First Presbyterian Church of Hanford

"The Joy of Worship II"

Noel K. Anderson, Pastor

PRINCETON

I'm going to share with you about the most perfect, most miraculous worship service I have ever experienced.

My first semester at Princeton Seminary was an academic honeymoon of sorts. No school feels more school than Princeton, especially after the autumn colors kick in and you find yourself wading ankle-deep through fallen orange leaves the size of salad plates wherever you go.

Part of that first semester was "field education", known better as field ed (pronounced "feel dead"). Students took year-long assignments serving in local churches. Assisting in worship and running youth groups all day on Sundays was the normal setup; I, too, took a position alongside a senior classman in a town called North Plainfield, New Jersey.

Our Sunday routine was to serve in worship in the morning and then work with the senior high group (while my friend Bruce worked with the junior highers) in the late afternoon. Somewhere about 6 weeks into the semester, I hit a wall. I don't remember all the details, but the kids just acted up and went on an emotional boycott of my leadership. I already had four solid years of Young Life leadership and summer camp counseling to my credit, so I couldn't understand why the kids should turn on me, but they did, and anything I tried to bring the group back into line that night simply failed. I was miserable.

On the drive home with Bruce, I now understood why they called it "feel dead." During the debriefing on the drive, I repeatedly felt shamed by the wisdom of my older classmate, whose very gentle suggestions, one by one, made it clear I had no idea what I was doing. He was trying to make me feel better, but I was sinking fast into a quicksand of self-awareness that I was utterly incompetent at ministry. As we arrived back at Princeton, the sight of the campus nearly brought tears of relief to my eyes; I was glad to be back.

SUNDAY NIGHT STUDENT COMMUNION

For Sunday nights, I had already developed a routine. First was a Sunday evening worship service—small, intimate, and student-led with communion—and then shooting baskets at the gym with my new buddy Cleve Stevens. Cleve had long, wavy hair, a large mustache, and big front teeth, so that when he smiled, he almost resembled a large human version of a rabbit—like Bugs Bunny, and Cleve's sense of humor made him the perfect buddy to unwind with when you were feeling dead. He wanted to just go

straight over to the gym, but I said no, tonight was a night I really needed worship and communion. He asked what was wrong; I told him I'd tell him later. The truth was that I had no words to articulate my self-loathing and complete sense of failure.

The Sunday evening worship met in the Princeton Seminary Chapel and usually involved between a dozen and two dozen students, most of us glad to have another Sunday over and done with. The sermons were preached by upperclassmen, but communion had to be celebrated by someone already ordained, and different people were brought in to officiate. On this particular night, a senior-class woman was bringing the Word. She was quite tall and large. Aligned with the progressive fashion of the day, her hair was cut quite short and irregularly chopped. She wore a plain, shapeless, brown frock—kind of like what Barney Rubble used to wear on The Flintstones. This was the going style of feminist activists in 1982 at Princeton—a look meant to undermine sexual stereotyping, particularly in terms of what is considered feminine—the look was meant to deliver a blow against the male gaze and sexualizing women.

Most nights, I might have felt snarky about it—rolled my eyes, saying, "Oh, whatever!" But tonight was different. I was utterly deflated and had no criticism in me. I felt like the lowest of the low.

DEFLATION AND SELF-LOATHING OVER FAILURE

Now, usually I was at or near the center of every laugh, joke, or prank, but that night there was no humor left in me; I had been thoroughly humbled. In fact, I was questioning my call altogether. I had no idea what I was doing, and here I was at Princeton Seminary; it all had to be a mistake. I looked to this student preacher the way a starving man looks to one delivering a meal. I needed her and the gospel she would bring. My expectations were high. Here I was at the best seminary in the world; I knew I could expect to hear one of the best student sermons anywhere. I'm all yours, sister—preach to me! Give me a reason to go on. She began with words indicating something about "our ultimate eschatological expectations," and my mind immediately wandered away to feel bad about myself.

I was utterly self-absorbed, and in my head, I instant-replayed the fumbles and unforced errors of the day to support my running thesis that I was absolutely unfit for ministry. I didn't hear the sermon, but sat in anguish, asking God why he led me here only to teach me the humility of failure. I felt completely eclipsed by a sense of inadequacy and began to beg God for a relatively face-saving exit strategy. I was leaving seminary and began to dread its downside. How do you tell your parents and friends? How do you tell your home church I thought I was right for it, but I was wrong—I acted on a lark of an idea—a pale whim that I should go into the ministry. I was depressed and wondered what I would do instead. I jumped in, and now everything was wrecked, and it was all my own fault.

"LIGHTEN UP"

Then I heard his voice. Now, I'm not one of those Christians who is so well plugged into God that I hear his voice all the time. I know there are people who do, and God bless them, but that's not my spirituality. But on that day, he spoke to my mind two words as simply and clearly as could be:

Lighten up.

These are not words I could have spoken to myself. There are no reserves that ran deep enough to suggest these words. As soon as I heard them, I was turned upside-down with wonder. They made sense! After all, who did I think I was to take myself so seriously? After years of being a class clown (and 4 years as a humor columnist in my college paper), was I the one now missing out on a joke? Yes! I was missing out—and the joke was me —Mr. Serious Ministry Guy. It became clear to me in a flash that my suffering was all self-imposed nonsense. The words from Job came back to me:

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding."

In a flash, I knew—or I remembered—that it was never about me. When did I start to think that I had anything to bring to ministry anyway? It's all about God and what he does through us, and nothing about me.

And, literally like pulling one's head out of the ground, I was in the light again, and I lifted my head to get back into the worship service when I noticed something. My friend Dave across the way had his face in his hands, and his forehead looked very red. I looked beside me at Cleve. His face was red and his eyes shut tightly. I nudged him with my elbow, and he shook his head nervously as if to say No, no—don't! Something was happening, and I was missing out on it. I had been missing something—something laughable—but my self-absorption had deafened me.

I looked to the preacher. She was standing sanctimoniously beside the lectern with her hands folded in front of her. Her face was as serious and dignified as any Puritan. On the lectern was a small cassette player. I began to hear what was going on: It was Sonny & Cher's And the Beat Goes On.

First of all, it's really bad form to play a popular song from a cheap cassette player in place of sermon material. Second, Sonny & Cher's And the Beat Goes On contains no content that can be justified as sermon-worthy material. Third, and worst, it was the live version.

And the Lord's voice hit home: Lighten Up. It's not about you, Noel. Something spectacularly, wonderfully idiotic was taking place—and I had been so busy beating up on myself that I was missing it.

The song ended, she pressed the stop button of the portable cassette player with a loud, awkward click, and then closed her sermon with these profound words:

And the beat goes on, and the beat goes on, even to the end of the age.

I couldn't help it; I laughed out loud. Others looked at me enviously; they had turned red trying to hold it back, but I was a new man—healed, reborn, touched by the Word of God—it was the best sermon I ever experienced! It spoke from God to my heart, and I was transformed and in an ecstasy of joy and awe!

The preacher looked offended; she scowled at me for my laughter; I wanted to kiss her, I was so happy. How could I tell her: she was me! So self-serious and dignified, passing off a rotten pop song as substance for a sermon and proud about it—that was my problem, and she was my mirror. She had truly helped me get over and beyond myself. Thank you, sister! Well done! In my heart, I said Thank You, Lord, for all of this mess.

THE TABLE OF ERRORS

We then made our way to the Table, and I had never been more ready to receive the Lord than that night, but the joke wasn't over, not even close. The guest officiant was, I believe, an angel sent from heaven just for me. I never saw him before that night nor ever again afterward. He was small and thin, with white adhesive tape wrapped around the center of his black-rimmed glasses. No, I'm not joking, it's exactly the early-80s stereotype of a nerd. He was the most serious liturgist I have ever seen—he spoke to us as if what we were about to do was an emergency operation to save the lives of many children. It made me want to laugh. He gave us instructions as if the cup were filled with nitroglycerine and the table made of priceless Tiffany glass. I got the joke and inwardly thanked God for his goodness. And then the joke just got better and better.

This angel from heaven sent for my benefit, blundered every detail of the sacrament. He had to read every word of the liturgy out of the worship book, and when he began the liturgy of baptism by mistake, we all felt for him, until he shot a nasty glance at his co-officiant, as if it was all her fault. He found the right page with some difficulty and began reading. He gave us instructions for communion with a serious, joyless face. And he got them all wrong.

First, he blessed the cup before the bread, and spilled juice before lifting the cup.

Next, he said we would begin by passing the bread to our left with the words "the bread of life," but he passed the cup to his right, saying, "the body of life." He realized his error and, with a very irritated look, took back the cup, then passed the remaining bread with the words "Body of Christ." After we had partaken, he realized that he had forgotten to "Pass the Peace of Christ," but seriously felt that it was honorable enough to do this afterward. I wanted to hug him—I wanted to see if I could actually feel wings moving beneath his black, polyester robe—I had been healed at this service and felt nothing but love for everyone. He came toward me and veered away; he wouldn't pass me the peace of Christ, probably because I had laughed earlier and ruined the service for him and everyone else.

Not only God's voice, but his Spirit within that entire service, spoke loudly to me that message: Lighten up—it isn't about you.

As we approach the table today, we approach not a manmade ritual or remembrance, but a sacrament. The difference is simple but important. Rituals are things we do to please God. Sacraments are God's gifts to us. Our seriousness amounts to nothing. Our reverence is always broken and undermined by our pride and spiritual blindness. But it is the message of Grace that says to us: "Lighten up—it's not about you—it's about what I've done for you. Take. Eat. Receive. May your Joy be complete." †