

The Road Less Traveled – April 5, 2019

I spent part of this week in Glen Rose with the Central Texas Conference Board of Ordained Ministry. The BOM is the group charged with interviewing and credentialing new pastors in the United Methodist Church. Those annual interviews took place this week.

The path to ordination in the United Methodist Church is a long and sometimes arduous process, one that takes, on average, six to seven years from beginning to end. In my work with the BOM, I engage with candidates for the final three years of the process. As part of the interview process, candidates submit a considerable body of written work, responding to a series of theological questions to help their interview team discern their gifts, graces and readiness for pastoral ministry. It was one particular candidate's "paperwork," as it tends to be called, that really got me thinking this week.

This candidate's paperwork was not particularly good. It wasn't terrible, but it really wasn't very good. It answered the questions on a very shallow and basic level and gave no indication of how this person would engage topics like grace and salvation and forgiveness in a local church setting. About three weeks ago, the members of my interview team met to discuss the candidates that we would interview, and we were all in agreement that this particular person's chances of approval were not good.

But the interview changed everything. It frankly was like we were looking at two different people, the one on paper and the one sitting before us. In the interview, this person was charming, articulate, passionate and tremendously engaging. As I listened, I found myself saying, this is someone I would welcome as my pastor.

The point is first impressions are important. And if I were forced to rely on my first impression in this case, the church could have been deprived of what I believe will be a wonderful pastor.

But it did get me thinking. I wonder what kind of first impression we make with our faith. Sometimes we get the opportunity to sit with someone one on one and really talk faith. But honestly, that usually happens (if it happens at all) long after the other person has formed an opinion about who I am as a Christian.

And so the question that lingers for me is, what is my first impression? When someone looks at me, when they meet me for the first time, what does my life suggest about my faith? Is the faith that others see real enough that they would even want that opportunity for a deeper conversation?

I think that's a question that all of us should ask. We talk a lot in the church about evangelism, about sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, about inviting others to church. But the truth is that evangelism is about the message that we tell with our lives even more than what we tell with our words.

Marketing experts will tell you that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. I'm not sure that I necessarily agree with that. But it does make me wonder. When it comes to the Christ that the world sees in me, why would I want to take the chance?

See you Sunday.