

### SILVER LININGS

It was Sunday, June 8, 1958. I was almost five years old. That morning in Virginia my mother's brother Tom had received his PhD. Meanwhile, hundreds of miles to the north, my mother helped conduct the annual Children's Day program at the church my father was pastoring in Jeffersonville, Vermont.

It was late, but not too late for Mom to write a brief letter to my grandfather. That letter is one of my treasured possessions.

"Dear Daddy," it begins, "This has been an eventful day. Tom is now Dr. Ripley and my little Sunday School children have been duly promoted. Children's Day went off without a hitch. John stood and yawned visibly all through their songs when he should have been singing but spoke his piece well. When he got home he announced he was going to be a minister and would say better 'preaches' than Daddy."

Frankly, I don't remember the day, or the vow to be a minister. And, in subsequent years I would change my mind many times, going through phases when I wanted to be an actor, a teacher, an advertising copywriter, a journalist, and, believe it or not, even a cadet at West Point. And in time I *did* take up a career in restaurant management. But eventually I came back round to the desire to be a minister. and so headed off to seminary,

Even then, though, I wasn't thinking about *parish* ministry. After seminary I was ordained and worked half-time at a church in Concord, Massachusetts. But when I simultaneously started my doctoral studies at Boston University I fully intended to pursue a teaching ministry. As I wrote in my ordination paper: "I feel called of God to help others learn from our past. I plan a career in ecclesiastical history." Well . . . twenty-five years and three pastorates later, things aren't quite what I projected back then when I was twenty-six! What's the old Yiddish saying, "Man plans and God laughs"?

But I'm not complaining. Not for a minute. And in truth, I feel quite certain my being a parish pastor has been what God wanted all along: it just took me a while to catch on!

That said, my studies in church history were not in vain, for though I haven't ended up at the front of a seminary classroom, those studies taught me the importance of learning from the past.

**In my ordination paper I also wrote: “As historical beings [we] cannot begin to understand where we are, if we have no idea where we have been.” And that is true not just in terms of our corporate past, but our personal pasts as well.**

**So, on this anniversary, it seems appropriate to stop and consider: what can I learn, what have I learned, from my years in the ministry? What have I learned from those I have served? For the truth is, as the author of Hebrews notes, “we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.” (Hebrews 12:1a) And there have been women and men who have taught me much in every congregation I have served.**

**My first church, while I was still a student in seminary, was a tiny congregation in Temple, Maine. On a good Sunday we turned out twenty or so for worship. One of the regulars was the church moderator, Eva Tyler.**

**Eva lived in a rundown old house and constantly battled one health problem after another.**

**But for all her troubles, Eva had a laugh you could never forget. And as they say in Maine, a wicked sense of humor.**

**Church Council meetings were rather infrequent in Temple, but when they happened seven or eight of us would sit around the only long table in the church. Eva would be at one end and I would be at the other.**

**Temple had a very inflated membership list. Dozens of folks were on the rolls who never darkened the doors of the sanctuary. So it happened that at one of our Church Council meetings we got to talking about cleaning the rolls, removing the inactive members from our lists. One of our three deacons was appalled. “The Bible says, ‘Judge not lest ye be judged,’” she said. Young, smart guy preacher that I was, I quickly responded: “It also says ‘If your right eye offends you, pluck it out.’” Suddenly from the other end of the table Eva let out one of her trademark laughs. And then it hit me: Eva had a glass eye. I was aghast. I quickly apologized, but Eva just laughed. “You don’t how tempted I was to simply pluck it out,” she later told me, “and roll it down the table in front of you!”**

**It was a hard won lesson, but one I’ve never forgotten: don’t use the Bible as a weapon. Never proof text. And always, always, pay attention to context: the context of the scriptures themselves and the context of the time and place you use them.**

**The second church I served was yoked with Temple. It was a slightly larger congregation fifteen miles away in New Sharon. They managed to get thirty folks out for worship.**

**The minute we landed in New Sharon we were invited to supper by Donald and Celia Ames. Donald worked for the highway department and Celia as I remember,**

had been a teacher. And could she cook! She was New Sharon's version of Edna Yergin. She baked ginger molasses cookies that would melt in your mouth. Yeast rolls to die for. And home grown corn-on-the-cob, always picked just minutes before it went into the boiling water.

We were as close to Donald and Celia as you could be. We had supper with them almost every week. And over dinner we'd share all sorts of things about life in the church. But Celia, even though she was literally as old as my grandmother, always called me Rev. Danner. No matter how much I'd insist that she should call me John, she just couldn't. "You're my minister," she said, "And I just can't see calling you by your first name."

And in that Celia taught me a vital lesson: being a pastor isn't just about me. It's also about the office, it's about the role. And people bring a lot of expectations to their relationship with their pastor. Some of the expectations are fair, some totally unreasonable. But the reality is, right from the start, when you are a pastor people have certain understandings that are beyond your control.

From Maine I moved to Concord, Massachusetts, where I served for three years as the part-time Minister of Christian Education while working on my PhD. My first year in Concord I had the honor of working with Forster Freeman.

Forster was the Senior Pastor and a real man of prayer. He approached life in a very contemplative manner. While he valued formal education and was very bright, he understood that there are more important things in life than matters of the mind. He also believed that studying the Bible is more than an intellectual undertaking. While he was certainly not a literalist, while he did *not* believe the Bible to be the literal words of God, he did believe it is the Word of God. And our task he felt is to listen for God's voice in the scriptures.

But I was working on my doctorate at the time. I was very much in my head. I had little patience with Forster's approach to the Bible. I wanted to take it apart and examine each inch of it under a microscope. But I was so busy pulling it apart that I often failed to put it back together!

The lessons I learned from Forster didn't blossom right then and there. But they did take root, and in time I began to see the great wisdom in his approach. Not that we should abandon a critical, intellectual approach to the scriptures, but rather we must remember that there is more to the Bible than mere words. We must take time to simply listen.

From Concord I moved to Gloversville, New York, where I would in time meet my wonderful wife Linda. Gloversville is an old industrial city built on the glove and leather trade. It is very much on the decline, and has been since the late fifties.

The church in Gloversville is a progressive outpost in an extremely conservative community. And its membership is very eclectic.

Bob Mills was a descendent of one of the founders of the church. He was a very tall fellow, already in his seventies when I first met him. He was a tenor in the choir. And every once in awhile he'd stand up during announcements and tell a story of his most recent escapade. I remember one in particular that involved his forgetting his wife's Valentine in the car, and running buck naked into the garage to get it before she woke up, and then getting accidentally locked out of the house. In February! In the foothills of the Adirondacks!

Bob was one of our most loyal parishioners. He was always in the choir loft; pledged generously; took his turn on boards and committees. When Linda had back surgery, Bob and his wife Audrey made sure I was getting enough to eat. But for all his involvement, Bob was a skeptic. He believed in God, but he wasn't quite sure who God is. One time at a board meeting as we discussed a particularly vexing problem I said, "Well we should pray about it." Bob shrugged his shoulders and said, "I guess it wouldn't hurt!"

We all laughed. It was *so* Bob! But it was also an important reminder that in the church there must be room not only for those who are certain in their faith, but also for those who are not. And in the end, the actions of folks like Bob speak much louder than their words.

And then came ten years in River Edge, New Jersey. Shortly after I started my work there a new couple moved into town and joined the church. Linda is from Ireland, and her husband Rob was from England.

Rob and Linda had two kids, and quickly immersed themselves in the life of the church. Rob became one of our most beloved church school teachers. Every time we'd talk about his class he'd tell me how much *he* was learning from his students.

And then the unthinkable happened. Rob was diagnosed with bladder cancer.

For several years Rob fought hard. He had surgeries and chemo. Sometimes he'd be doing much better, others he was confined to home. And sometimes he was in great pain.

But Rob never felt sorry for himself. We'd have long and intimate conversations; we became good friends. But I never heard him complain. Instead he was always looking for something new he could learn from it all—about life, about his family, about himself.

The last time I saw Rob, a few days before he died, I told him what a good man he was, and I thanked him for all he meant to me. And then, true to form, weak as he was, Rob turned that meeting into a lesson as well. And as he laid there on his sofa,

shivering under his blanket, he smiled and whispered, “Thank *you*, thank you for being a good friend.”

And it was then that I learned the secret to Rob’s endurance: it was gratitude. For Rob truly gave thanks in all things, at all times.

The First Congregational Church of Temple. New Sharon United Church of Christ. West Concord Union Church. First Congregational United Church of Christ in Gloversville. The First Congregational Church in River Edge. Five different but equally wonderful congregations along the path that brought me here to Westport, to Saugatuck Congregational Church.

I won’t attempt to single out one witness here. How could I? There are so many, folks like George Mangold, Ned Dimes, Ellen Ritter, Jean Pinter, Ed and Muriel Mitchell. And the list goes on.

Throughout my ministry I have been very, very blessed to be surrounded, absolutely surrounded, by a great cloud of witnesses. It is said that every cloud has a silver lining, but when it comes to the cloud of witnesses, it’s *all* silver. And that great silver cloud of faithful women, men and children have witnessed to their faith, and in doing so have taught this preacher so very, very much.

Pay attention to the context of scriptures and life.

Remember your role.

Listen for God’s Word.

Make room for skeptics.

Always say thank you.

On that Children’s Day back in 1958 I may have stood and yawned my way through the service. But not anymore! For being a parish pastor has been a constant source of stimulation. And I have learned so much from so many! From Eva and Celia and Don, from Forster and Bob and Rob—and from each one of you as well.

To be a pastor is not only a great privilege, it is also, most days at least, a great thrill! And for that I thank God every day—every single day.

Amen  
John H. Danner