

"Count It All Joy"

A Sermon by the Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt

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When it happened, how did you know? Was it a sudden understanding that wrapped itself around you, or a quick shot to your heart? When it happened, where were you? Lying in bed, listening to your partner's breath? Walking through the house, tucking stray feet beneath covers? Were you driving down a country road with a beloved friend, or eating your breakfast, or were you at your office, closing out a file? When it happened, was it a shout or a whisper? A command or a lure? An invitation or a plea or a prayer or a quiet, blessed assurance that came and never left you?

Perhaps you always knew one thing about yourself – that you made every meal a ritual, or that ideas danced in your head and arranged themselves in questions. Perhaps your friends knew first, the way they clustered in your room in college, or drifted by to talk, to tell you things no one else had heard. Perhaps yours was the phone that always rang in the midst of someone's heartbreak or victory; it was important to the person on the other end to find out what you thought, because yours was a trusted heart. Maybe you were always the one who hated bullies, who said no when everyone else said yes, even when you were afraid.

Did you fight it, or did you surrender right away? Did you pose cogent intellectual arguments against taking the path, arguments that should have convinced you, but didn't? Did you hold on as long as you could to years of your carefully constructed life, or did you let go gracefully, giddily, awake to this new adventure? How long, exactly, did it take you to form the words that gave voice to the longing that filled you to overflowing? What did it take to hear and to finally say: Yes. This is what I want. I want to be a minister. Yes.

Such brave words, such foolish words, and yet, how the world depends on them, depends on those of us who will say the words as well as those of us who will hear them, those of us who assist in the work, embrace it and enliven it and enrich it in all the forms it takes or has ever taken. How much our common lives depend on those words that in the end, help to build temples in the human heart, making space for divinity.

Not one of us who loves and lives into this calling succeeds in the task without those who minister with us, who call out from us a greater understanding and depth than we knew we had. Such is the wisdom of our congregational way, that allows to be born in us a capacity for affection, for greatness of heart that surprises both the lover and the loved. Together, we create a set of relationships both public and intimate.

As the mother of the dead child lies down on the morgue floor to cry, as you lie down with her and you sob together, who is blessing and who is being blessed? As the uncompromising atheist in your congregation thanks you for your sermon about Jesus, who is healing and who is being healed? As the toddler you dedicate grasps the rose touching his lips and begins to chew on it, who is really being fed? When you sign the marriage license for two men who have loved each other since before you were born, who is it that gives the gift of ministry, and who is it that receives it?

If all we ever accomplished was this – this binding together of a community, moment by moment, person by person, it would be enough. For in a frightened and fragmented world what is more beautiful, more filled with grace, than the communities of memory and hope we are privileged to build together? And yet the call we answer places a claim on us that is greater than our own contentment. Our own happiness is the very least of it, because to whom much is given, much is expected, and we people of the liberal way are a people called to serve and to save this world.

We who are privileged to be ministers engage this life as agents of love, gathering up the beloved people in our care – in churches, in hospitals, in prisons, in classrooms. In our large and small assemblies we move about, opening every door in the house of the soul, inviting everyone to come, to see, to share what we have found, what we are finding together. Showing our lover what is most glorious in life. We are called to focus our love for all creation, to focus and refine that love into tools of grace and of power, and then to distribute those tools among the people, so that what we dream together becomes what we do together. We are called to this holy work, not because we are so much better than everyone else, but because our love and our sorrow for the world have made us restless.

We each know the touchstones of our love – the congregant who sees you after services and does not speak, but presses her hands to yours and touches your cheek with her lips and her tears. The children who dash to surround you after coffee hour and play hide and seek with your robe – while you are still in it. The man who has no family but the church, who collects jokes and cartoons and periodically presents them to you, just so that he can watch you laugh.

We know, too, the touchstones of our sorrow: the homeless man we see occasionally, not some drifter, but a member too ashamed to say he has lost his apartment and his job. The couple weighed down with addiction and anger whose relationship cannot survive the alcohol but who cannot afford rehab. The woman whose partner of a decade prepares for deportation because her visa has expired and marriage equality will come too late to save them.

Daily we encounter those who trust us with shame and secrets as well as delights; we comfort them and rejoice with them as best we can. Yet in our darkened rooms before sleep, the events of the day playing out behind our closed eyelids, we are caught up in the irony of it: how much it matters that we do what we can, yet how inadequate is our response, confronting one circumstance at a time. Daily we labor for individuals in a

world in which institutions, powers and principalities seem to absorb all our efforts, leaving no trace that we were ever there.

“Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

These are words in the Gospel of James to a community of what would later become the early Christian church, the same James that reminds us in a later chapter that “faith without works is dead.” The call felt by those early radical reformers of the Jewish tradition was a call that is not so very different from our own. Like them, we are called to a new freedom and new relationships; like them we know that wherever we encounter the shredded fabric of the human spirit, we are called to reweave those fragile bits into garments of wholeness and peace. Like them, we know that wherever there is narrowness of mind and heart, we are called to be architects of openness. Like them, we make common cause with others who share our restless hunger for the communities of memory, hope and resistance yet to be built. Like these earlier faithful women and men, we know that the task is large enough to make us lose our hearts, or our way.

At any age or any stage of ministry, it is so very easy to lose our way. When we cease to be honored and instead are burdened by our congregants’ trust in us, we have lost our way. When we are so afraid of losing our jobs that we forget to do our jobs, we have lost our way. When we work as though the ministry to which we have been called depends entirely on us, we have lost our way.

Even more pitiable are those among us who revel in ministries of exile, those who have deliberately absented themselves from the great debates of faith and culture that we are called to engaged—for we are called to engage them—those who each week abandon our living tradition in favor of our once-lived tradition. Contemptuous of inevitable change, unwilling to be moved by the fresh winds of the Spirit, they distract the faithful with claims of political correctness to mask their own intellectual and spiritual arrogance. These ministries, served under false pretenses, cheat our free religious movement of depth and meaning. They weaken us at the very moment when our nation and its people most need our liberating power.

There are a multiplicity of new voices within our liberal ministries, voices with their roots in cultures and communities far different from the stentorian tones of our Puritan forbears, voices that bring warmth, innovation, new life and new ministries to our faith communities. Yet there are those among us who have chosen to view these streams of inspiration as an unfortunate distraction from our real work. It is as if we have forgotten the words of Theodore Parker, who more than a century ago asked us to imagine a church that “felt that [humanity] was great...; [its] duties great, and great its rights and great its power. What a church that would be, a church of faith and works; that warred with sin and healed the woes of [humanity] and loosed the chain...one such church is in this place... That work is for you,” Parker said.

This work, this broad, expansive, inclusive ministry is for us. So long as we remember that, we need not fear the many waves of the world's changes. For we are never alone, not one of us; we travel always in good company. We walk with God, that Presence that has searched us and known us, even before we drew breath. We walk with every woman and man who has walked this liberal path before us, leaving behind fragments of grace to sustain us.

We walk with Olympia Brown, her last sermon both an invitation and a provocation to us: "Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals, which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful."

We walk with James Luther Adams, who reminded us that "a living tradition is not bequeathed through some law of inheritance; it must be earned, not without dust and heat, and not without humbling grace."

We who minister in these days are being asked to earn our living tradition yet again in a world of dizzying change. Our lives will not be particularly easy, but those of us who answer the call to ministry have never asked for ease. We asked, instead, for these few things: the chance to make common cause with every man and woman on life's journey, for the capacity to fall in love, over and over again, with life and with the source of life. We asked that we live to sing life's praises, and to point the way so that others might join us in the holy song. We asked for strength to do and to say the difficult thing, no matter what the cost. And we asked for the wisdom, through all our days, to count it all joy. Amen.