

*The Power of Presence*  
I Corinthians 3:12; II Corinthians 3:18  
*Self-Portrait*, by David Whyte

I want to tell you this morning the story of how I came to be here, in Campbell. Pastors talk a lot about their “call” stories, how they came to sense that God was calling them into a career or a next position in the Church. But it’s not just pastors whom God ‘calls’ into a new position or direction; it’s all of us. Any one of us might think of what we choose to do with our lives as a “calling”. If we were to use that kind of language more often, I think what we might be saying with it is that the place or the work where we feel “called” is like a sweet spot. It falls at the intersection between sensing that here we might make a difference, do something good for the world; and where it feels like joy to do that work. Parenting can feel like a calling to us, or a relationship, or even a hobby in which your particular kind of gift or creativity can be used fully for good. “Where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need” is how the great writer Frederick Buechner put it, and I think that’s just right. Each of us is called—maybe pulled—by some internal sense toward a purpose that not only serves others, but makes our own heart sing.

I am one of those United Methodist pastors who believes that the Bishop’s call to me can be, but is not necessarily, God’s call in my life. I respect and trust our Bishop and District Superintendent and the appointment system in our church, but over the years, when I have gotten calls about new appointments, I have always thought of them as discussion starters rather than commands. So when our District Superintendent called me in late February and told me that the Bishop wanted me to serve the church in Campbell, I began to think and pray and listen hard. I had heard little bits about this church and its pastors for a long time, but I didn’t know this community or the South Bay area at all. I was already serving a church where things were going well and they wanted me to stay. In 2013, I had been a final candidate for the presidency of two seminaries, and so I had the option of going back into higher education. I knew I was ready for a job that would be the focus of the next major chapter of my life, but I really didn’t know if it was Campbell, or even the church.

If you’re familiar at all with the United Methodist appointment system, you know that there is much about the comings and goings of new pastors that is done quietly, behind the scenes, until the date of a public announcement. By design and

tradition, the Staff Parish Relations Committee gathers secretly to meet the one candidate the Bishop surprises them with at that meeting. And even before that meeting, the clergy person is supposed to make a decision about the appointment—‘yes’ or ‘no’—without talking to anyone else or seeing this new place. It’s completely different than any other interview or candidacy process most people have ever gone through.

Well, I couldn’t do it quite the way the process was outlined. I thought and I prayed for several days, and still I felt like I needed something—some insight or information—that would help me make the decision. I asked the District Superintendent whether it would be all right if I *drove around* Campbell, and she sort of chuckled and said yes. “But do not,” she said, “go and talk to anyone at the church.” OK, ok.

So I drove down here on a Friday morning. It was raining—maybe it was one of the only rainy days we had last winter. I got off the freeway and drove down Hamilton Avenue, and I looked at the kinds of businesses that are around here, and at the people walking on the sidewalks. I went inside the post office, and I saw people from many different racial and ethnic backgrounds, which I liked very much. And then I drove into the parking lot of the church, right about noon. I saw parents picking up children from the preschool, but I didn’t talk to them. I walked through the lobby area in front of the fellowship hall, and I picked up everything in writing that I could find: flyers about Lenten study groups, announcements about a youth outing and a list of things the over-50 group was doing, and the most recent issue of the church’s newsletter.

And then I did something really daring. I walked into the church office and asked the person at the desk—who I now know was Barbara—if she could open up the sanctuary so that I could have a quiet place to pray. This kind of thing happens at churches sometimes during the week, and I figured I could do it anonymously. Praying was part of my agenda, but what I really wanted was to feel this space, to see if I could imagine myself leading worship here, and preaching from this pulpit.

It was noon on Friday, so the office was just about to close, but I didn’t know that. Barbara was enormously gracious, even though I was a complete stranger. “I can’t open up the sanctuary right now,” she said, “but I can let you into the chapel, and you can pray there.” So I followed her over to the chapel, and she left me there alone. And I just want to say, in case the District Superintendent is here for

worship this morning, that we exchanged very few words, and I am confident that Barbara had no idea who I was.

I prayed a bit--for my own opening, for wisdom, for some sense of confirmation, one way or another. And then I began to read the pieces you'd written, the things I'd picked up. The newsletter I held was the first one published after Pastor Paul's death. There were several columns that talked about the memorial service and the congregation's reactions to this loss. In a moment, I was knocked back on my heels by the honest grief and shock that the writers expressed. I have rarely—maybe never—seen a church where the people were as authentic and open with one another, as willing to be transparent with one another in difficulty, as what I got a glimpse of in just that newsletter. And I knew...almost immediately, I knew...that I wanted to be the pastor here. I felt like I was falling in love with this congregation already, by watching the way you grieved and your willingness to be vulnerable with one another. That afternoon, I called the District Superintendent and told her that I wanted to come. So, in a way, you called me to this place. It was your authenticity in that moment, your willingness to show one another a layer of your hearts below the surface—not to me, but to one another--that called me here, and that made me believe that this is a place where I too might joyfully do the work of leading the church.

That's the power of authentic relationships; it's what happens when people are fully present with one another, willing to show each other parts of themselves that lie below the surface. It transforms us. When you let me see something inside of you, I am moved—not only toward you, with compassion, but toward a deeper understanding of my own humanity. Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest and theologian, calls it "presence". Presence, he says, is that mysterious thing that happens when "the self-disclosure of one evokes a deeper life in the other."

*The self-disclosure of one evokes a deeper life in the other.* It's what happens in twelve-step meetings, when one person says, "My name is Steve, and I'm an alcoholic." Steve's willingness to tell the parts of his story in which he was anything but a hero feels like healing to someone whose similar, hidden story had felt like shame. It's that moment of relief, when you dare to say something about yourself that had made you feel isolated and alone, and someone else says, "Me too." It's the power of falling in love, when you open up and reveal yourself to someone else and their response to you is delight. It makes you feel lovable and beautiful.

All of us need relationships to know who we are. We need people who will be our mirrors, whose responses to us help us discover and shape our own identity. Psychologists call these our “constituting others”. But this is not just a psychological issue; it’s a spiritual one. When we are divided, insecure, un-integrated, it’s because we are looking in many directions—too many—for a definition of ourselves, validation of who we are.

The process of growing up is choosing that list of people whose validation we need to know ourselves. The process of a life of faith, you might say, is about moving toward trusting that God is our most reliable mirror, the one in whom we get the most accurate image of ourselves. In relationship with God, and especially by seeing ourselves in the stories of Jesus, I see highlighted both the most hopeful and truthful possibilities for my life and my shortcomings. I think this is what Paul was talking about in the two places Elin read from this morning in the letters to the Corinthians. “For now we see in a mirror,” Paul said—but only dimly. “Then,”—then when we are fully mature, fully human, able to hold both the pain and the exquisite beauty of this life; when we are more fully transformed into the image of the One who created us—then when we look in that mirror, we will see looking back at us not only our own image but God’s. Those two images will be so intertwined, so alike, that they are one and the same. Not because we will be perfect—but because our eyes, just like God’s, will be full of love.

Will this happen fully in our lifetimes? Probably not. But what we do here, with and for each other, is to keep re-setting our gaze in that direction. We do it by telling the stories that remind us where we’ve wandered away and how to find the path again. We do it by calling each other into action, the practice of acting like the hands and feet of God until those actions change our hearts. We do it by being in relationship with one another, gradually lifting the veil that covers the hidden layers of our lives, the untold stories that can connect us—to each other, to ourselves, to God.

Recently I’ve been reading and loving and giving away a book called *Carry On, Warrior*, by Glennon Doyle Melton, who writes a blog called “Momastery”. In both the book and her blog, she talks honestly about her own messy life so that other women who sometimes feel bad about themselves can take courage from knowing they’re not alone. In one place she talks about her reluctance to join a church, because no church seems to capture her own faith exactly. And then she says this:

“...[A]ny faith worth a damn is a faith worked out over a lifetime of relationships with other people. *Church* is just a commitment to try to live a life of a certain quality—a life of love, of humility, of service—alongside others for whom you will care and allow to care for you, even when that’s difficult. It’s a group of regular old humans trying to love each other and the world in superhuman ways.”<sup>i</sup>

We need each other. We need to know each other and to be known—not only for the great, admirable things we’ve accomplished, but in those moments when taking off the mask and letting another person see inside of us makes us feel vulnerable and afraid. Hearing other people’s stories and telling our own is how we figure out who we are. It’s how we change and grow. When we do this with God we call it ‘prayer’. When we do this with each other we call it ‘love’. May this place—may our life together—be filled with both.

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<sup>i</sup> Glennon Doyle Melton, *Carry On, Warrior: The Power of Embracing Your Messy, Beautiful Life*, Scribner 2013, p. 219.