

In the absence of a Preacher, this reflection was read at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Port Townsend, WA, during Morning Prayer on June 16, 2024. It was written by BRAD ROTH, lead pastor of Whitestone Mennonite Church in Hesston, Kansas, and author of The Hunger Inside. It originally appeared in The Christian Century, June 2024.

June 16

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Corinthians 5:6–10, (11–13), 14–17

At the end of a silent prayer retreat at a Benedictine monastery, a Catholic deacon approached me over lunch and asked, “Young man, are you discerning a call to the priesthood?” I was a little flummoxed and said, “Why do you ask me that?” He responded, “I don’t know. You just have that look about you.” I had not noticed that look, but I told him I was already a Mennonite pastor. He said, “Oh, bless you, Father!”

It’s sometimes a strange thing to be a pastor. Once upon a time, my spiritual ancestors were part of a 16th-century lay renewal movement. Early communities appointed pastors, but at least at first they were just regular folks drawn from the congregation, sometimes chosen by lot. Today, most of the Mennonite pastors I know wear ordination lightly, admitting in our weaker moments that we’re not entirely confident how it’s supposed to work. You only catch us slapping “the Rev.” in front of our names when we’re writing a letter to our congressional representative—or feeling a little insecure. I suspect this rings true for others too, not just Anabaptists.

And yet, there’s something there, some devotion, some compulsion, maybe even a vocation. After a few days of silent prayer, we just have that look about us. It’s the elusive quality that the apostle Paul is talking about when he writes to the Corinthians, “The love of Christ urges us on.” Christ’s love for us and for others drives our leadership in the church.

It takes faith to walk in that love. You see this all throughout 2 Corinthians. Paul has been wounded by the church. He writes “out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears” (2:4). He feels the need to defend his ministry at length in chapter 11. And yet, Paul is driven to keep engaging the church, the very body that causes him so much pain. That tension is part of what gives the letter its heft. Paul is “beside” himself because of his interactions with the church, but he also has “confidence” and is “convinced” and acts “with great boldness” (see also

3:12). He's been taken hold of by the conviction that Christ "died for all," and because Christ was raised to new life, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation."

This is how I've experienced pastoral ministry. It's part of the reason I love Paul so much: his words ring true to what I've lived. Somehow, the very thing that lights a flame in our hearts to teach and proclaim and accompany and pray with the church is also what makes us vulnerable to being wounded by the church. No surprise there, I suppose, but still a great mystery: Christ's cruciform heart beats in us and keeps driving us back into the heart of his people. The love of Christ urges us on.

Paul's word, translated as "urges" by the NRSV, is a strong one. Elsewhere, it's used to describe those who are seized by extreme pain or those who are in the grips of fever and dysentery (Matt. 4:24; Acts 28:8). It's the "holding" the guards are engaged in when they mock and beat Jesus (Luke 22:63). In Philippians, Paul deploys it as "hard pressed" (Phil. 1:23). The word's uses are mostly unpleasant.

And so this urging on by Christ's love is not unlike a kind of sickness, a rumbling in our bowels that won't release us even when we take our licks. It seizes us and holds us. Ministering in Christ's love is the thing we can't not do.

Over the years, I've leaned into this love of Christ that urges us on when I've found myself meeting with tough personalities or getting behind the pulpit week after week through seasons of congregational anxiety or preparing a gorgeous funeral sermon for the person whose words to me had been so much grit and ash and ball bearings. As Thérèse of Lisieux writes in her spiritual autobiography *Story of a Soul*, "If I hadn't truly had the vocation, I would have stopped at the beginning, because I encountered obstacles as soon as I began to respond to Jesus' call."

That's the vocation: the life that springs from Jesus' love. The thing that drives us and wounds us is also what sustains us.

And that's what we have to keep getting back to: encounter with the love of Christ—with Christ in his love. That encounter lies at ministry's heart. We have to keep rediscovering those still and silent places, those spaces where we can hear Jesus calling us one more step forward in the faith that, as Norwegian monk Erik Varden puts it, "God in his providence has seen something in me I had not noticed.

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