

“A Lasting Family”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

Shortly after Bill was hired, we knew each other - but not really well, so we got together and visited one day. We kind of told each other our stories and he was saying how his dad had been a pastor for 26 years in the same church - and I was awed. I mean that just doesn't happen. It takes a very special pastor to remain in one place for that length of time. I said, “How fortunate you were,” because he said, “I was able to be raised in one town that whole time.” I thought, “Wow! What a blessing.” So our situations have been very different.

I was raised in the military, at least through the age of 13. So between kindergarten and tenth grade I went to 12 schools - and that doesn't count Grand Forks, North Dakota. This story makes me know that God exists, because we only lived there three weeks. [Laughter.] And, if you have been to Grand Forks, North Dakota, you know that was a blessing from God. [Laughter.] My mother got the last bag unpacked, the last box folded and broken down and put away in the garage, and my dad comes home, very sheepishly, saying, “We are moving to Aurora, Colorado.” So that didn't even count in the schools I went to.

The reason that I bring this up is, I was telling Bill, when you move all of the time, you are constantly meeting new people and sometimes you don't even try to invest, because you know you are going to be gone soon anyway.

The one stable thing in my life was that, no matter where we went, we found a Presbyterian Church. No matter where we went, when they did the Lord's Prayer they “debted.” [Laughter.] I know that sounds silly but, man, when you go and it's different everywhere, boy, no matter what town we lived in, no matter what state or wherever else we were at the time, I knew [when] you went to Presbyterian Church, you knew how to say the Lord's prayer correctly. [Laughter.] Not like those Methodists. Nothing worse than doing a funeral on a Friday. Half of them are “sinning,” or “trespassing,” or whatever else they do. [Laughter.] We “debt.”

The other really wonderful thing was that, no matter wherever we went, I knew the hymns. Those hymns came alive. It would almost bring you to tears, because then I felt “home.” So, that was the connection that felt so real and abiding to me. And that's why I always hesitated, [because] I have had churches where we did praise services and contemporary [services] or whatever you want to call them, but I felt the most at home with the hymnody that we have here - that is traditional - or that is at least what we are calling it, because, 1.) The theology of those hymns [is] rich, full and deep. They are also something that I grew up with, that my great-great grandparents sang, my grandparents sang and my mother sang and now we are singing. My daughter and pretty soon that little guy that we have now, who is six weeks old, someday will learn how to sing these hymns - that is the power and the meaning, no matter where you live. That connection is denominational and it can last for generations - if you are willing to share in it - and it was a great joy.

Finally my folks divorced. We moved in with my grandmother and we were back at the church I was baptized in. I was in 8th grade, you Bible recipients, and I went through Confirmation back in the church that I was baptized in. That summer, between 8th and 9th

grade, we went up to the Boundary Waters because that is what people in Minnesota do - you go up to the Boundary Waters. We were handed our Bibles and, let me tell you, when you are carrying Duluth packs and canoes on your shoulders, all of that weight of a Bible is really a pain - and 8th graders don't mind telling you that that is a pain. It became the greatest gift of that trip - besides learning to drink coffee, which kept me energized on that trip - because we were all sent to different parts away from each other - which is intimidating when you are in 8th grade to be just alone sometimes - especially when you are more of an extravert.

So, we went alone, and we sat down and were told to read a passage from the Gospels. I don't recall the exact passage right now, but I remember the Spirit flowing through me in that moment. I had never felt it before and I knew that God existed in that moment - not because I was told, not because of the Scripture lessons I read, but because it felt real to me.

I went back to the Assistant Pastor - they had Assistant Pastors in those days. His name was Pastor Edd Breeden - and I told him about it, and he said, "That is what all of this is about." Then we went back and we shared our experiences. Some kids didn't experience anything, but others had that moment like I did for the first time, and that is why I'm a minister.

Then we moved again. My mother finished her degree and she got a job up in northern Minnesota, up on the Iron Range – Hibbing. That is another blessing, because the only other job she was offered was in Beach, North Dakota, on the Montana border – and, that is isn't hell, but you can see hell from there. [Laughter.]

So we went to the Iron Range and we went, again, to First Presbyterian Church. We left First Presbyterian of St. Cloud, Minnesota and we went to First Presbyterian Church. (You know, Presbyterians do not have a lot of creativity. We are either Westminsters or First, Second or Third - and if you are in Chicago, you might get a Fourth.) So, we went to First Presbyterian in Hibbing, Minnesota.

That was the most wonderful place. Again, we had great ministers and I started [singing] in the choir. The associate pastor's wife, who was my director in school, was also the director of the church choir. So, I was a tenor. I was like Steve Miller, and I was sitting between two rowdy fellows - not much different than Scott Blacketer and Bob Schlueter [Scott points to those three guys in the choir and the congregation laughs.] - only their names were Farrel Burho (because you got a lot of Finlanders up there in the range) and Bob Rathbun. They were both in their 60s, but when they were in choir they were like two little boys. (They were the kind of people Kris would have liked to throw a ruler at, except she is peace-loving, so she just has to glare at them a lot.)

So I would sit there, and try to behave, because I knew I would catch it in school, if I was mean during choir practice at church. So, I'm trying to be nice and these two guys are getting me in all sorts of trouble and, because they are in their 60s and she was like 27 years old, and directing in her husband's first church, she didn't feel like she could yell at 60-something-year-olds, she hollered at me. [Laughter.] I'm *behaving*, for once in my life, and I'm getting yelled at.

Well, these two guys ended up being my two - here I am 16-18 years old - and these two are my closest friends that I have in that church. I have a youth group full of friends, but these two guys were special.

I will save the Bob Rathbun story for another time, but I will tell you the Farrel Burho story. I did this one other time, but it's been long enough ago - shortly after I came - so I can probably get away with it, regurgitating a story for you.

Farrel Burho was a clown. He would dress up occasionally as a frog and would run around and give you a plaque if you got your name in the paper, or you had a special something that happened in your life, or you were in a school play, or you were an athlete. Whatever you did, and he heard about it, he was in his garage every weekend making these little plaques; I still have one in my office. Then, because he dressed up as a full-length frog to deliver these, he had a little ceramic frog on the top of the stand. (Somewhere along the line - I think it was in Indiana in my second call - I lost the frog and I'm mad about it to this day.) But, Farrel did everything. Everybody waited for those little plaques, and we were all so excited that he cared about us and knew about us and made those connections. Whether you were 3 years old or 90 years old, he knew everything about everyone.

I went on to college. Then I went to seminary and got into my church job. I think I was in Merrellville, Indiana, or Waterloo - but I think I was in Merrellville, Indiana - when he passed away. A sad day.

Farrel was a hunter all of his life - because that is what Finlanders do - and he was walking through the woods in a place he had gone forever to hunt. But this particular day, he was getting older. He went out - and it had just snowed - and he lost his way. He got lost. They followed the tracks. They could tell he was trying to find his way - in fact he had circled back to the same tree twice. Finally [he] just gave up, sat down, unzipped and took off his coat, and passed away.

Now, at first thought, that would sound horrific, but in another way, I thought that was the most fateful thing. He didn't fight. He knew he couldn't find his way out and he was ready to go and be with his God. That's the way I was going to try to share that with the family who I had not met - because his kids were so much older than I was.

I was in a different church, but they were just between [pastors] and had a new interim, and he didn't know Farrel. So the church called me and asked if I could come back and do his funeral. I did. I flew back and met the family. I was so excited to meet with his kids and find out what kind of loons these kids were, because he was a wild man. They had to be crazy.

They were so normal. They were all buttoned up. I said, "Tell me stories about your dad." They looked at me blankly, and I looked at his wife, who I knew so well, and she was like a different woman when the kids were there.

I said, "Tell me. Come on, here." They didn't have much. Dad worked all of the time. Dad was making a living. He was an accountant. He worked in this little back room, of this little shop, that was a sub-contractor for Hibbing Taconite, up on the Range. He just lived in this

little box and he worked sometimes 60-70-80 hours a week, at certain times of the year, and they really didn't know him. And, when he was around he was tired or cranky.

I thought, "What in the world?" I said, "Do you know that he dressed up like a frog? Do you know about these plaques? Do you know how much trouble he got me into in choir?" They thought I was lying. They didn't know this man.

Something happened in his retirement and he got free from the bondage of his work; from the fears of not being able to carve out a living to take care of his family - I think it was four or three boys, and a girl. He got them all through college. He did it - but it almost killed him. So, when he finally retired, he could be his real self and - I have a feeling in my own thoughts - did he miss the connection with his own children? So, now, he finally had a chance to connect with his church children - and connect he did.

We all loved him. There were so many "big" kids at his funeral; all of us with our little plaques. None of us knew what Farrel did for a living and we didn't care. It didn't define him in his retirement and it doesn't define us - what we do. It matters who we are. It doesn't matter how much money we make. It doesn't matter about the people you know. What matters is how much you love.

Do you know the people around you as "family" in the church? In that way, Farrel connected with everyone?

I pray, and hope, and trust, that we will all be like that wonderful man *after* his retirement. That we are all like Farrel: willing to be embarrassed, willing to dress up in a stupid frog suit and have all of the other adults laughing, because all you cared about was the laughter and the glint in the children's eyes and their laughter. Following up with what they are doing. Caring about the little ones, and the big ones, and everyone else in between.

He was one of the greatest mentors in my life. I tried to remember that when I was raising my own daughter, and working too many hours, praying to God every night that I wouldn't raise Farrel's children; but I raised the children Farrel raised after his retirement, and have a daughter who would love me, and know who I am, and know that she could play with me, as well as receive discipline from me. We will see how that works out. [Laughter.]

But, for a Church, our job - our task - is to connect with each other, to carry each other, to teach each other, to love each other - and that is what we are going to do here, what we are going to continue to do here in the months and years to come. That is what the Apostle Paul wrote, or what was written by one of his caregivers. That is what they were saying when you need to stay together - and we need to stay together - loving, supporting, laughing, teaching-; loving each other, prayerfully. in Jesus name.

Amen.