

Chapter One

UNCALLED, THEN THE HAND IN MY BACK

ONCE, I THOUGHT I'd make a good pastor.

I seemed born with a knack for it. I was only three when I told my first story from the church platform. Cute as a bug's ear, I was, sitting in my little red rocking chair with an oversized red book upside down in my hands. I chirped, "Mary and Joseph were on their way to Bethlehem." Right then the relatives started saying, "He looked like a little preacher up there!" It wasn't long before I was preaching from the high hassock in our living room.

In high school I started leading the once-a-month Sunday evening "singspiration" at Rose Hill, the country church in northeastern South Dakota that was my family's spiritual home. I mastered the song leader's smile on that platform, and how to pray like a preacher. Everyone could see I had a future in the church.

My main reason for going to our denominational school, Trinity College in Deerfield, Illinois, was to get on a traveling gospel team. Most Christian colleges had them in those days. Small musical ensembles made for good PR when you could get a church service together on almost any night of the week. The seven of us in our group, Heirborn, sang nearly every weekend in a church or two and toured for three summers. I got to know churches—church buildings, at least—inside and out. I made small talk with pastors, napped in the nurseries, and foraged food from secret stashes in youth room closets. I also came to love church people. I liked their stories of first steps and long walks with Jesus. This was also my first exposure to the fraternity of pastors. I began to think they were my kind of people.

But a double whammy waited.

As I headed into my senior year, I learned that a church in the area was looking for a part-time choir director and youth pastor. I called, had a short meeting with the pastor, and got the job on the spot. I learned to direct a cantata, how to plan a series of Bible lessons, and endured a camping trip to the boundary waters of northern Minnesota. I liked the twenty or thirty kids I worked with,

but the majority of them were unchurched and I didn't know how to ride herd on all their shenanigans.

I had been there about a year when I arranged an appointment with the pastor. (We almost never had meetings.) I never got to my agenda because no sooner had I sat down than he told me, "I don't think this is working out." I caught my breath. It was a Friday morning and he said that Sunday would be my last day. He gave me some reasons—things we had never talked about before—and that was it. I never saw most of the kids in our group again. Thirty years later, when I was invited to a big church anniversary event there, I told the lady who called that returning would be a bit awkward. "You know I was fired from your church, don't you?" I asked.

She was taken aback. "No one ever knew why you left," she said. "You were just gone."

Until then I had rarely failed at anything. That was partly because I didn't take chances, and partly because I was an overachiever. So for me this failure was a doozy.

CALLING UNRAVELED

I probably would have walked away from the ministry then and there, but I had registered for seminary and classes started only a week later. It was too late to change plans, so I plowed forward. But inside I was mortified. Thank God for that. Grace had a toehold.

The next spring, as my first year at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School drew to a close, a friend told me his home church back in our native South Dakota was looking for a summer intern. Rapid City is on the edge of the Black Hills, only a few miles from Mt. Rushmore, and it sounded like a grand adventure. A couple of letters back and forth, and things were set.

Under Pastor Stokka's gentle guidance, I began to learn what it was like to be a pastor. I led Bible studies, put church services together, and hung out with kids. Pastor Stokka and I talked about the ministry, and he took me with him to visit hospitals and homes—the part of the job that terrified me most. I counseled a few people and led someone to Christ. My confidence came back.

In the course of that summer internship, I was required to read a few books about being a pastor. One of them talked about the call to ministry. The message, loud and clear to this day, was, "If you can do anything other than be a pastor, do it." (I think every pastor I've ever mentioned that line to over the years has nodded in agreement.) Pastoring is good work, but it isn't exactly a career choice. I could easily see myself doing other things, and apparently that was a deal

breaker. So there it was. God had not called me to the ministry. After all that. Go figure.

GOD SOMETIMES ENROLLS US IN HIS OWN KIND OF
UNDERGROUND SEMINARY TO SCHOOL US IN GRACE
BEFORE HE EVEN CLEARS HIS THROAT FOR A CALL.

That fall I eased out of seminary by taking just one class and starting a job raising funds for Trinity. No one glad-hands better than I do, so it seemed I had found my niche. I set a career goal of someday heading up that department.

Then I got a new boss. He was more disciplined and demanding than I was used to. My job review that spring didn't go well. Each of his six criticisms hit me like a body blow. I don't suppose I had ever heard so many of my failings in one place at one time. A month or two later, he dropped the hammer. "We'll pay you through the summer," he said—generously—"but June 10 will be your last day."

On that Friday afternoon in 1977 I walked out of my department alone, the last to leave. As I carried my box of stuff out to the car, I had trouble seeing through my tears. No party or cake. No one stayed to say thanks. No one said good-bye. If that wasn't bad enough, that night we were invited to the seminary graduation. It was my class, the guys I'd started with. They crossed the platform to get their MDiv degrees, most with pastorates or mission fields ahead of them, while I sat watching from the shadows with nothing.

I know now that God sometimes enrolls us in His own kind of underground seminary to school us in grace before He even clears His throat for a call.

My wife, Susan, and I were married in the middle of our senior year in college and we have always been involved in pastoral ministry together. We have both always loved it. In those early years we matured in Christ and in serving Him. I started a thriving young adults group and was elected to the Deacon Board. I had found my Christian calling as all believers do, using our spiritual gifts to build the Body of Christ. I was thankful for all God had invested in me to make me a useful layman.

CAPTIVE CAPTIVES

There is a short video clip in Ephesians 4. Picture an upward road, crowded with an unchained gang of captives, newly taken slaves who sing, "Free at last!" and "He has made me glad!" They delight to see

out ahead of them their Conqueror Christ. The Bible says, “When he ascended on high he took many captives.” The captive church, including us, parades toward paradise.

But unnoticed by most of our brothers and sisters in their upward journey, Christ in his Emmaus disguise slips in and out among us. Here He taps someone on the shoulder and points to the side of the road. There He slips in behind others and whispers to them. Their puzzled look says, “Who? Me?” and He nods. Everyone on that highway was taken captive once by Christ, thank God, and now some are captured again. Captives twice over. Born again, again.

WE ARE THE GOSPEL TRADESMEN WITH SWEAT-
STAINED WORK SHIRTS, WELL-WORN TOOL BELTS, ACHY
KNEES, AND THE INSIDER’S KNOWLEDGE OF HOW SOULS
ARE BUILT.

What does Jesus do with these captive captives? He outfits them with the Word and gives them back to his upward-bound church as gifts. “When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people... So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:8, 11-12 NIV).

There is no earthly reason why the Lord pulled these particular captives out of the company of the heaven-bound and set the Word burning on our tongues. All our saintly siblings are gifted by Christ to serve one another in His Body as surely as we are, but we are among the Wordworkers. That is what I call the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers. God divinely equips these particular believers to speak to the world and the church on His behalf. So far as I can tell, God did not single any of us out for this work because He liked our resumes or found us in a talent search. I suspect He chose us because, ever since creation, God finds special creative delight in making something from nothing, *ex nihilo*.

Christ’s Wordworkers, these four ministry cousins, have different voices. Apostles have voices that can be heard over the din of a whole discordant culture, like a tornado warning siren. They step on unclaimed shores and proclaim a beachhead in the King’s name. Prophets can bellow like town criers, stirring even the soundest sleepers with “This is what the Lord says.” Evangelists sing with

God's sweetest words, "Repent and believe the Good News. Jesus Christ died and rose again to save sinners. Come home! Come home!"

Then there are my people—the pastors and teachers. I think of pastors and teachers as the journeymen of Word-working. We are the gospel tradesmen with sweat-stained work shirts, well-worn tool belts, achy knees, and the insider's knowledge of how souls are built.

All these captives know, if they have their wits about them, that like a turtle on a fencepost, they didn't get where they are by themselves. In fact, to say that God called them seems like a tame way of describing what happened. Collared or captured is more like it. For me, when God's call came, everything else went gray.

FOUR TIMES IN FIVE DAYS I HEARD, "YOU SHOULD BE A PASTOR."

During that wilderness summer of 1977, God schooled me in trust. Just as both the severance pay and summer ended, I was offered a position raising funds for a new Christian ministry, Living Bibles International, started by Kenneth Taylor, who had written *The Living Bible*. My assistant and I started from scratch, so it was a fascinating year of learning, administering, and traveling. But I had a growing sense of foreboding. Sooner or later, I would have to ask wealthy people, face to face, for big money. I would have to walk into executive offices or the homes of people the age of my grandparents and ask if they would contribute thousands of dollars to the cause of Bible translation. It was worthy work, but I knew I just didn't have the nerve. I had failed twice before and I was afraid it was going to happen again.

As part of my first annual review, my boss, Dr. Lars Dunberg, had me write about my gifts and goals. I don't remember what I wrote but I remember our meeting. It was a Monday afternoon in September and the first thing he said when I sat down was, "With your interests, why aren't you in the ministry?" He meant the pastorate. I hadn't seen that coming.

The next day a close friend, whose seminary graduation I'd watched on that dark June night, dropped in to see me. When he asked how the job was going I said, "I don't know how long I can do this. I'm afraid I'm not cut out for fundraising." Almost offhandedly he said, "Well, I've always thought you should be a pastor."

That evening when I got home, I told my wife Susan about our visit. We had been married almost five years at that point, and she had always said—only half-joking—that she never wanted to be

married to a farmer or a pastor. So I was truly surprised when she said, “He’s right. You should be a pastor.”

On Friday morning of that same week, I got a phone call from a church in Colorado. They remembered me from when our college group, Heirborn, had sung there at least six years earlier. “We’re looking for a youth pastor,” the man said, “and you came to mind.” I didn’t pursue that position. But I didn’t have to get my hearing checked either. Four times in five days I heard, “You should be a pastor.”

There I was, minding my own business among the marching captives of Christ, when I felt a hand in the small of my back and a whisper, “Come with Me.” Despite the obvious quiet ways God had been steering me, when His call came, it took me completely by surprise.

Two weeks later the associate pastor at the church we attended resigned. And just like that, the door opened. I was offered a position as assistant pastor. The church only required that I finish my seminary education part-time while working full-time. And they would pay for it!

On Sunday, December 10, 1978, under the clear call of God, I became a pastor—a real pastor—for the first time.

“THE SPIRIT OF THE SOVEREIGN LORD IS ON ME”

An African-American pastor friend invited me once to an ordination service for a couple of young men in his church. My wife and I had slipped into the back row of the crowded church when my friend tapped me on the shoulder. “Come with me,” he said. “You’ll be in the processional.”

“The processional?” I asked. I had no idea what he was talking about. But a moment later pastors were marching down the aisle two by two. *What have I gotten myself into?* I wondered. I ended up in VIP seating to the side of the platform. I settled into the back row, caught my wife’s grin, and figured I could lie low from then on.

Just then my host, who was sitting right in front of me, turned around in his chair and whispered over his shoulder, “You’ll be reading the Scripture text. Isaiah 61:1-2.”

“Ah, okay,” I said, and thumbed my way to the passage that begins, “The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me.” *Oh yes, that one, I thought. Just two verses. I can do that. It’ll be over in a second.* Then I waited about an hour for my turn.

Finally, I climbed the platform steps to the old pulpit. I opened my Bible and intoned, “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me.”

The congregation stopped me dead in my tracks: “Amen! That’s right! Amen!”

After I found my place again I forged on, “... because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” I was feeling the love, so I punched the word preach a bit and there it came again:

“Preach the good news! Amen! Preach!”

I girded up my loins and marched boldly onward. “He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted.”

And it rolled back at me like an echo from heaven. “Bind UP!” “Praise God!” “Thank You, Jesus!”

“To proclaim FREEDOM for the captives.”

Some laughed for the joy of it. Some clapped their hands.

“And release from DARKNESS for the prisoners.”

Again, they ran out to meet the Word with palm branches and hosannas.

Two verses could take a long time to read. “To PROCLAIM the year of the Lord’s FAVOR and the day of vengeance of our GOD.”

“Yes!! Hallelujah!” Feet stomped on the wooden floor. Applause— applause!—for the greatness of the commission.

I closed my Bible and stood there amazed. And I wished like everything they’d given me more than two verses to read.

According to Luke 4, Jesus read those words to a wide-eyed gathering of the Sabbath faithful in Nazareth. Surely those ancient promises had never sounded so good. Then He rolled up the scroll and sat down. When no one said anything, Jesus broke the pregnant silence, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Then Luke reports, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips” (Luke 4:21, 22). The gracious words. Words of grace.

Isaiah gives us a fitting passage to read when a pastor is ordained, like the two young men that Sunday afternoon. Paul reminded Timothy, “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.” Wordwork, all of it. “Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you” (1 Timothy 4:13- 14 NIV). I don’t quite understand all that happened there, but it is clear that God gave Timothy a gift in that holy moment that he didn’t have before, and that his gift required bringing God’s Word to God’s

people. I think Timothy's gift was the same as that commission given to Jesus, and that He keeps giving to those He calls as shepherds. "The Lord has anointed me [too] to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me [too] to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus first, and then His pastors.

Proclaiming grace always starts with the good news of redemption and resurrection. But grace has so much more to tell the redeemed. Gracious words, not always spoken aloud, cancel debts and bandage hearts. Gracious words open cell doors and tell people that their long dark wait has turned into the Lord's New Year's Day.

In Isaiah 61:3 NIV God continues, "to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor." I've loved that last line about the oaks of righteousness ever since one of the first couples I married asked to me to use it as a theme for their wedding. Their marriage endures oak-like to this day. The church I serve, the Village Church of Lincolnshire, is set amidst towering old oaks, so we've adopted that half verse as our motto. "They shall be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor."

A few years ago, on my tenth anniversary with this congregation, I asked for a new pulpit. It is beautifully crafted from oak by an expert woodworker who carved oak leaves and acorns into the border. Fitting, I think, for a pulpit and for the pastor called to the Wordwork of grace.