

The Stole

Matthew 28:16-20

August 19, 2018

Earlier this summer, I got a little package in the mail,
wrapped in brown paper,
hand-addressed to me,
but from an address I didn't recognize.
Had I won something recently on eBay?
Ordered something and then forgotten?
I do that sometimes.
But I couldn't think of a thing.
So the package was a mystery.
I unwrapped the paper. It was a Godiva chocolate box.
Yum! I thought, and opened the box.
No chocolate. There was something inside it wrapped in tissue paper, and on top of it
this note:
"Dear Alida,
This memory of my father, Bill Smith, has been hanging in my closet.
What better person to give it to than you.
Cheers - Kathie Smith.
P.S. Sorry there was no Godiva in the box."

What was in the box was this. [*stole*]

Like what I'm wearing around my neck right now,
this is what's known as a stole --
worn by pastors, it's a symbol of ordination.
As you can perhaps tell by the length of this particular stole,
it was created for a person much taller than I am.
Bill Smith was indeed a tall man,
and in my life, a giant of a man.
He was my pastor, growing up,
the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, Virginia.
What I knew of being a pastor I knew from him:
a gentle man, but a strong voice for social justice.
He preached with passion,
he himself baked the bread which he broke and shared in our Communion services.
And at the end of every service,
he stood tall at the front of the church, raised his hands over us, and said

“Go out into the world in peace,
have courage, hold fast to what is good,
return to no one evil for evil.”

If those words sound familiar, it’s because they’re the words I say at the end of every one of my services here.

The first time I led worship,
as a student minister in New Haven,
I came to the close of the service,
and suddenly realized I was supposed to have prepared a Benediction, a final blessing.
I had nothing in my notes.

But when I opened my mouth, out came the words,
the words I’d heard Bill say over and over again.

Go out into the world in peace. Have courage.

He had passed on those words to me,
just as he had passed on his example of what it means to be a pastor,
just as he had passed on the faith of Jesus Christ to me and to so many others.

And as I pulled this stole, his stole,
out of the box,
a symbol of Bill’s role in my life,
I of course burst into tears.
It felt like, literally, the passing of the mantle.

Stoles are created in different colors,
for different seasons of the church, different holy days.
The stole I’m wearing now is a stole for Ordinary Time, as it’s known -- the time
between Easter and Advent which covers most of the year. Ordinary time.
But this stole, Bill’s stole,
with its striking reds,
is a Pentecost stole --
it’s worn on the day of Pentecost,
when the church celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit to Christ’s followers.

And it’s worn any time a new minister is ordained.

So this stole, you see,
has been in this Sanctuary before.
It’s what Bill would have worn at my ordination 29 years ago.
Because he was the preacher that day.
It’s what he would have worn
as he prayed for the gift of the Spirit on my ministry,
as he prayed for faith to thrive in this church.

The Spirit moving from one generation to the next,
faith continuing into the future,
one preacher passing the mantle to the next.

This morning,
David is 50 miles from here,
in Brooklyn, at the Breezy Point Church, two blocks from the ocean.
He's there because almost 50 years ago another pastor passed the mantle to him.
That pastor was his father.
It was Sunday, August 17, 1969, and the Rev. Gard Rowe was scheduled to guest
preach at the Breezy Point church.
But on August 16, Gard had agreed to drive his daughters, David's sisters, up to a music
concert they really wanted to go to,
upstate in a place called Woodstock.
And late that Saturday night,
David got a call from his father.
"We can't get out of here," his dad said,
"they've got all the roads shut down.
You'll have to preach for me."

So David did.
He went and preached the faith he'd learned from his father,
he went and preached as he'd heard his dad preach all the years growing up with him.
And every August since then, David has gone back to Breezy Point to guest preach
again.
Today, he does it with an added poignancy;
only four days ago, he led his father's funeral service.
It was service in which we remembered, all of us,
the faith with which Gard Rowe lived,
the faith he's passed to all of us who loved him,
and which we will do our best now to live out, in his honor.

Bill Smith and Gard Rowe --
two pastors who lived the faith,
shared it with everyone they met,
and each raised up the next generation of believers.
And this stole, this stole,
hangs in my office now,
there to remind me of the ones from whom I learned God's love,
there to remind me of my responsibility to teach that love.

This week at Vacation Bible School,
our Church House was filled to the brim every day,
with kids from 4 years old on up,
with middle schoolers as assistant counselors,
with college kids and moms and dads as leaders.

And every day,
my job was to get up on the Memorial Room stage,
entertain kids with a puppet and a little slapstick,
and then tell a Bible Story.

I told them about the day that Jesus found some fishermen and called them to be his disciples;

about the little man named Zacchaeus who climbed up a tree to see Jesus better;
about the supper, the last supper with his friends, when Jesus shared bread and asked them to remember.

And the final story of the week was the one that Casey just now read to you.

Jesus' last words to his followers before he disappeared into heaven.

The story is called the Great Commission --

Jesus' final charge to his friends, his final request.

He gathers them all together and he says

"everything I've taught you about God's love,
I want you to tell to everyone you can find."

He says

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them,
and teaching them everything I have commanded you."

In other words, he's saying,

"This good news I've shared with you,

this good news of God's love,

it wasn't meant for just you --

this is meant to be good news for the whole world to hear.'

And so they did it.

His followers, the disciples, they got up off their behinds,

and they started sharing the story of God's love with everyone they could find.

They did it in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

the Spirit which this stole represents,

with its tongues of flame dancing across it.

The fire of the Spirit, that's what this stole depicts,

and in that burning passion for God,
Jesus' followers went and preached and healed and proclaimed.
Because they understood, they got it --
they knew that the good news of a loving God
was not something they were supposed to keep to themselves.
They knew, they understood,
that there was a world out there desperate to be loved,
needing to know love and show love.
And they wouldn't rest until they made sure everyone had heard.

The truth is, that's why we do Vacation Bible School.
To make sure a whole lot of kids get to hear the good news.
To make sure that all these children whom we love
find out just how much **God** loves them.
And we have a lot of fun with them,
lots of arts and crafts and popsicles are involved,
but at the heart of it, at the heart,
is our passionate conviction that this is news that needs to be shared.
God loves you.
And when you love others, God comes alive in you.

That's why we do Vacation Bible School,
and that's why we do church.
That's why we're here right now,
you and me together.
To be reminded of a story that generations before us have taken care to pass down --
a story that has been told to us by pastors and parents, by preachers and poets,
a story told in song and scripture and prayer,
a story told by candlelight on Christmas Eve,
a story told with the scent of lilies on Easter morning.

Like David's dad passing the faith to him,
like Bill Smith telling me the good news,
this is a story of love that has been handed down like a treasure from person to person,
generation to generation.
All going back to the moment
when Jesus stood before his friends and said
"for God's sake -- for GOD'S sake -- make sure everyone hears the good news."

So ... it can't stop here.

It can't stop here with us.
We, too, are Jesus' friends.
We too stand before him,
and we too hear him say "Go therefore into all the world,
and teach them everything I have taught you."
We too are being told -- this good news,
this love,
it's not just for us to hold onto,
it's for everyone to hear.

So what does that mean?

Well, it means this:

it means, for instance, that as little Brayden grows up,
it's our job as his parents and church and his friends to make sure that he and every
child like him
learns that they are loved by God, and by us.

It means that we keep doing Vacation Bible School and Church School so that every kid
in our community
learns the stories of hope and love and justice and peace,
learns that they are not alone, never alone.

It means that we welcome anyone who comes through this door and invite them to stay
with us
and learn together with us
what it means to be children of God,
what it means to try for Christlikeness.

But it also means telling the story *beyond* these walls,
and beyond this pretty little hill in the woods.

Whatever you learn of love and grace in this place,
whatever you know of God's welcome,
whatever faith has been passed down to you
like a mantle, like a stole around your shoulders,
you are commissioned by Christ to share it with others.
Maybe not from a pulpit, probably not from a pulpit --
but in the way God gives to you.

Which brings me back to Mr. Rogers.

Last week my entire sermon was dedicated to Mr. Rogers,
who was in fact the Rev. Frederick Rogers ...
but whose preaching was done entirely outside a pulpit,
to people who mostly didn't even know he was a pastor.
He found his way to live and teach his faith,
in the gentleness he brought to his children's show,
in the wise words that came through the voices of his puppet characters.

That was the way God gave him to share the story.

But each of us has our own way,
each of us has our own chance to make sure that love is passed to the next generation,
that God's hope is given to the people around us.
It may be in an act of kindness that someone witnesses in you.
It may be in the integrity with which you live.
It may be your witness to hope and to optimism
in a time of cynicism.
It may be that moment when you hear yourself say to someone, without
embarrassment, "why? because God wants me to."

In all those ways,
in ways I can't predict but that you will know,
you will be living out the Great Commission.
You will be witnessing to love.
And you will be ensuring that this story,
this story of love that the world so needs,
is shared,
proclaimed,
lived and believed --
passed on like a mantle of hope to generations to come.

Amen.