

I must admit that the last several weeks I've felt empty of good ideas for sermons, and so last Monday night, I asked the worship ministry what they thought you, the congregation, needed or wanted to hear. They told me that they liked to hear personal stories as I reflected on passages, and perhaps even including some of what the last weeks have been like for me with my mother's passing. And Ed mentioned Paul Tillich's classic book: *The Courage To Be* as a topic. So I decided to tell you the story of "my call" to enter seminary and become a pastor and to comment on the courage required of all of us as we respond to our call. Courage that requires us to take risk in hopes of renewal. I preached my first "call" sermon seventeen years ago, on January 24, 1993, and the text that day was the one we are assigned today. But my "call" began long before that day.

As many of you already know, the church I grew up in did not have women pastors or women as church leaders. The church took quite literally words in the New Testament epistles often attributed to Paul about women keeping silent in church. So it never really occurred to me, growing up, that I could be called to the ministry. But I loved church! And I got a lot of it--at least three times every week and often more than that. But something happened when I was 12 years old, and I began to ask questions about biblical literalism because I couldn't understand why some passages in the Bible were taken as literal truths while others were not, and who decided this? For awhile I decided that I MUST take every verse word for word, and so I would not wear gold jewelry because the Bible told me not to, I would not braid my hair, because the Bible said not to, I prayed without ceasing because the Bible told me to pray without ceasing, and to make a long story short, I pretty much went crazy trying to obey every word in the Bible quite literally. I asked questions of all the traveling preachers that came to hold gospel meetings, trying to get at the truth of what I must do to be saved.

I was on this quest for truth when I went to Abilene Christian College, but there I began to be exposed to new ways of thinking and interpreting scripture. Yet, to venture away from the church in which I had been brought up felt very risky and frightening. For about 8 more years I tried very hard to remain faithful to that church's doctrines. Finally, my husband at that time and I were "called out" for heresy, and I gave up trying to fit in. I was tired of trying to hide and tired of living a lie and tired of believing in such a narrow minded God.

For awhile I didn't go to church except for occasional visits to try out other denominations; then when the girls were born, I found the Unitarian Universalist Church in N. Dallas to be a good place to worship. The reason was that the UU had religious tolerance; I could explore; I could hold onto what I resonated with and let go of what didn't speak to me of God.

After moving to California in 1984, the search for a church lead me to the United Church of Christ, and I knew I was home. The UCC combined freedom of religious thought and discernment and an honoring of the Christian tradition with which I was raised. I became very involved with church and with the church's preschool where the girls went. Other people began to ask me if I had ever thought of going to seminary, and a position was created at the church for me in the areas of education and church family development. The Spirit was moving in my life both in positive and troubling ways. There came a day when I was faced with the decision of whether I would say "yes" to the call God was placing on my heart and study for the ministry.

By this time I was a single parent, I did not want to leave home, I did not want to uproot my little girls, I did not want to leave the support of friends who had helped me through a difficult personal time. It felt like a huge risk. I didn't know if I could make the grade; in fact, I was told, that Claremont School of Theology would be too hard for me, and I should choose an easier seminary. (Three years later on the afternoon of my graduation, Brittany took great delight in calling those folks, to tell them that I graduated 1st in my class.) But picking up and moving us to Claremont to begin seminary was one of the scariest

things I've ever done. The risk of it all often overwhelmed me. But I knew if I stayed where I was, if I did not leave, I would spiritually and emotionally die. So I took a risk in hope of renewal.

After I graduated and was "called" to serve Claremont UCC and spent 8 1/2 years there as associate pastor, I was being nudged again by the Spirit. I didn't want to leave that ministry which I loved. But once again, I knew that to stay was not right, and so I left that church and took a risk for the hope of renewal. On Feb. 6, 2005, five years ago, I preached one more call sermon right from this pulpit.

Three weeks ago I was able to spend a day and a half with my mother before she died. The night I arrived, she still knew me and called my name, and smiled her smile. The night before she died, I sat beside her, held her hand, and sang to her many of her favorite hymns. They were hymns of my childhood; hymns whose language is not the language or even the theology I hold today; but hymns that bound my mother and I together in our quest for God even if our destinations were different. By that night, my mother was no longer conscious, but her breath and soft moans kept cadence with the beat of the hymns as I sang to her. These will always be precious memories.

It had only been a few weeks earlier (shortly before Christmas) when I said goodbye to her in the hospital and came home to California, and Mom said to me **"You go; Tom needs you and your congregation needs you."** Now you've got to understand that mother still held firm these 17 years to the "silencing of women." She never once heard me preach or acknowledged my call. For years she referred to my work as social work (and being a social worker is good; it just wasn't what I was). I was almost never asked to pray when I went home to visit; Tom got to do that because he is a man. But finally, in that moment, my mother said to me, **"go home; Tom needs you, and your congregation needs you."** I know now the deep meaning of receiving a blessing.

Now I will tell you something. After mother died, and we were preparing for her service, which I helped plan though was not allowed to preach, there were moments when I was overcome with the church I had known as a child. I heard the words of admonition, the warnings, the commandments to be obeyed, and the promised reward if one arrived at "perfect submission." And in that time of emotional exhaustion and grief, I found myself questioning myself; could I be wrong; could I have strayed too far from the truth. I only had the nerve to admit such thoughts to two people: Tom and Emily Click, my colleague who teaches at Harvard and who preached my installation sermon here six years ago. This past Wednesday I received a card from Emily, and she wrote these words that I very much want to share with you today: ***I do not know that our religious perspective has the whole God thing right, nor am I certain on what happens in terms of judgment. But I am just so unshakably certain that God's embrace is wide and full. I am certain you are fully in the safe circle of God's love. It is not, I believe, "certainty" that matters so much in the end, as it is the capacity we develop to love fully and deeply. You are so full of love for others, I have no doubt God recognizes you as one of Her children.***

I am not a brave person. I don't like roller coasters and many other things which my children tease me about being afraid of. But at my mother's funeral, when the preacher was preaching judgment and "perfect submission," and though his words were kindly said there was the "shadow of intolerance" of different beliefs, our daughter, Brittany, who had flown down from Chicago to be with me that day, leaned over and whispered in my ear: ***I am so proud of your courage; it's incredible that you found your way to where you are now.*** Still I know I am a coward about many things; but by the grace of God, I found the ***courage to be.***

Jesus taught from a boat; he called Peter, James, and John. He showed them by giving them a huge catch of fish that they could be successful fishermen. But then he called them to be much more. He called them to risk it all for the sake of God's dream for the world. He calls to us today, calling us to risk with hope of renewal and resurrection; it is the courage to truly and authentically be. May this be so!