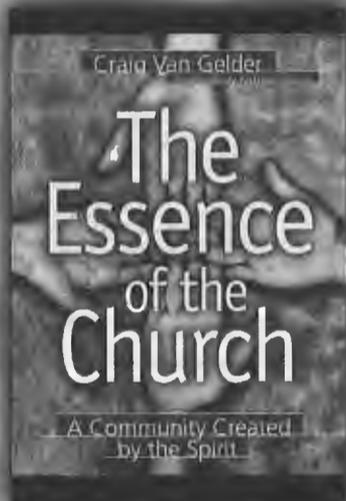


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A Call to Retirement

Neva Evenhouse

Not many years ago, I dreaded the thought of retirement. So much of my joy, satisfaction, sense of purpose and meaning—even my sense of self—was found in my ministry. After all, it was such a struggle to get here. God had called me into ordained ministry late in life. Pouring myself into fulfilling the call, I felt as if all my previous life had been moving in *this* direction, that I had arrived at the culmination or destination of a lifetime of "lesser" calls. How could retirement be looming on the horizon so soon? How could it be that before long I should have to give it all up? My God, such a few years! It seemed like a waste.

My call to ministry had catapulted me into the most disturbing, painful period of my life. At that time a female member of the Christian Reformed Church was not to entertain such thoughts, much less suggest that they came from God! I should be satisfied with the position of leadership I already had—co-founder and director of the Coffee Break Ministry, flying around the country giving leadership-training workshops, known and appreciated for the Bible study materials I had written. More importantly, lives were being changed through this ministry; people were coming to know Christ. Surely *this* was God's work!

Yet, the call persisted, increasingly strong and real. I was forty-eight years old when I finally gave myself permission to enter seminary, and fifty-one by the time I was ordained. Now I was ready to set out on my brief but wonderfully varied "career." First, I served a year in a pastoral-counseling center while waiting for a call to a church. Then seven wonderful years of staff ministry at the Christ Memorial Church in Holland, Michigan, were followed by five rich and full years as solo pastor of the Community (RCA) Church of Wurtsboro, New York. Only two churches, yet each afforded unique challenges and exciting opportunities. Imagine going from a three-thousand-member church to one of a hundred members, from ten secretaries to none, from a prosperous, largely upper-middle-class congregation to one struggling in a depressed area, from a heavily Dutch ethnicity to a situation where my husband and I were the only "Dutchmen," from a small city of many Protestant churches to a village with one Protestant church (ours), one Roman Catholic church, and one Jewish synagogue. Although these two ministries included both tough times and joys, I was *very* happy and deeply fulfilled in each one. I felt I had been born for this.

As the years slipped by all too quickly, I began to feel like a giant clock was hanging over my head, tick-tock, tick-tock, reminding me of my limited time. Though I believe God continued to give me creativity, vision, and insight (even while my perfectionism was as persistent as ever) I noticed that my energy and

physical stamina were not what they once were. Then, one day I sensed something else taking shape within me. It was at once a gift of grace and a call. Even now as I reflect on the experience, I hear Jesus' invitation to his disciples, "Come ye apart and rest awhile" (KJV). These words were over the entrance of Indiana's Cedar Lake Conference Grounds where we sometimes took our family when the children were young. But this time the words were not a call to a Bible conference, a retreat, or even a sabbatical. They felt more like an invitation to just let go, to *be* instead of to *do*.

At first I excused it away. I was tired. I needed a vacation. It was crazy to think of a *call* to retirement. God called only to special tasks, to vocations—important spiritual endeavors. It was now, at *this* point in my life, busily involved in ordained ministry, that I was finally fulfilling God's call. Then I realized what I was doing. I was validating as significant only calls to some form of ordained ministry. I had been taught differently. I had preached and taught differently myself! *All* jobs and vocations are or should be callings. Apparently, at the deep level affecting how I viewed my life in relationship to God, I had really not believed it.

Continuing reflection led to the realization that this present "tugging at my soul" felt very much like God's call to ordained ministry a few years earlier. Earlier still it was this same kind of tugging that led to the founding of the Coffee Break Ministry. Then I recalled saying to my mother the summer before I was to start college: "Sometimes lately it feels like I'm supposed to go into nursing rather than teaching." (From the time I was very young I had planned to be a teacher.) In all these situations it was not the call but what I was being called to that was different. The reflections continued even as the tugging at my soul increased. I remembered how as a little girl I loved church and Sunday school and even catechism! It was a little-girl-size feeling of the psalmist's words: "My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God" (84:2).

Then came the memory of my "tree experience" at age eight. My mother had just condemned me as a horrible sinner for losing my temper and lashing out at her. Feeling as if I would burst with the conflicting emotions of rage, guilt, and rejection within me, I rushed from the house to my favorite tree. I climbed it and clung to its branches, chest heaving, eyes streaming with tears. Then I heard God speak, not condemning me, but calling me to God's self: "Quiet now little one. Come, rest in me. I love you, I love you." Even as that poignant memory came, I knew that these childhood experiences were also "call," and that the call to *do* something for God cannot be separated from the call to *be* in relationship with God. In fact, the being is the foundation of our doing, the fountain out of which "flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38).

For the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., the concept of call is fundamental. I once heard Gordon Cosby, the church's founder, define call in a way that summarizes my own concept. Call, he said, "is a sense of being dealt with by that which is ultimate, of knowing that one was born to this, that one has

found one's place in the scheme of things, in salvation's history." Significantly, our salvation history goes back to Abraham. Abraham was called to leave his country and kindred and father's house, not so much to do something for God as to be in relationship with God. Yes, he was called to become the father of God's chosen people, but God could have begun a race of people from anyone, or anything. However, God's way is to have the fruit of God's blessings flow out of relationship with God, out of our being in Christ.

Why else would God not have Abraham start to produce God's chosen race right away? Why else would Abraham have to live through years and years of repeated promises and their testing? Even after the birth of Isaac, the miracle baby, God's command to sacrifice his only son was again a test of Abraham to determine whether God and God's will were more important to him than anyone or anything else.

It seems to me that all the great heroes and heroines of faith were people who walked and talked with God, who lived with and for God; it was out of their relationship with God that the fruit of their lives and ministries flowed. Enoch, who "walked with God," is a biblical character I would love to know better. Yet, no matter how often I have learned the lesson of needing to live close to God in order to do God's work, I find myself once again pushing and pulling and struggling to do it on my own. In theory I assent to my dependence on the One who calls and equips me, but in practice I readily negate it. I feel sure that that lack of walking and talking with God, even while I am seeking to carry out God's call, is in part why I so frequently found myself "maxed out."

One reason I appreciate Eugene Peterson's books is his persistent emphasis on the spirituality of pastors, the genuineness of their relationship with God, as the basis of their identity and the lifeblood of their ministry. In introducing *Under the Predictable Plant*, he writes:

Basically, all I am doing is trying to get it straight, get straight what it means to be a pastor, and then develop a spirituality adequate to the work. The so-called spirituality that was handed to me by those who put me to the task of pastoral work was not adequate. I do not find the emaciated, exhausted spirituality of institutional careerism adequate. I do not find the renewed, cosmetic spirituality of personal charisma adequate. I require something *biblically* spiritual—rooted and cultivated in creation and covenant, leisurely in Christ, soaked in Spirit.¹

A friend who has worked with the late Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity tells how this saint's closeness to Jesus radiated to everyone around her. The little book, *Jesus, the Word to be Spoken*, is a collection of 366 "words of wisdom" drawn from Mother Teresa's instructions, anecdotes, and meditations. The following two gems illustrate that for her, the call to *be* in Christ and the call to *do* for Christ were of one piece:

Fourth month, Day 18

What is our spiritual life? A love union with Jesus in which the divine and the human give themselves completely to one another. All that Jesus asks of me is to give myself to him in all poverty and nothingness.

Fifth Month, Day 20

Our lives, to be fruitful, must be full of Christ; to be able to bring his peace, joy, and love we must have it ourselves, for we cannot give what we have not got—the blind leading the blind. . . .²

Through the years, the yearning for a deeper spirituality, a closer, more intentional relationship with God was a gnawing hunger that cried to be fed. I resolved repeatedly to feed that hunger. I wanted to follow Eugene Peterson's suggestion: "The trick, of course, is to get to the calendar before anyone else does. I mark out the times for prayer, for reading, for leisure, for the silence and solitude out of which creative work—prayer, preaching, and listening—can issue."³

I only managed to schedule monthly twenty-four-hour silent retreats. Even those "dates with God" I broke at least one third of the time; some activity or need came along which absolutely demanded my attention or my gifts. Even as I confess this I blush. And I can hardly understand it because when I did keep such dates with God, my deep hunger was fed for days and my ministry was blessed with a shower of creative energy. Often my husband, my co-workers, and the people to whom I ministered could sense when I had "indulged" in a retreat. I am embarrassed to recount the occasion when an elder in Wurtsboro tactfully let me know he could tell that I had *not* been on retreat for awhile! The fact is that in every situation of ministry I was encouraged to do so.

Now it was as if *God* was encouraging, indeed calling me, to spend the rest of my life on retreat. Once again, I felt that I had always been moving in this direction, that I had arrived at the culmination or destination of a lifetime of "lesser" calls. I was reminded again that God intends that call be an ongoing process in our lives. I often wish I could do my ministry, indeed my whole life, over again. I have felt the call to be in a "love union with Jesus" for as long as I have memory. Over and over I heard the call and responded to it eagerly, only to be caught up in my own needs and "the exhausted spirituality of institutional careerism."

I am an oldest child, born and bred to be an achiever. Circumstances fed an addiction to work and busyness. As soon as I was old enough I was baby-sitting and cleaning people's houses. My parents were so insistent that my siblings and I attend a Christian high school that they moved from out of state to make it possible. But their financial struggles required us to pay our own way—tuition, clothes, and entertainment (such as there was time for). During high school I

worked until eight in the evening Monday through Friday, plus two twelve-hour days every other weekend. I feel now that I was robbed of an adolescence.

As a young child who loved to read, I devoured stacks of books from the library. Because I also loved to draw, I spent many hours sketching. Both activities ended with adolescence. Although I still read a lot, it seemed I always had to have a good reason. I could read for pleasure only if there was nothing else on my agenda. I also constantly denied the impulse to sketch that tree or flower or profile, or to take up watercolor. By contrast, my call to retirement seemed an opportunity to live out the adolescence I had missed—with the advantage of a mature perspective. I was being given permission, even mandated, to take up pastimes I had previously thought must be wrong because they were so pleasurable.

Now I can read the books I *want* to read (including novels). I can sketch or watercolor for hours without a hint of guilt. I can enjoy being with my grandchildren, or with other family or friends, without looking at the clock or thinking about what I should be accomplishing. I can delight in the outdoor exercise of golf, a pastime I had previously judged to be a waste of time. Best of all I have as much time as I want or need just to be with God, relishing God's presence and love.

Do I fulfill this call with all the freedom and abandon I think God wills for me? No. By myself I am powerless against the habits and drivenness of a lifetime. Yet, the degree to which I have let go seems a miracle. I move forward trusting that God will continue to "mold me and make me" after God's will. Do I have regrets? O yes! During a recent baptism in our church, tears surfaced as I remembered the joy of performing this sacrament. While satisfying my hunger to take Communion more frequently, I miss the opportunities to serve it to others. Occasional pulpit supply reminds me of how much I enjoy preaching, as well as planning and leading worship. However, the overall, "umbrella" regret is having had so few years as a pastor, and in those years failing to integrate fully the call to be and the call to do.

In my senior years, pulpit supply and leading retreats seem to be the ministry activities in which God wants me involved. Yet, I have learned that one never knows when God's call may change one's direction. I also know that my call to retirement is personal, subjective, and beyond authentication. I offer it only as my experience, believing it may be as authentic as the call to "die with your boots on."

Words from Psalm 63 express the satisfaction of my soul as I live out my present call: "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. . . . Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips . . .

for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me."

While I have come to see this hunger as the call of a lifetime, I am sure that call will not be completely fulfilled until eternity. Yet, I am enjoying the gifts of this life and my present call far too much to pine for eternity. Whenever the time comes for me to cross over, I am sure that God will again tug at my soul and that I will recognize the call to come home to enjoy the presence of my Creator Savior forever.

ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 5.

² Mother Teresa, compiled by Brother Angelo Devananda, *Jesus, the Word to Be Spoken* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1986), 41, 50.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Carol Stream, IL: Word, 1989), 32.