind of miracle.

## Conclusion

Why am I still a pastor? Why do I still love being a pastor? I am stretched and challenged almost every day of work, either by circumstances, or by a Biblical text, or by a ministry challenge. And I get to know, and to love, an incredible array of God's children. And I get to see God at work, sometimes real close up, as miracles keep on happening in people's lives, sometimes even in my own. And when I get discouraged, which I do sometimes, and when I feel I am a failure, and I sure do fail often enough, and even when a church starts fighting unfairly, which every church does, I hear again the text from the

baptism of Jesus, directed to me, and to every Christian, and to every church - I hear the voice saying, "You are mine, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased".

What a privilege to be part of a church. What a privilege to be a pastor.