

***Sharing The Ministry***  
**By Rev. Don Southworth**  
**April 15, 2007**

© 2007, Rev. Don Southworth

---

**READING** – *Anyone's Ministry* by Gordon McKeeman

Ministry is...

A quality of human relationship between and among human beings that beckons forth hidden possibilities;

Inviting other people into deeper, more constant, more reverent relationship with the world and with one another;

Being present with, to, and for others in their terrors and torments; in their grief, misery and pain;

Knowing that those feelings are our feelings too;

Celebrating the triumphs of the human spirit, the miracles of birth and life, the wonders of devotion and sacrifice;

Witnessing to life-enhancing values; speaking truth to power;

Standing for human dignity and equity, for compassion and aspiration;

Believing in life in the presence of death; struggling for human responsibility against principalities and structures that ignore humaneness and become instruments of death;

It is all of these and much, much more than all of them present in

The wordless,

The unspoken,

The ineffable.

It is speaking and living the highest we know and living with the knowledge that it is

Never as deep, or as wide      Or as high as we wish.

Whenever there is a meeting that summons us to our better selves, wherever

Our lostness is found, our fragments are untied, or our wounds are healing, our spines stiffen and our muscles grow strong for the task...there is ministry.

---

**SERMON:**

There is a truism that minister wannabes are taught in seminary and that preachers sometimes confess to each other after they have been at this work for awhile. Preachers, it is said, have, at most, three sermons they have to teach and preach. And our task is to preach those three sermons in as many different ways as we can so that our congregations do not get bored or figure us out.

This morning I want to talk about one of my three, something that lies at the deepest core of what I hope my ministry, my life is all about – shared ministry. Before I explain what shared ministry is and why I think living it is one of, if not the biggest challenges, we face both as individuals and as a religious community, let me read these words about the purpose of church, or in our case Fellowship, from an essay titled “Reinventing the Church” written by Beverly and David Bumbaugh:

“The church exists to proclaim the gospel that each human being is infinitely precious, that the meaning of our lives lies hidden in our interactions with each other. The challenge we confront is to be a church which does not bury that great truth beneath all our business, but which enables us to encounter each other with wonder and appreciation and expectation, to call out of each other strengths and wisdom and compassion we never knew we had.”

The church, the Fellowship, exists to proclaim the gospel that each human being is infinitely precious and to call out of each other strengths and wisdom and compassion we never knew we had. Most of you know that the definition of gospel is good news; I cannot think of any more good news than these words. Our task together is to call out of each other strengths and wisdom and compassion we never knew we had.

This morning I want to propose one way we can do this - by practicing shared ministry. Some of you may be wondering what I mean by sharing the ministry while some of you may be thinking to yourself I have enough to do in my life already, thank you very much, and I sure do not want to share the ministry – besides isn't that what we pay our ministers to do?!

What do I mean by sharing the ministry? Ministry in its most ancient form, simply meant to serve. In our reading this morning Gordon McKeeman claims that ministry is a quality of relationship between and among human beings that beckons forth hidden possibilities and that it is inviting people into deeper, more constant, more reverent relationship with the world and one another.

If we hold his words and the original definition of ministry to be true, ministry is to serve and bring forth the best in each other. Many of you do this naturally and you probably did not realize you were doing ministry. This is the work, the ministry, which we all need to share.

Long before I ever dreamed about being a minister, and even longer before I was aware that there was a religion called Unitarian Universalism, I fell in love with a song by a country singer named Kathy Mattea. The song is titled “Seeds” and its chorus still can move me to tears after these many years. “We’re all just seeds in God’s hands. We start the same but where we land is sometimes fertile soil and sometimes sand. We’re all just seeds in God’s hands.” That song, and my experiences in life, led me to craft a sacred story that I hold onto today. The story is simply this: Each one of us comes into the world as precious and divine seeds planted in the garden of humanity. Sometimes we find ourselves in fertile soil and sometimes we

find ourselves in sand. One of our main tasks in life is to do everything we can to find fertile ground to plant ourselves in, and then surround ourselves with those people who can help us bloom into our most beautiful and radiant selves – and then help others to do the same. When we do this we have our best chance at becoming whole – at finding our ministry - and we have the best chance at helping to heal the world.

I tell you this story, my personal story about what I believe our main purpose on this planet to be, for two reasons. One is because I think that a religious community offers one of the best chances to cultivate and till the fertile soil which helps people bloom into their most radiant selves, and two because the work of finding the soil, the people and the sunlight that helps grow seeds, grow people, into beautiful flowers is one of the primary goals of ministry – and everyone can do it.

My path to ministry, although I did not realize it at the time, began many years ago when I discovered the Buddhist concept of Right Livelihood – one of the stages on the Eightfold path. Right Livelihood, some call it the Buddhist phrase for vocation, is the notion that the work we do must be consistent with our spiritual values, make a difference in the world and feed our spirits. Learning about Right Livelihood turned my world upside down. I had always been aware that work was important to my self-esteem but I never really thought how important it was to living out my life's purpose as well. I began to seriously question what my life's work was and how I could best live, and work from, my spiritual and ethical values.

Eventually my search for finding work that would feed my spirit and help heal the world led me to Joseph Campbell who introduced me to a word that started to sound and feel like ministry – call. I started to listen for, and sometimes be haunted by, the call after I read Campbell's words: "But if a person has had the sense of the Call – the feeling that there's an adventure for one – and if one doesn't follow that, but remains in the society because it is safe and secure than life dries up."

Do you have a sense of the call – are you called to do work that will feed your spirit and help to heal the world? Let me suggest that the first step in sharing the ministry is for all of us to spend time reflecting on what life is calling us to do.

When many of us start to listen for our calling we tell ourselves callings are only for ministers or people who are going to sacrifice their lives to serve humankind. When I think of being called I think of the stories of the prophets in the Bible. The stories about people like Moses, Jeremiah and Jonah are some of my favorite because the prophets' responses to God's calling is so human and similar to what I think most of ours is when we start to sense a calling – it can't be me, please take somebody else.

Of course most of us are not lucky enough to have God come down and have private conversations with us about what we are meant to do with our lives. We have to struggle with hearing and answering the call on our own. Or we decide callings are only for religious people such as Mother Teresa, Gandhi or professional ministers. Or we simply refuse to acknowledge that anything like a calling in life really exists.

James Hillman, the psychologist, scholar and author, in his book *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*, claims the idea that each of us are called pre-dates the Bible and can be seen in Plato's works, as well as the myths of most ancient cultures. Hillman, in secular, non-religious language, argues that each person is born with an individual daimon or genius and that our main task in life is to fully express and share this genius with the world. Hillman writes that "Each person enters the world called...A calling may be postponed, avoided, intermittently missed. It may also possess you completely. Whatever, eventually it will out. It makes its claim. The daimon, or call, does not go away."

If we accept Hillman's assertion that all of us enter the world called, the first question we must ask ourselves is how do we discover what we are called to do? And I would add, how can a religious community help us- and others - do this? Hillman says that we can discern what our calling is by answering "What is it, in my heart that I must do, be and have. And why?" I find his question valuable but I find the theologian Frederick Buechner's words more powerful and more relevant for our task as religious people. "To find our calling is to find the intersection between our own deep gladness and the world's deep hunger."

The intersection between our own deep gladness and the world's deep hunger. This is our calling, this is our task in life.

Parker Palmer in his wonderful book on vocation *Let Your Life Speak* articulates what I believe is the most compelling spiritual challenge we face as individuals and as a religious community – and the reward we gain by doing the work of finding our calling and our ministry. "Our deepest calling," he writes, "is to grow into our authentic selfhood whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks – we will also find our path of authentic service in the world."

Finding our path of authentic service in the world – our ministry if you will – is the hope I have for each one of us and for our Fellowship. Imagine the power of having everyone in this congregation living from the deepest part of their self, doing work that fills us with gladness while helping feed the world's deep hunger.

Imagine the transformation and healing that is possible when a religious community, *this* religious community, acts in the world with joy and authenticity answering the call of service, of ministry to the world. My dream for our Fellowship is that everyone who steps in the front door catches the energy and enthusiasm of people living from their most authentic selves, speaking and acting from that place of intersection between their deep gladness and the world's deep hunger. I dream of a place where everyone heeds their calling and ministers to each other and to the world.

I hope the thought of this excites you as much as it does me. I hope you wish to join me in proclaiming the gospel that each human being is infinitely precious. I hope you wish to join me in calling out of each other strength, wisdom and compassion that we never knew we had.

The society we live in does not encourage us to live from our most authentic selves and share our gifts, our geniuses with the world very often. We always need to be on the lookout for people, coincidences and fertile soil that help us discern our calls. People who are answering their calls and sharing their passion and gladness with the world are magnetic and inspiring. They seem to have found their divine seeds and discovered how to grow those seeds into beautiful flowers. They can be ministers or mothers, actresses or artists, dancers or doctors, gardeners or grandfathers, programmers or professors, teachers or technicians. They are you and me.

My favorite part of congregational life and ministry is watching other people discover and live their calls. I have had the joy and pleasure of working with worship associates who have opened their hearts and found their voices, embarrassed and shy teenagers who have blossomed into talented and wise teachers, volunteers who have offered their hearts and souls – not to mention their time – for the well being of their religious community, professional staff who have given in music, in words and in their very lives – the best they have to the people they serve and I have watched hundreds of people whose passion and commitment to social justice and caring for the suffering of others is as deep as any river and as hot as any star.

If we are going to find the courage and commitment to answer our calls and share a ministry that will gladden us and heal the world we must plant ourselves in gardens where others are also committed to blessing the world with all of their gifts. This congregation is such a garden and with water, nurturing, commitment and maybe a little fertilizer it can become even lusher and more beautiful than it is today

I am still learning about this place called ERUUF. I hope I never stop. One thing I have learned is that we do not have processes and systems in place to make it easy for each one of you to share your ministry, your gifts, with all of us. One of the most heartbreaking conversations I have had since I have been here was with someone who told me they had been around for two years and figured their gifts weren't needed so they decided, with much sadness, to come on Sunday and not do much of anything else. Let me be clear - we need, we want, we expect each of you to share our gifts, your ministry, with us. Linda Brooks is helping us design ways to make it easier for you to share your gifts but we aren't there yet. I never want someone at ERUUF to feel their gifts are not needed, their ministry not cherished, again. If you are feeling this way, un-needed or unwanted, I invite you, to be honest I beg you, to contact Linda, Mary or me. And don't wait.

Because if I have learned one thing about answering our calls, about gladly offering our gifts in ministry, in service, to others it is this. Today is the day to begin. Today is the day to be willing, in the words of Joseph Campbell, "to get rid of the life we have planned so we can have the life that is waiting for us." Today is the day to take the leap of faith that life, the universe, other people, and/or God will support our decision to live fully from our gladness and help feed the hungry world. Today is the day to answer our calls.

Look for places to serve – both in the world and this congregation – that are whispering, or shouting, to you to use your gifts. If you are having a hard time hearing them, ask someone for help. Use this

congregation as a place to practice – both listening to your calling and living your ministry. Find something you think you would love to do – attend a class, become a worship associate, drive someone to church, make coffee, tend your garden, sing in the choir, – and do it.

The world has a deep hunger and a deep need for healing. The people in this congregation and in our community have yearnings, sorrows, worries and callings. So do our children, our friends and our families. There is too much work to be done and too much joy to be lived to leave it to the people with Rev in front of their names.

The congregation exists to proclaim the gospel that each human being is infinitely precious and to call out of each other strengths and wisdom and compassion we never knew we had. Wherever there is a meeting that summons us to our better selves there is ministry.

May every meeting in this place summon us to our better selves. May we remind each other and the world around us of our infinite preciousness. And may we find strength, wisdom, compassion... and a ministry that we never knew we had.

May it be so. Amen.