

## “One for the Road”

I have no idea who first came up with the idea of baccalaureate, but I’ll bet you it wasn’t somebody who was gradating from something. Sure, this is a time of transition, and anything important in life has a religious dimension... but, really! One more chance to hear a speech? Either you’ve been looking forward to this weekend and you can’t believe it’s finally here and you’re all ready to celebrate; or it’s no big deal and you wonder why everybody’s making a fuss. Either way, people usually don’t of their own free will stand in line to hear one more person try to talk about what it means.

But we talk at times like this because something important is happening. Our relationships are changing: not all at once, but in ways that we can’t control and can never undo. The toothpaste will never make it back into the tube. We love you, we’re proud of you, we look forward to the new relationship we’re going to have... but it’s scary, too. So we talk to calm the fear: to frame the moment, to give words to the peril and the possibility and to lift all of that up to God.

In recent years Angie and Matt and I have taken turns with this. Delightfully for me the responsibility is mine this year, and I get to use it doing what Angie and Matt can’t do: sharing a personal experience that happened a very long time ago.

Once upon a time, long ago and far away, I was a young minister serving in my first full time position in Branford, Connecticut. The church there was founded in 1644. It is a place where they measure church attendance in generations, as in, “How long have you been attending church here?” “Oh, four generations or so.” “How nice! Do you think you’re going to like it here?”

My role in the Branford Church was to be the Assistant Minister for Christian Education. I directed the Church School, met with the Board of Christian Education, and worked with the Jr. and Sr. High youth groups. Guitar-toting, retreat-leading youth minister: that about sums it up.

Wherever there are youth groups there are fundraisers. One of the brilliant schemes we hit on was for the senior highs to prepare and serve the dinner for the Annual Meeting of the Church, which took place on a Thursday evening in January. Here at Plymouth the Annual Meeting of the congregation is a non-event. We bribe people with free dessert and still get a modest turnout. But there, as is common in smaller churches, everybody turned out for the Annual Meeting, and the youth could make what seemed like a lot of money.

Driven by God knows what demonic impulse, we settled on spaghetti. It seemed easy enough: vats of boiling water cooking the spaghetti, a cauldron of sauce at the ready, ladle the stuff out and serve it with salad and bread, brownies for dessert. We liked the menu because it promised to be the first church dinner in history that did not include Jell-O, which of course was the substance that allowed the Pilgrims to survive their first winter in New England.

The best part about spaghetti was that the sauce could be cooked up ahead of time and frozen. One of the kids had a terrific recipe for sauce and a flair for math, so he was able to convert the recipe to serve six into a recipe to serve 150. So far, so good. We did the shopping and the sauce preparation on Saturday, several days before the dinner on Thursday evening. That way we could just heat it up and we'd be ready to go.

One of the unusual features of the kitchen at that Branford Church was an old ice cream freezer: a long and narrow thing shaped ominously like a coffin. The lid was hinged in the middle, and could be opened from either side. It was designed to hold tubs of ice cream but we could immediately see that it had a far better use. Why bother with a bunch of containers for the sauce? What a hassle! Why not simply line the freezer with a big plastic bag, and pour that old spaghetti sauce right in there? Good thinking, huh? Now, we knew of course that liquid expands a bit when it freezes. But we allowed for that. We packed a few paper garbage bags in around the outside to allow for expansion, set the freezer on its coldest setting, poured in the sauce, cleaned up the kitchen and never gave it another thought. Everything was under control.

Around noon on Thursday I thought it might be a good idea to check in on the sauce. I figured I'd need to let it thaw gradually, perhaps by turning the freezer off an hour or so before we needed to get it out. Gosh, it had grown! I remembered it as being about halfway up the sides of the freezer; but it came nearly to the top, this huge, red, angry-looking mass. I poked at it a little bit and discovered that it was pretty hard... something like concrete, actually.

My quick mind grasped the implications immediately: maybe this would need more than a couple of hours to thaw out! Perhaps I should get it out of the freezer—since the freezer walls were so well insulated that no heat would get to it in there. Here, I'll just get these bags out of here and lift it right...

Over the next several hours, gradually more drastic measures were employed. By four o'clock, visitors to the kitchen were treated to quite a sight: the freezer lid had been completely removed, and I had a space heater mounted above the freezer, along with a fan blowing hot air onto the spaghetti sauce glacier. And there I was, on my knees, astride the thing and wielding a hatchet, grunting and raining blows down upon the sauce block. The full picture would have to include my red, white and blue striped bellbottoms, blue work shirt and red bandanna, and bright red Converse canvass high tops. With each blow, spaghetti sauce flew all over the room and all over me, so that I looked like some sort of gruesome ax murderer, growing more insistent every moment because, apart from the incredible mess I was making, my efforts were having little effect.

At about that point the Senior Minister walked into the room. He had heard the grunting and the hatchet blows. He saw the sauce all over the place before he saw me. I can imagine what he must have been thinking: "Is this what they're teaching them at Yale Divinity School these days?" He looked at me and said, in a tone of utter disbelief, "David?" Looking like a wild animal interrupted while devouring its prey, I wheeled on him and snarled, "What?" He looked at me, and at the freezer, and at me, and around at the sauce-stained room. He sighed, smiled faintly and said, "Carry on," and walked out of the room.

Actually, it all sort of turned out OK. Eventually my efforts paid off and we managed to get the sauce out in chunks, which then went into every pan the church owned for thawing on the stove. Most of the folks who came to the dinner had no idea what had gone on behind the scenes; and those few who commented on the meal were very complimentary, remarking on the unusual metallic tang to the sauce. (Just kidding.) Best of all, nobody got sick... a happy ending.

I share that story not simply for its intrinsic entertainment value, but because it is a very important memory for me. Whenever I find myself impressed with my dignity, or competence, or importance, I find it useful to flash on that scene in the kitchen. Humility is always easier when we have something to be humble about. In that regard, some of us are more richly blessed than others.

But there is another side to this memory, and that is the response of Roger Manners, the Senior Minister. He didn't explode or over-react in any way. He simply assessed the mess, recognized that I was aware of my evident stupidity, and left me to deal with it. Without words he said to me, "Well, beloved colleague, you've gotten yourself into quite a mess here. But I know that you have within you everything you need to deal with it. You can handle this, and I'll let you do it."

That's the way I'm feeling today. You haven't made a mess that I'm aware of, most of you, but sooner or later you will, if you expect to grow up and accomplish anything. But you already have within you everything you truly need.

You probably know that we don't pick the scripture readings; we take what we get from week to week. But if I had had the opportunity to choose a lesson I would have picked the one we got for today. Paul and Silas are in deep trouble. They have been beaten for preaching their Christian faith. They are locked in a cell within a cell at midnight. And there in the dark, bruised and bloodied, what do they do? They sing hymns. They sing songs they know by heart: songs of encouragement and comfort; songs that remind them of who they are and who God is; songs for the dead end in which they find themselves and the road to new beginnings that lies before them. They sing from the hymnals of their hearts.

What we've been trying to do for you all this time at Plymouth Church is to give you a hymnal of the heart to fall back on when you need it most. They're not all really hymns, of course, these hymns of the heart. Some of what's in your hymnal might actually have a melody attached to it: *God is Our Refuge and Strength; Many Gifts, One Spirit; This Little Light of Mine*. But a lot of what's in there is just stuff you've heard over and over and over again: "We agree to differ. We resolve to love. We unite to serve." "Our purpose is to grow in love of God and neighbor." "No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you are always welcome here." Even though we don't sing those things, they're in your hymnal, too.

Sometimes it turns out that the most precious things in our hymnals of the heart are things we have grown pretty tired of hearing. One time many years ago when one of our sons was "negotiating" not to have to go to church so much he said, "It's the same thing every week: God love you so love each other, God loves you so love each other, God loves you so love each other... I get it, already!" He was right. That's it.

But what he didn't know then but knows now is that not everybody believes that or really seeks to live it; and that when it's midnight and you're locked in a dark prison—perhaps of your own making—these simple songs mean everything. And he has within him everything he needs.

That's what we've tried to give you: a tune for the road, a reminder of who you are, an inspiration to change the world, and a promise that we'll always belong to one another because we belong to God.

God loves you so love each other. That's all: sing it when you need it.

Amen

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