

# Making the Most of Ministry

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## **Meditation** “Turning to One Another” by Margaret Wheatley

There is no greater power than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask “What’s possible?” not “What’s wrong?” Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.

Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

Talk to people you know.

Talk to people you don’t know.

Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear.

Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what’s possible.

Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.

Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.

Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

Rely on human goodness. Stay together.

## **Sermon: Making the Most of Ministry**

I will forever remember the weight of all those hands.

There, in the centre of the sanctuary, I knelt,  
surrounded by concentric circles of people.

Everyone reaching out to touch the shoulder of the person in front of them,  
until the final, inner ring of hands rested squarely on my shoulders.

There, at the centre of that blessed web of life and of love,  
a prayer for my future in ministry was given.

When I stood up, I was ordained.

Though the whole thing was over in a matter of seconds,  
I will treasure that formative moment of becoming a minister  
all of the days of my life.

It was a singular, shining moment of affirmation,  
a moment when so many threads of my life were brought together  
to bear witness to the fact that I was making  
a serious commitment with my life—a commitment to a life in ministry.

Now being a minister is, if not the world's oldest,  
certainly the world's weirdest, profession.

It is a strange craft—not easily understood,  
and too often, in our day, a source of some unease itself.

As I've said before, the surest way to be a total buzz-kill at a party  
is to introduce one's self as a member of the clergy.

Few people, it turns out, really want to stand around with a beer  
trying to figure out what to say to a minister,  
let alone feeling that they have to watch their language.

(Little do they know that ministers sometimes swear like sailors, too!)

There are reasons for this, of course, reasons for this discomfort.

The reputation of clergy in modern society is not what it once was.

This profession that was, in another time, held in highest-esteem  
is now often considered a little odd and out-dated at best,  
and scorned and dismissed outright at worst.

As I say, there are reasons for this,  
appalling accounts of clergy misconduct not least among them.

But also the obnoxious part played  
by televangelists and rabid fundamentalist preachers  
who have fashioned their religion into weapons  
to abuse those with differing views on theology or ethics.

And generations of clergy  
resistant to an educated understanding of the modern world,  
who in their hostility have become increasingly irrelevant  
to the times in which we live.

But, I also think the discomfort with clergy goes beyond all of that.  
There is discomfort about what we are called to do.

Ministers are given to walk through many mysterious worlds:  
into the intimate dialogue with a couple preparing for marriage,  
through the quiet, dim light of the ICU, long after visiting hours are over,  
into the grief of death and dying, with a family mourning in its wake.

There is something profound about this role that ministers take on,  
about these places we are so very privileged to walk;  
but, all the same, there's something about it  
that is just unsettling to some.

I believe that discomfort is rooted in risk—  
the risk of sharing the soul of who we are with another.  
It's not, after all, something we often do in polite company.  
And yet it is a central aspect of ministry.

You know what I'm talking about. . .

There's always the risk that a minister is going to ask how you're doing—  
and not only that, but maybe even ask how you're *really* doing,  
a question likely accompanied by that comforting, inquisitive look  
that says "I'm fully prepared to stand here and hold the awkward silence  
between us until you break and hand over the emotional goods."

There's something startling about that invitation to intimacy,  
about that offer to open the heart and entrust it to another,  
that is sometimes too much to bear.

And, yet, when it happens, when true connection is made,

when bridges of understanding are built,  
when our soul is truly seen for what it is and all that it is,  
there is this life-giving affirmation that comes in our glimpsing—  
with another—that which is most sacred,  
most precious and inviolable to the heart of who we are.

This surely has something to do with why ministers burn through  
so many boxes of Kleenex in our offices.

People so often apologize to me for falling apart in my office.  
And I frequently remind them that that's what my office is for—  
and by that I mean not just my physical office,  
but the position, the role, the sacred trust  
that lives at the heart of this odd and wondrous profession.

The office of ministry is a place to bear witness  
to the wrestlings of the human heart,  
to the striving of the soul,  
to the yearning for strength and courage,  
patience and endurance, healing and transformation.

But, here's the thing:  
that office does not belong to the clergy alone.  
Ministry is a trust we are all called to take up.

After my ordination, a congregant from one of the churches I had served  
spoke of how moved she was by playing a part in the service,  
and then lamented that such a life-changing, life-affirming experience  
isn't widely available to non-ministers.

She wondered about whether it might be possible to create ceremonies  
for lay people to bless such significant commitments in their own lives—  
moments to celebrate when people dedicate themselves to some vital task,  
when they take vows or make important promises,  
when they mark the future of their life  
as being intentionally different and set apart from what has gone before  
by making a pledge to serve a greater good,  
some purpose beyond themselves.

It was a marvelous question,  
and one I've often wondered about in the years since.

What would it mean if everyone could be ordained?

What would it mean if everyone answering the great call of life,  
were blessed and affirmed in such a powerful way  
before setting forth to serve?

And what if everyone could see that whatever way they choose to answer  
that call can be seen as a form of ministry?

These are questions I hear in the background of words  
by my colleague David Rankin, who, upon learning his son  
was considering following him into ministry, wrote this letter:

Dear Oran,

You have inquired about the ministry.

I need not describe the perils,  
since you have observed the staring into space,  
heard the late-night calls for help, read the cranky letters,  
and been affected by a thousand funerals.

I thank you for never complaining.

I imagine you are considering  
the ministry because you know my secret.  
[That,] Yes, I love it!

I love the church:  
with the scent of the ages in the air,  
with the light filtering through coloured windows,  
with the music and mystery of eternity echoing off the stone walls.

I love the challenge:  
of going deep down into the cave of the heart,  
of soaring above the obvious,  
of stretching every nerve and fiber for truth and understanding.

I love the people:  
as they are the source of religious inspiration,

as they are the mentors of human courage,  
as they are the bearers of joy and forgiveness.  
The saints are [to be found] in the pews.

Yes, I love the ministry.

But whatever you choose as a career,  
it will be a form of ministry,  
since you have been blessed with a sensitive spirit.

In the end, we are all ministers to each other,  
witnessing in our own ways to the ties that bind.  
Every task is holy when the heart is employed.

In the meantime, for God's sake, get a haircut!

Sincerely,  
Dad

“Every task is holy when the [human] heart is employed.”

What would it mean for us to trust that that is true?

What would it take for us to see that we are, indeed, ministers all,  
each and every one of us, whenever we witness to the ties that bind?

I often wonder what would happen if it weren't my name  
listed on our sign out front as “minister,” but all of us?

What if we recognized this congregation has not one minister,  
but hundreds of ministers, hundreds of people carrying out ministry,  
both within and beyond these walls?

Some of you have already discovered the power and the promise in this.

A few have even stumbled upon the not-so-secret secret  
that there really is nothing I do as a minister  
that can't be done and done better by someone else here.

The catch-phrase for this is “shared ministry.”

It's the recognition that no one around here in a position of leadership is ever required to make a hard decision alone.

It's the reason we have Lay Chaplains, Lay Pastors, and lay worship leaders, and why lay people preach from our pulpit.

It's why the governance and management of our congregation is carried out mostly by dedicated volunteers.

It's why so many of you serve life, here and elsewhere, in so many different ways.

And, yet, I doubt quite a few of you recognize so much of what you do as the ministry that it is.

I will tell you that my goal is to change that—to equip and empower you to take up your ministry, with intention, that you might serve the world with the gifts you've been given.

And my dream is to encourage you—in the truest sense of the word: meaning to instill in you greater courage—to not shy away from what life is asking of you.

As you've hopefully heard, one of the ways I hope to do this is through the experiment we'll be launching here next fall called theme-based ministry.

Each month, we will explore a topic in depth through the weekly service, and just as importantly, if not more, through small group gatherings that meet once a month, called Heart & Soul Circles.

In your Orders of Service this morning, you'll find the topics for the coming year, which include themes such as: Purpose, Passion, Wonder, Discipline and Play.

This approach to our shared ministry here will give us all an opportunity to go deeper, to ground ourselves in a shared monthly practice, and to really examine how we are living our lives in light of our values.

In a way, we are all entering seminary next fall, so rest up this summer!

Central to our efforts will be the work we do in small groups.

It's been rightly said  
that small groups are the sacrament of liberal religion—  
that place where we lift up our lives up to the light  
and examine, and engage, and even transform them  
through the crucible of being in loving community.

I belong to two small groups myself, groups of colleagues and friends,  
one going back almost a decade now.

These are the places I turn to be nurtured and challenged,  
held accountable to being my best self,  
and reminded of the calling that brought me into ministry.

I hope that these Heart & Soul Groups will do the same for you.

I hope they will strengthen your high resolve  
to be about the work of ministry,  
ever mindful that we all belong to a tradition as old as our species  
of people bearing witness to the joys and the sorrows of this life,  
to the wonders and the mysteries of our being,  
to the fears and hopes that give shape to our days on this good earth.

For this ministry, you don't have to be ordained.

We don't have to wait around for an ordination to be reminded  
that each of us is called to serve the world in this way.

A friend and colleague of mine recently confessed  
that ministry has made of him a much better person  
than he really ever intended on being...

Friends, my deepest hope, indeed my ordination prayer for you all this day  
is that your ministry will do the very same for you.

So be it.

Amen.