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Mayflower 1/31/10
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4:16-30

Luke

CALLING CHRIS MOORE

This is a very important day for Mayflower Church. When a church, any church, votes to call a minister into covenant with a congregation, it is doing something profound and sacred. Especially in the free-church tradition, where we do not depend on a bishop or other ecclesiastical official to send us a candidate, but rather make that decision ourselves — through some combination of intuition and opportunity. That is, when we trust the work of the spirit, and the windows of opportunity that open in life from time to time, to guide us in such an important decision.

I have served as the only minister of this church for 25 years, but I have come to believe that the right associate minister would help me now to build an even stronger and more vital community here. First I should make a couple of things perfectly clear: 1) I am not leaving, nor do I plan to stop making trouble in this town on behalf of the things I believe in; 2) I am not hoping to do less work in the future by giving more of the work I do now to Chris. To the contrary, collaborative work with a colleague involves more work, not less — but I'm just ready to have a partner in this work, so that the members of this church have more resources in worship, pastoral care, administration, and mission than one minister can possibly provide.

And I'm ready to try some new things around here, so I'm asking for an associate to help make those changes so that he will get in trouble for making those changes instead of me! Seriously, I am just ready, because I know myself, to have a partner in ministry, and to get new ideas from someone, even as I have the opportunity to give my counsel and experience to a colleague.

In one sense, I could easily have delayed this long enough to enjoy the years between now and my retirement without shaking anything up. But I don't think that's good leadership. One must recognize when one has reached the limit of what he or she can do, and if that's not enough,

then he or she should look around for help. The path of least resistance is not always the best path.

Granted, change is always difficult, but without constructive, creative change, institutions flounder. For one thing, a lot has changed in 25 years. This church has grown from a congregation with about 60 people at worship on average in 1985, and a total budget of \$93,000 to a church of over 700 members and a combined operating and mission budget of about \$700,000. After having added on to both ends of the building in separate capitol campaigns that exceeded 1.2 million dollars, Mayflower is now too big, too complicated, and too diverse for one minister to adequately care for. Besides, a sign of maturity, my wife tells me, is realizing when you need help. She's always right.

Now don't get me wrong, I have thoroughly enjoyed being the Liberal Lone Ranger of this amazing church. There was a nice, single, lightning-rod simplicity to it. People could love me or hate me, but they really couldn't go behind my back because there wasn't anyone behind my back! But neither could they find the ministry they might be missing, because if I couldn't provide it, then they would have to look elsewhere. Besides, there is good stuff that we haven't tried yet, and I won't be able to think it all up. But I know someone who can.

Not quite a year ago, I preached the ordination sermon in this pulpit for Chris Moore. He had been a member here almost ten years, and knew this was his spiritual home, and when he decided to go to seminary, I was delighted to think that the church, and especially progressive Christianity, would be the beneficiary. But like Gary Cox before him, I felt certain that Chris would want to be in charge of his own church, another lone ranger like myself.

What is amazing is that for that sermon I took the passage I just read to you from Luke 4 as the text. And today, that is the lectionary text being preached by ministers around the country. The story of Jesus preaching his first sermon, getting patted on the head for being such a fine-spoken young man, and then daring to apply the text to the real life of his listeners in such an indicting way that the same people who were just gushing over him took him out and tried to kill him. Truth-telling is inherently dangerous, and unfortunately, too many ministers of the gospel are more interested in their pensions than in their fidelity to the gospel — and the result is the church we have today, a sleeping giant curled up on the hearth of the Empire, unable to give people the hope they need, and the principalities and powers the heartburn they deserve.

Then something happened that for better or worse I took to be a sign. I was in Phoenix last fall preaching and lecturing about my book, and Chris preached in my absence and I called Shawn from the airport to ask how it went. She said it went well, and that at one point in the sermon, Chris had said that he thought people often love free enterprise more than they love God. I said, "Chris said that?" And Shawn said, "yes," and went on to say "that there were a few people squirming a bit in the pews." This was an important sort of tipping point for me, because as far as I'm concerned, at the heart of a good minister of the gospel, is a minister who loves the gospel more than he loves being agreeable and popular.

And yet Chris Moore is one of the most likeable people I've ever met. He is married to a strong and sensible woman and they are the parents of two of the most beautiful boys you will ever see, Ian and Alec. Chris actually took Hebrew and Greek in seminary, whereas I avoided them, and he is a first-rate student of the Bible. And what may be best about him is that he cares about people, and he asks about how people are doing, and he holds the suffering of people in his heart. I've seen it on many occasions.

And then I ran the idea by Cass, who is, as you well know, 16 —very, very 16. I said to him, "Cass, I'd like to hire Chris Moore as my associate." And he said, "Cool." You may not think that's much of an endorsement, unless you live with a 16 year old — that's like an Academy award.

And so I went to Chris last fall and sat down with him for a cup of coffee at The Red Cup (where I do some of my best work on behalf of the church), and said, "I have an idea." I knew that Norman was not growing fast enough to be able to afford to keep him from taking another job, and that he was actively looking at openings in other churches, including out of state, and that if I waited on this idea much longer, he might be gone.

I said "I think there are a number of ways you might be able to help me at Mayflower, especially in the retention of new members, and in the development of some new ways to worship, especially with more diverse forms of music, and liturgy, and we could offer this to people along with continuing our traditional worship service, which many of us, myself included, know and love.

But even with our amazing Care Team, I need help with pastoral care and with better coordination of the three-ring circus of lay-led missions that Mayflower has become, so that the right hand knows what the left hand is doing. I have never been in a church where laypeople do as much as they do here. But from time to time, they could use the guidance and support of an ordained minister.

I also want more offerings here in Christian formation and Christian practice — two growing and important areas of the church of the future. In the Western rational tradition, we talk a lot, and we talk about important things a lot, but to have thought a good thought and to have preached a good sermon is not the same thing as to have done a good thing. We need to learn how to be disciples for our time, and prophets in this perishing democracy, which at the moment seems to have a death wish. We need to work to build a church that gives people a genuine alternative to the madness of the empire — to celebrity culture, to mindless consumerism, and to the ever-expanding gap between the haves and the have-nots. In short, the church needs to be genuinely subversive again, "a thorn in the flesh of the Empire." Chris and I share this vision of the ministry of the church completely.

But to be honest, I thought Chris might well say, “Well, I agree with all that, but I’ve got a different plan for my life, and it doesn’t involve going back to Mayflower.” *You Can’t Go Home Again* and all that. But what Chris said was, “I would be interested,” and so we talked, and talked, and talked about what we might do together. And we haven’t stopped talking, and we won’t stop talking, because although we are two white guys, and are very much aware that this isn’t the greatest model of diversity in the church, we are committed to a church that is as diverse as we can make it, and as activist as we can make it, and as caring as we can make it. And that should keep us busy. Especially given that in Oklahoma, things just seem to be getting stranger all the time — as if we really want to fall off the Right side of the world. A legislator actually sponsored a bill recently that would make it a felony to bless a same-sex marriage, with a fine of \$500 and a year in jail. If that becomes law, I’m really going to need an associate!

And besides, Chris Moore looks exactly like Friar Tuck, who as you recall was sidekick to none other than Robin Hood, my namesake, and the hero from whom I derive much of my political leanings. So perhaps it was in the stars all along, or perhaps we don’t really know what we are doing at all, but just have to join together with goodwill and with hope to be the change we wish to see in the world.

I have met very few people in my life to whom I would entrust a thing as precious as this church. It is my life’s work, yet Chris Moore strikes me as a person of such integrity. When we ordained Chris Moore in this very room just over 9 months ago, I told him that his new job description was this: *to be a purveyor of transcendence in a world starving for the sacramental.*

In that ordination sermon I said to Chris that ministry is like the covenant of marriage, meaning that it is more than just a romantic idea; it is an adventure. And that the work of ministry is a kind of insurgency of love and compassion against the occupying army that is indifference. To speak differently, to listen differently, to be present in a world where we rush past one another, this is a powerful, powerful thing to do with one’s life. But I always assumed that Chris would do this in his own church somewhere else.

Now we stand ready to invite him to do those things here, and to add his voice to the larger, and very important voice that is Mayflower church in our time. Because no matter what happens, Mayflower will be Mayflower; unapologetically Christian, unapologetically liberal. No matter what new programs are added, and what new forms of worship and ministry are created, we will always be dedicated to faith as a way of life, not a system of creeds and doctrines demanding total agreement. We will always care more about what Jesus taught us about God, than we will argue over the things the church has taught us about Jesus. We will always seek to balance head and heart because that’s who we are, and that’s the very message that sent one Chris Moore packing off to seminary, when he already had a real job in the real world. He took the road less traveled to pursue ordained parish ministry — which I promise you is a strange and often misunderstood vocation.

And now he has decided that if you will call him, he will come home to this place and do ministry with us here. That is no small thing. And I view it as the most important decision we will have made since a group of people in this church 25 years ago took a chance on me. Lord knows, they were not altogether convinced that I was the right person to do ministry in Oklahoma!

I know that you have questions, and want to offer your thoughts about all this in our special meeting in just a few minutes. And that is exactly the purpose of such a meeting. I will have much more specific information about what we would be asking Chris to do, and how we hope to be able to pay for it, and why it is our hope that with his help we will become a stronger and better church, whose members recognize the value of supporting such a position, but for now I just want to enjoy the possibilities. I want to enjoy thinking about the future, and how we might shape it differently together.

I think there is a grace that hangs over this place, and that at crucial moments, we seem to be blessed by good fortune and good will. And I think today will be no exception. Once more let me say it as clearly as I can — this is the most remarkable congregation that I have ever seen. And our work is not done; it is just beginning.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, January 31, 2010

Lord of Life, we have not forgotten the suffering in Haiti, and we hope the world will not forget. We give thanks for the generosity of the world as it sought to help, and for the continued heroism of those who work against enormous odds to bring relief to that shattered land. In our own backyard, we know there is suffering as well, people without food or shelter, without jobs, without hope. And yet our political process seems as petty and as disconnected from reality as ever. Perhaps the second birth we need most is to be born-again to the idea of democracy, a government of by and for the people, not for the corporations. Perhaps the revolution we need is to reintroduce an old idea whose time must come again and come soon—the Common Good. We the People. One person, one vote. Old ideas to be sure, but they were once, and continue to be, the hope of the world.

Wake us, we pray, from this nightmare version of the Golden Rule, where those who have the gold rule, and restore us to the City set upon a hill, where we care about one another, and about the future we make for our children, and not only about ourselves.

And let the church of Jesus Christ play its vital role in this reawakening, by finding ways to refuse to play this broken game by these broken rules.

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, our Teacher and Lord we pray, Amen.



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