

David Schilling

Witness 9-8-24

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

18 years and one month ago, to the day, my grandfather passed away suddenly, and our extended family had gathered from all corners of the country to support my grandmother, and attend his funeral mass.

In need of a mental break from all of the commotion surrounding death, magnified by needing to come to terms with the sudden presence of suicide in our lives, my father and I, along with siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins brought out some beers and a deck of cards, and for the first time in years, did a pretty stellar job of getting along just fine.

I remember my grandmother, shaky and emotionally drained, emerging from her bedroom to ask what we were doing. We told her the name of the card game, she voiced her obvious disapproval, and called my father and I off to the side. Expecting a lecture on cards and beer during a solemn time, she instead placed her hand on my shoulder and asked my father if he knew what the greatest disappointment in her life was.

She looked us both in the eye and said "Mark, my greatest disappointment is that you never got your little boy baptized". She stared at us, we stared at her, she retreated to her room to continue watching Nancy Grace on CNN, we returned to our card game.

Conversation over.

If nothing had yet cemented my aversion to religion at that point in my life, it was that moment. My paternal grandparents were Catholic, at least in that they went to church, spoke certain words, said grace before meals and had crosses scattered throughout their house. Other than that, they were sad and bitter people, who treated their children with a toxic mix of apathy and disdain.

Thanking the Lord for our food and then in the same breath chastising whichever loser child happened to be closest to them at the table cemented the concept of God in my mind as something to be avoided. Kind of like bullies. Or walnuts. "Not our way" was my parents' explanation of the whole thing, and I was glad to go along with it.

If 46 year old me had walked into that room and said "don't worry Grandma Rita, it's cool...not only did I get baptized, I'm about to describe a call to Christian Ministry", I'd imagine my grandmother and 28 year old me would be about as shocked as if Jesus himself appeared in human form, sat down at the table and said "deal me in".

And...here we are.

When I look back, I realize that all the ingredients were present, I just had the wrong recipe to follow. I secretly loved going to church with those very same grandparents, moved by the power of the music, the physical space, the rituals. I did my best to try to pray when instructed, yet never shook the feeling of being an imposter.

Maybe it had something to do with sitting silently, feeling the eyes of the whole room on me when they went up for Communion, and I was left alone in the empty pews. I don't know how, but a children's bible storybook found its way into my collection, and I loved reading the stories, placing it carefully out of view to make sure I didn't have to try to explain anything about it.

Attending Sunday School with a friend was also a positive yet novel experience, getting together as students to talk about being loved, not about writing words I already knew how to spell 20 times each, or seemingly endless math drills.

Later, attending and working for a Quaker camp connected my love for the outdoors with spirituality. I can't describe the feeling that I felt attending Meeting for Worship....other than something just worked, and it was so perfect. My own version of holy water was found paddling lakes and rivers, and God's light reached me from mountaintops, as opposed to through stained glass.

When I moved to Vermont, I had the honor of working with and learning from Dick Spaulding, a retired principal who was working in Cabot as a behavior interventionist. Dick and I spent hours talking about just about everything, and he served as a good friend, moral compass and mentor. I knew Dick had been through serious struggles in his life and credited his faith with getting through it, but we didn't discuss God much.

One afternoon, Dick came to me with a story that he just couldn't wait to tell. The past week, he had been vacationing on Cape Cod, and saw a poster about a missing diamond ring. On the final morning of the trip, Dick was walking the beach, having a conversation with God about his own life and family struggles, and paused for a moment to reflect on a seemingly insurmountable challenge. He looked down, and found the ring at his feet. He called the number on the poster, and after insisting that it was God's intervention, reluctantly accepted a week's stay the next year at the owner's beautiful beach house. I clearly remember the topic of one of Elissa's sermons, around the same time, being God doesn't grant wishes, but does love a celebration.

This made so much sense. Rather than my grandmother's continuous one-sided requests for absolution, Dick's devout adherence to his faith, having nothing to do with finding rings nor asking to be rewarded, led to an unexpected resolution.

Two years later, Dick was in line to take on the interim principal position at Cabot, with me working as an intern. He died 5 months shy of that job's start date, and I questioned what I would do next without his guidance. At his funeral, his stepson sang a powerful rendition of Wake Me Up, by Avicii. To this day, the presence of that song in my life is what Dick left behind, with the help of God. I can go months, sometimes years without hearing it, but it will, without fail, show up in a shuffle playlist or in public when Dick has something to say. The moment I crossed the Cabot town line after being selected as the school's next principal. At the Jay Peak Waterpark when Marilla and I took our first mini-vacation in way too long. The week after we purchased the land we live on. On the school bus when I rode with a student heading back to an unsafe world and handed him an emergency cell phone just in case... and again in a restaurant the next morning, at the time the student's stepfather was finally arrested.

In one of the final conversations Dick and I had, he told me something along the lines of “I don’t care if you want to talk about God or not, you know you already act more like a minister than a principal around here”.

Turns out he might have been more right than I realized. Noticeable to some and finally obvious to me, I’ve been running schools as if they were faith communities all along. Every school leader has their own focus, for some it’s test scores and academic performance, for others it’s athletic identity, for me, it is safety, belonging and inclusion. While I have a lot to learn about theology, when it comes to community leadership, I suppose I’ve been training for this role for quite a while.

When a Cabot student who was struggling with his father’s reaction to his gender asked if places who loved you for who you are actually existed, I showed him words of welcome from the Old Meeting House. He asked if we could put that up in school, and I said we could work on something. I was surprised when a week later, a giant vinyl outdoor sign proclaiming “Cabot School - No matter who you are, what you believe or who you love, you are welcome here” showed up on my desk. We proudly stuck it on the outside of the building, and it lasted for years.

Our second response at Cabot to the Parkland school shooting on Valentine’s Day, 2018 was to review our safety protocols. Our first action was to gather as a high school community to honor lives lost by reading aloud together clips from the 20th General Synod of the United Church of Christ’s resolution on violence in our Society and World, over and over, until we were naturally silent. We copied the quotes onto Montpelier Valentine’s Phantom hearts, and stuck them up all over the school.

During the early stages of the pandemic, Danville’s food shelf closed when older volunteers could not risk their lives to manage distribution. My co-principal and I took the undeposited proceeds from several athletic tournaments, and got on Amazon Pantry, turning our cafeteria into a food distribution center, sending out weekly boxes to over 20 families during school lunch deliveries. During this time, I vividly remember receiving regular robocalls from another school imploring parents to deliver their student’s paper homework on time each day, questioning my focus, and landing on “I don’t care...we’re looking out for our people”.

Lastly, when I took over as Danville’s principal, I was sternly warned “whatever you do, don’t say a word about the mascot”, which was at the time the Indians. After reading a firsthand account of an indigenous student who directly described the harm caused to her over 20 years ago, including being both being drawn as a caricature of the image on the gym wall and being told “you don’t look Indian enough to be a Danville Indian”, I worked, hidden from view, connecting students seeking change to those whose voices were shouted down in the past, leading to the school board not only making change, but to vote 4-1 to approve a policy barring the school from using any race or ethnic group, and its traditions and customs as a mascot.

My role was to lead from behind and empower students to be heard, and their voices carried Danville to one of the more amicable and successful Vermont mascot changes, culminating in a celebratory election day, where students from ages 4-18 voted the Danville Bears into existence.

And while Rona's assignment to me this week was to explain my call to ministry, what you just heard is the most I ever want to talk about myself in this space, because the story of our future is ours together, and does not belong to any one leader. I am blessed that God, through the voice of Erik Esselsytn led me to this place. Some friends and I had just rented his house in Montpelier, and he joined us for dinner. Erik described a caring community, where even if you didn't quite believe every word you were saying, everything in the room, from the music to the wood stoves, conveyed true love.

Our scripture reading reminds us that above all, we are called to create a community in which we love and accept all who enter, without favoritism. James, through insistence on deeds of compassion and on the love commandment reminds us that to be called to do God's work, to be followers of Jesus, we must practice radical inclusion and welcome. We must stand strong against misuse of Paul's teachings on justification by faith, and if we say our doors are open, we mean our doors are open. At our best, we do this by virtue of who we are. Not every church can claim to strongly increase the diversity of its congregation by putting on a musical written in 1947, but that's exactly what happened after Brigadoon. We didn't study it, we did it.

My hope for our immediate future is that we can step back from the challenges of leadership transitions, of pandemics, and of interruption, and simply return to enjoying what it is to be a community of faith, to recognize the contributions of each person in this room as we worship together, and to allow time for celebration and joy. We are called to be stewards of this sacred, historic physical space, inextricably tied to its surrounding community by being built from the products of the very land on which it stands. We make music, art, and delicious meals together, we learn alongside our youth, and we spread God's work and love through our missions, at home and far away.

We've been through change, we've been through ups and downs, we've sought truth from walks with the disciples and journeys through the metaverse, and now, on this Gathering Sunday, my prayer for us all is that we all can pause, heal, and once again enjoy and grow from our time together. That we refocus on what God calls us as a community of faith to be.

Amongst other skills, an effective Christian leader engages sacred stories and traditions to inspire their community to care for all creation, and work together for justice and mercy.

In reassessing my life's calling, I can think of no greater purpose nor blessing than to be called to serve a community that follows the teachings of a craftsman,

who for centuries upon centuries has united everyone...

world leaders, kings, queens, artists, teachers, scientists, farmers and builders

to try their very best to simply choose love.