



IT COULD HAVE GONE EITHER WAY

Bishop Laurie Haller – February 19, 2018
Eight Year Assessment Gathering – Orlando
Luke 4:40-44, 5:1-11(CEB)

⁴⁰ When the sun was setting, everyone brought to Jesus relatives and acquaintances with all kinds of diseases. Placing his hands on each of them, he healed them. ⁴¹ Demons also came out of many people. They screamed, “You are God’s Son.” But he spoke harshly to them and wouldn’t allow them to speak because they recognized that he was the Christ. ⁴² When daybreak arrived, Jesus went to a deserted place. The crowds were looking for him. When they found him, they tried to keep him from leaving them. ⁴³ But he said to them, “I must preach the good news of God’s kingdom in other cities too, for this is why I was sent.” ⁴⁴ So he continued preaching in the Judean synagogues.

5 One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Gennesaret when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God’s word. ² Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and were washing their nets. ³ Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, then asked him to row out a little distance from the shore. Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴ When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, “Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch.” ⁵ Simon replied, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I’ll drop the nets.” ⁶ So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting. ⁷ They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink. ⁸ When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Leave me, Lord, for I’m a sinner!” ⁹ Peter and those with him were overcome with amazement because of the number of fish they caught. ¹⁰ James and John, Zebedee’s sons, were Simon’s partners and they were amazed too. Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people.” ¹¹ As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

Prayer Song

Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead,
find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are freed:
clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes, that we can see
all the things that really matter, be at peace, and simply be.



How many of you are tired right now? How many of you are sitting here thinking that maybe you should not have made a commitment to come to this event because you have too much to do? How many of you are on the edge of the precipice? How many of you are wondering if you can sustain the pace of ministry that you think you need to keep? Are you living a meaningful life? Are you flourishing and thriving? Are you happy?

Seventeen years ago, in 2001, almost twenty years into my career, when my husband Gary and I were serving as pastors of a large church in the West Michigan Conference, I wrote these words, “It could have gone either way. I could have easily dropped out, never to return to the professional ministry, another casualty in a profession that is not always kind to its clergy. Burned out, depressed, and unsure of my call, I was no longer able to endure the incessant demands of pastoral ministry. I had forgotten who God created me to be and had become disconnected from my true self.

“Knowing that all organizations need to reinvent themselves every five to seven years in order to remain vital, I realized that I was at a crossroads. At different times I found myself discouraged, bored, hopeless, depressed, beyond exhaustion, cynical, despairing, and numb. I was hanging on by a thread. Most of all, I had lost my joy and all semblance of balance between career, family, and self. Life is a continual process of



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change and growth. Yet, in the lifecycle of my ministry, I had plateaued. Could I reinvent myself through adaptive and systemic personal transformation, or would I give up and find a job that did not dog me twenty-four hours a day?”

I am the poster child for why we need the new eight-year assessment process, which was approved by the 2016 General Conference. If I had not taken three-month formational and spiritual growth leaves in 2001 and again in 2011, I would not be in ministry today. I was dangerously close both times to just calling it quits.

It was in the fall of 1999 that I finally admitted to myself that something had to give in my life and ministry. I was no longer able to cope with leading a large church and caring for three school-age children with all the issues that go along with adolescence. My day off was Friday, and every week, by the time Thursday night arrived, I was so whipped from the intensity of ministry that I could barely function. Unfortunately, the Missions Committee met once a month on Thursday night, and I was the staff representative. On this particular Thursday evening, however, I laid down on the couch at home around 6:15 p.m. and literally could not get up. I was done for the week. I called the chairperson, who graciously said, “Stay home, Laurie. We’ll be just fine.” God bless Lynda for her grace and her leadership.



A month later, it was Christmas Eve and I was preaching. We had a 5 p.m. family service and then 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. communion and candle lighting services. I have a vivid memory of sitting in my office between the two later services and wanting to just run away. Have you ever felt that way? I didn't think I had it in me to get through one more service. I made it, by the grace of God. It was a wake-up call, however, and it set in motion a process by which I was able to take three months away in 2001.

It could have gone either way. I wrote a poem about my feelings toward ministry when I began my leave. The poem is from a book called *Recess* that I published about my 2001 leave and is called *I'm Sorry*.

*It's the story of my life, my family, my vocation.
My spirit is sliced up into tiny pieces, wrapped in
tin foil and thrown off the parade float to appease the masses;
Everyone wants a piece of me.
I'm sorry I'm such a bad mom.
I'm sorry that I can't seem to balance all the demands placed on me.
I'm sorry I'm such a slouch as a pastor.
I'm sorry I couldn't get supper made because of that evening meeting.
I'm sorry I wasn't home to tuck you into bed
and left again before you got up in the morning.
I'm sorry I didn't visit you in the hospital,
call you when you were sick or send you a card.
I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you needed me.
I'm sorry I was stuck in Arizona on September 11,
unable to do anything except pray.*



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I'm sorry that I desperately need this time away.

I'm sorry I can't be the person you want me to become, God.

Always saying I'm sorry, but still praying, dreaming, hoping.

I'm not sorry about that.

And God said, "My grace is sufficient for you."

My life was changed forever because of that first renewal leave, and it has turned me into an advocate for regular personal assessment, evaluation, renewal, and time away for all clergy. Every clergy person needs to take the time to periodically ask the questions, "Who am I now? Where am I going? Where is God leading me? How do I need to change in order to sustain effective ministry over the long haul? And what are the next steps that I need to take to be healthy and whole and flourish in my call?" Most of us are simply not able to do this difficult and sacred work in the everyday course of our ministry. We need to take intentional time away.

Why do we now have a mandated eight-year assessment process in our *Book of Discipline*? Because evaluating our life and ministry does not come naturally, it is always uncomfortable, and most of us don't want to do it because we're afraid of what we'll uncover about ourselves and how this assessment might change our lives. Just telling the truth.

Have you ever noticed how often Jesus went away by himself or with just a few disciples during his three years of ministry? Jesus needed time alone with God, to assess



where he was going, whether he was on the right track, and to make sure he was in sync with God's desires. I'm sure there were other times when Jesus simply needed to rest, to be away from people and their incessant demands, and to prepare himself physically, emotionally, and spiritually for all that lay ahead.

Jesus would go into the wilderness or up to a high mountain, or simply to a deserted place. One time, Jesus withdrew to the north, to the headwaters of the Jordan River in Caesarea Philippi, and asked his disciples, "Who do the people say that the Son of Man is?" Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." From that time on, Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem and certain death.

Right after that, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us that Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, most likely Mount Herman. He took with him Peter, James, and John. While on the mountain, the appearance of Jesus' face changed. It shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appeared, and then Jesus heard a voice, "This is my son, my Chosen One. Listen to him." It could have gone either way. Is it possible that Jesus couldn't have headed to Jerusalem, that he couldn't have faced all that lay ahead unless he had that confirmation from God up on the mountain?

When Jesus reached the Holy City and spent the day teaching in the Temple, he withdrew every night to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. He needed



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the care and safety of those he loved. And the night before he died, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray by himself. So, if any of you here this afternoon are bold enough to claim that you don't need intentional time away to be alone with God and assess your own life and ministry, let's have a conversation afterward.

The first time Jesus went away was at the very beginning of his ministry. Luke tells us that when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, and he heard these words from God, "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." Jesus was then led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. It was a time of fasting, temptation, and discernment about how Jesus was going to go about his ministry.

Forty days later, Jesus emerged, and with the power of the Spirit, he went to Galilee to teach. When Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth and preached in the synagogue, he announced his mission, his life's work, "to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Unfortunately, the subsequent dialogue with his own people went south. "Who do you think you are?" they raged, and Jesus was run out of town.



After spending the rest of the day healing diseases and casting out demons, Luke says that Jesus departed and went into a deserted place. Do you see? Jesus had only been in ministry one day, and he had to take a break and go off by himself. One day! And, oh, what a day it was!

The next morning Jesus is standing by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, with people pressing in on him from all sides. He sees two boats along the shore, gets into one belonging to Simon Peter and asks him to pull out. Jesus teaches the crowds from the boat, after which he says to Simon, “Row out farther into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch.” Simon says, “Look, Jesus. We’ve been out all night and haven’t caught anything, but if you insist, we’ll do it again.”

Well, they catch so many fish that the nets start to split. They call out to the other boat for help, but both boats begin to sink because of the weight of the fish. When Simon Peter sees what is happening, he falls to his knees and said, “Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinner.” Everyone is amazed, including James and John. And Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will be fishing for people.” As they bring the boats to the shore, Peter, James, and John leave everything and follow Jesus.

Go deeper. For me, that’s the heart of this scripture. Leave everything and go deeper, Jesus tells Simon Peter. “If you want to be my disciple, you’re going to have to



head into the unknown. You're gonna have to search your soul; you're gonna have to care for each other; you're gonna face criticism; you're gonna find yourself afraid of where God might lead you; and you're gonna be emotionally, physically, relationally, and spiritually depleted. You're gonna be so tired from the demands of others that you'll feel like quitting. And, oh, by the way, your life may be in danger, too. But don't be afraid, for I am with you. Leave it all and follow me."

Row out farther into the deep water. That's exactly why General Conference voted to mandate an eight-year assessment process. It's because, left to our own devices, we clergy are reluctant to even get in the boat, let alone row into uncharted waters, face our demons head on, and see it all as a gift. It's because General Conference, in its wisdom, knew that it can go either way for clergy because ministry is difficult. It's gut-wrenching, emotionally draining, physically debilitating, relationally challenging, and spiritually depleting. One of my favorite quotes is from Andre Gide, "One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time." My hope is that the eight-year assessment will always result in losing sight of the shore for a while because it means we're going to have to go deeper than we want to.

Last fall, I read a fascinating book by David McCullough about Orville and Wilbur Wright. It's called *The Wright Brothers* and was published in 2015. How did Orville and



Wilbur Wright accomplish their single-minded passion to fly a powered machine with a pilot: the first airplane? What personal qualities and principles of their success carry over into ministry? What can we learn from the Wright brothers about how to flourish and thrive in challenging times? And how do we do effective ministry and make a difference in our congregations and the world without sacrificing our health, our integrity, and our sanity? I'd like to suggest several things.

First, Wilbur and Orville had a unity of purpose and mission, from which they never wavered, despite many failures along the way. Some of that came from a strong family upbringing by their parents, Susan and Milton, who was elected a bishop in the United Brethren Church in 1877 and was responsible for churches from the Mississippi to the Rockies. Wilbur, born in 1867, and Orville in 1871, were given self-confidence, strength of character, and curiosity by their parents. They believed that they could accomplish anything with hard work.

As teenagers, the boys opened a bike shop in Dayton, Ohio, and were fascinated with the challenge of flight. The turn of the 20th century saw a myriad of new inventions in the US, and Dayton ranked first in the country for new patents. Author McCullough refers to a French journalist who likened Wilbur's devotion to flying to "that of a gifted man dedicating his life to a religious mission."ⁱ



According to Franz Reichel, a writer for *Le Figaro*, “He (Wilbur) and his brother made the conquest of the sky their existence. They needed this ambition and profound, almost religious, faith in order to deliberately accept their exile to the country of the dunes (Kitty Hawk), far away from all Wilbur is phlegmatic but only in appearance. He is driven by a will of iron which animates him and drives him in his work.”ⁱⁱ

- **How might the eight-year assessment contribute to a renewed vision and mission for clergy, which in turn would lead to greater fruitfulness?**

Second, Wilbur and Orville worked harder than anyone else and were disciplined in continuous evaluation of their progress toward flight. After the Wright brothers began their experimentation with flight in their bike shop, by 1902 they chose Kitty Hawk, North Carolina as their proving ground. Kitty Hawk had constant wind that provided lift for their glider and soft sand that cushioned their more than 700 successful flights. What gave the Wright brothers success was hard work, common sense, total commitment, and daily evaluation of progress.

According to William Werthner, a high school science teacher who helped the brothers out during the part of the year they worked in Dayton, “After every trial, the two inventors, quite apart, held long and confidential consultation, with always some new gain; they were getting nearer and nearer the moment when sustained flight would be



made, for a machine that could maintain itself aloft two minutes might just as well stay there for an hour if everything were as intended.”ⁱⁱⁱ

- **How might the eight-year assessment provide tools for clergy to be constantly evaluating and tweaking their own ministries so that they don't reach the point of burnout?**

Third, Wilbur and Orville learned the hard way that strategically preserving their energy would enable them to be successful over the long haul. After their December 1903 flight and Wilbur's subsequent sojourn in France in order to promote their flying machine, both brothers realized that their instant fame and the demands of their time would lead to their ruin unless they found ways to care for their physical and emotional health.

Enormous crowds followed wherever Wilbur and Orville went, and the ever-increasing demands of the press in Europe and the U.S. took a toll on the brothers. Wilbur wrote to Orville from France, “Do not let yourself be forced into doing anything before you are ready. Be very cautious and proceed slowly in attempting flights in the middle of the day when wind gusts are frequent.... Do not let people talk to you all day and all night. Got that, clergy? It will wear you out, before you are ready for real business. Courtesy has limits. If necessary, appoint some hour in the daytime and refuse



absolutely to receive visitors even for a minute at other times. Do not receive anyone after 8 o'clock at night."^{iv} Do you need to learn that lesson?

- **How might the eight-year assessment help us to preserve our energy for ministry over the long haul?**

Fourth, don't be afraid to take calculated and appropriate risks. Many people thought that Wilbur and Orville were nuts! Even the residents of Kitty Hawk, where the brothers did their testing, were skeptical. Local Bill Tate represented their thinking, "We believed in a good God, a bad devil, and a hot Hell, and more than anything else, we believed the same God did not intend man should ever fly."^v

One time, Wilbur commented on learning how to ride a flying machine, "If you are looking for perfect safety, you will do well to sit on a fence and watch the birds; but if you really wish to learn, you must mount a machine and become acquainted with its tricks by actual trial."^{vi}

- **How might the eight-year assessment empower you to risk all for the cause of Christ?**

And, fifth, be yourself. As the Wright brothers became world famous overnight, Wilbur, especially, found himself involved in complex commercial deals in Europe that tested his resilience and went against his nature. In the midst of the pressure, Wilbur



made a conscious decision to be himself. McCullough writes about Wilbur, “Most importantly, he remained entirely himself, never straying from his direct, unpretentious way, and with good effect. If anything, his lack of French, his lack of sophistication, seemed to work to his advantage.”^{vii}

It could have gone either way with the Wrights. In the end, Wilbur died in 1912 at age 45 of typhoid fever, a body weakened by so many demands. Orville died of a heart attack in 1948 at age 77.

- **How will an intentional, personal, professional, and spiritual assessment every eight years empower you and your colleagues to stay grounded and remember who you are in Christ? For it can go either way. I believe that Jesus is calling The United Methodist Church to go deep. General Conference is calling our clergy to go deep. And God has called each one of you as conference leaders to go deep. Are you willing and ready to go deep? Let’s do it together!**



Swim with Me

*I don't want to lose sight of the shore, God.
I'm scared that I won't be able to find my way back.
Frankly, God, I've never done transitions well.
I'd much rather stay in my comfort zone than discover new lands.
So why am I putting myself through this?
Why do you put me through this?
I want to stick close to shore.
Keep my feet on the ground and my head above water.
What do I need to learn about you, God—and about myself?
The disciples put their nets out into deep water when you asked.
They couldn't even gather in all the fish.
I'm afraid of losing control—of letting go—of trusting you totally.
Maybe you'll just have to push me into the water, God.
Just don't leave me, please. Swim with me.
Keep my head above water.
Flood me with a cold, sea-sharp wash of relief
So that I can see my life more clearly.*

ⁱ David McCullough, *The Wright Brothers*, New York, Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2015, p. 175.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 178.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 48.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 68.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 142.