

Epistle for the Lilly Endowment

Thomas K. Tewell

Thomas, a forgiven sinner by the grace of God, and by God's providence a Pastor, Preacher, and Founder of a Preaching Ministry that helps preachers experience the joy and privilege of their craft, and connects preachers in a mutually supportive fellowship of learners,

To my beloved sister in faith, Emily. I offer this word of encouragement to you as Pastor of First Presbyterian Church and as the leader of the Zick Preaching Scholars Program.

As I pass the baton of leadership to you, Emily, I charge you to PAY ATTENTION TO GOD In your congregation and in your ministry with the Zick Preachers. I challenge you to make God the focus of your life and ministry. Take time daily to attend to God in prayer, to attend to what God is saying to you through the scriptures, and to attend to what God is saying to the people of Highlands, North Carolina and to the community of preachers you lead. Do not assume that you bring God into a situation. Assume that God has already gone into every situation before you and ask the question, "God, what are you up to?" God is always "up to something" before we know it. So, I charge you to spend time discerning what God is "up to" each day.

Pay attention to God, Emily! I can't say it strongly enough. I echo the words of Eugene Peterson in Working the Angles that he published in 1987. Now, you will surely ask, how could something written that long ago be relevant today? But don't dismiss Peterson's words too quickly thinking that they are dated. Peterson is a seasoned pastor whose words about pastoral ministry transcend time and space. His words are worth remembering! The essence of Peterson's wisdom is this:

"The pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God. But American pastors have abandoned their posts. They have abandoned their calling. They have gone whoring after other gods. The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper's concerns – how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money. Some of these shopkeepers attract a lot of customers and pull in great sums of money. Yet it is still shopkeeping; religious shopkeeping to be sure, but shopkeeping still the same.

The marketing strategies of the fast-food franchises occupy the minds of these entrepreneurs, as they dream of success. **But the biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are instead communities of sinners, gathered by God week after week in towns and villages all over the world.** The Holy Spirit gathers them and does God's work in them. In these communities of sinners one of the sinners is called pastor and given a designated responsibility in the community. **The pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God.** It is this responsibility that is being abandoned in spades!" Working the Angles, Eugene Peterson, page 1-2.

Emily, I beg you, do not abandon your post! The most important thing that you have to offer your congregation, and your Zick preachers is to provide an environment in which they can be attentive to God, and in which they can experience the presence of God. But to do that you must pay attention to God yourself. I charge you to remember two essential things:

First, remember that only God can satisfy the deepest hunger and assuage the deepest thirst of a soul! Yoga, Meditation, Orange Theory, CrossFit, Nutrition Groups, Cooking Classes and social media can be helpful to people. But they will not ultimately satisfy.

The scripture points to this truth again and again:

- **Psalm 42:1-2** As a deer long for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. You have been my food day and night, O God.
- **John 6: 35** I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty.

A Hunger and Thirst for God on September 11, 2001

How vividly I remember how hungry and thirsty people were for God on September 11, 2001. I had the privilege of being the Sr. Pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City on that ominous day. What the people of our city needed most on that day and every day afterwards was worship, prayer, bible study, the sacraments, and a theology that allowed for a robust conversation about theodicy. People in New York couldn't get enough of these means of grace. For example, David walked into our sanctuary for one of our 5 impromptu worship services on 9/11 and I noticed that his white shirt was covered with blood. I asked if he had been cut. He responded that he was late to work, and he took a cab instead of the subway. As he was paying the cabdriver, he told me that he saw a plane fly into his building. Without thinking, he instinctively ran over to the World Trade Center building to see if he could help. But, by the time he got there he saw people opening the windows and jumping out. "I guess this is their blood," he said, amid sobs. He told me that he ran up Fifth Avenue **LOOKING FOR SOMETHING**. "I didn't have breakfast, and I was starving! I was really looking for a Beer and a Burger. And I saw the sign on Fifth Avenue that you were having a worship service, so I decided that maybe I could get "**SOMETHING**" here"

Although I had never met David, I escorted him into our sanctuary and ushered him to a seat. I started the service with the words of Psalm 46, "God is our Refuge and Strength, a Very Present help in time of trouble." And then we sang the hymn, "Our God Our Help in Ages Past, Our Hope for Years to Come. Our Shelter from the Stormy Blast and our Eternal Home." As soon as the service ended, David, the guy with the blood-stained shirt, ran up to me, breathless, and said, "Those words you said at the beginning of the service, I wrote them down...God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. **That is GOOD STUFF**. Where did you get that. Is that Tennyson?" I said, no sir that is from the Holy Bible. Psalm 46. I have never read the Bible, he said, but I would like to read it. And, I do not have a Bible. I gave David a Bible. He said, "I do not know where to start." I must tell you that on the Sunday before 9/11, I gave our Fifth Avenue Congregation a Bible Bookmark with 50 passages on it that I thought every person of faith ought to know. I gave David a Bible bookmark and suggested that he start there. He did! He read all 50 passages, again, and again, and that practice started David on a journey of faith, and a time of intense wrestling with God that led to his being baptized at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian two years later. Those bookmarks made a deep impression on people. We gave away the 2,000 bookmarks on 9/11 that were left over from Sunday worship. We ordered 5,000 more and... 5,000 more and... 5,000 more... and 5,000 more. We gave away over 25,000 bookmarks in the weeks after 9/11. People were clamoring for them. Why? **BECAUSE PEOPLE NEED GOD. Even if they don't know it...they NEED GOD!**

Remember Emily, that no matter how hungry or thirsty people are, a beer and a burger will not ultimately satisfy. St. Augustine captured this when he said, “Our hearts are restless until we find our rest in Thee.”

Secondly, remember that the goal of your ministry, Emily, is not to be a CEO or to achieve the goals and objectives your congregation desires in measurable, numerical terms. Your goal as a pastor (not a CEO) is, like the Apostle Paul, to help everyone to GROW UP in FAITH! But to do this, you must live by a different set of standards. You must live against the grain of the culture. The scriptures bear witness to this:

Colossians 1:28 “ It is Jesus Christ who we proclaim warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I strenuously toil with all the energy that he powerfully inspires in me.”

Emily, I warn you that your congregation, the preachers in the Zick Program, and the donors may encourage you to be a CEO, a Management Consultant, an entrepreneur and a visionary who can teach them how to preach to raise money and develop a strategic plan. But do not be seduced by these expectations! They are not from God!

STAY IN YOUR LANE. Do not get off the path God wants you to walk. You will be tempted to be a CEO, an entrepreneur, and a head of staff specializing in long range planning. Do not fall prey to that. Your PRIMARY CALLING is to represent God in the lives of people and to help them to pay attention to God. Your “go to” book is the Bible not the writing of Brene Brown, Ronald Heifetz, or Peter Senge as practical as they are. Your people NEED GOD! NOONE ELSE will satisfy! NOONE!!

I pray that your goal in every part of your life and ministry will be to get on God’s agenda, not to have God bless your agenda. To do that you must let go of your agenda and truly seek God’s agenda. And that is why I open my hands to pray every day. That way, God can take things out of my hands that are holding me back and God can put some fresh, new things into my hands.

When I was a 16-year-old high school student, a seminarian at our church in Pittsburgh asked me a life changing question. “Tom, have you ever thought of being a pastor? I asked why anyone would want to be a pastor? He replied, “ A pastor is the only profession where you have the privilege of walking with people at the very best and the very worst times of their lives. If they have a baby they call you, and if there is a death in the family, they call you. If they receive an honor, they call you and if the bottom drops out of life they call you. And you are not selling them a financial plan. You are representing God in their life. And it is the greatest privilege of life to represent God. Here is what is best of all; you don’t HAVE to do it, you GET to do it! You don’t HAVE to preach Easter; you GET to preach Easter. You don’t HAVE to visit a patient and their family in the Intensive Care Unit of a hospital; you GET to visit them. It is a privilege. Don’t ever forget that!

This year I am celebrating the 50th Anniversary of my ordination into the Gospel Ministry of Jesus Christ. I have written this epistle because I hope that you will love the pastoral ministry as I do and that you will see the pastoral ministry as the high calling and the inestimable privilege that it is.

IF you will remember these things, Emily, then you will realize, as I do, that the greatest compliment you will ever receive in the ministry is when someone comes up to you with a friend beside them, and says to that friend “ I want you to meet my pastor.”