

*Journal for Field Education*

Name: Excellent Student

Tuesday:

I noticed today in my one-on-one visits with rehab patients that I was feeling much more comfortable being assertive with changing the direction of conversations. Hooray! There is one gentleman who is challenged with limited social skills, and in addition, he was feeling suicidal a week ago in response to the limitations of his present medical condition. When we spoke, he initially wanted to begin discourse about my sermon that he had heard yesterday, and that felt appropriate. However, I had learned from experience that he has a tendency to short circuit “real talk” with short monologues about his opinions about politics, religion and pop culture---witty little vignettes that he repeats in order to get a reaction from the listener.

Knowing this, I felt quite adept today at shifting the direction of our conversation at least twice---once when he was avoiding my question about how he was feeling about his recovery from his stroke, and the second time when he started telling me a strange but distant story about a man who had killed himself. It felt very easy for me to just ask him specifically about the unusual topic in relation to his own thoughts of self-harm, and change the focus back where it needed to be.

For some reason, it made me feel unusually competent in my ministry goals today and I really needed that, since I walked in today feeling laid low from my sermon yesterday. I have preached at this retirement community before, and I feel I know my listeners well. However, I wasn’t prepared for the flatness of response to my sermon (lectionary was the holiness codes of Leviticus and Matthew 5---I know, I know). I imagine that it offered a lot for people to think about. It spoke openly about holiness, sin, salvation and grace. We NEVER hear the words “sin” and “salvation” in anything but our liturgy at times---never out loud. I actually didn’t

realize that until I was in the middle of speaking those words and realized that this is a topic I have never heard broached in my experience of the Church. Tomorrow I have my weekly discussion time with my supervisor, and I look forward to what she might be able to offer. She read most of my sermon the week before and said it sounded fine, but then she gave me a book she thought I'd enjoy based on our sharing. I quoted a few places from that book about the nature of salvation and grace in my sermon, and I'm wondering if what seemed expansive and helpful may have sounded heretical to my congregation. Ugh.

Thursday: I met with my supervisor this past Monday and she shared with me her own feedback from reading the finished sermon (she wasn't present when I preached), and from the sermon study group she meets with weekly. It seems that the group was not concerned about the content, per se, but the FORM! They couldn't figure out what my sermon was talking about because I was talking about so many topics and didn't connect them very well to the scripture that day. Whew. That was a relief, even though it felt embarrassing somewhat. After dissecting my sermon together, I realized that I used to be able to write very good sermons before I started seminary. Now my writing style has changed for a reader audience instead of a listening experience, and with the learning I have now, I can make leaps and jumps between subject matters that leave others feeling confused. Yikes. Well, I get to do a sermon again in April when my Field Education Instructor comes, so I'll have to practice my old way of writing!

I'm glad that this situation gave me an opportunity to reflect theologically about the nature of true community. After I preached, I shook hands and gave hugs to the congregation as usual, but there were only two people who said that the sermon was helpful or a positive experience in some fashion. This stands in stark contrast to my usual experience of not knowing how to say humbly handle all the accolades! People were very kind on Sunday, and over and over they kept

saying how good it was to see me, to have me back with them, to enjoy my enthusiasm, etc. The reality that no one glossed over the fact that my sermon stunk tells me that I can actually trust these people in a way I wouldn't have known I could! It can be very tempting to tell white lies about a person's work in order to not disappoint them, but these dear people did not, and I couldn't be more pleased. In fact, after I spoke with my supervisor, I happened upon a resident named Matilda sitting and watching the birds, and I sat down to say hello. She said how good it was to see me Sunday, and when I told her how I thought I had messed up the sermon by writing too academically, she just smiled in a grandmotherly way and said it might be just that I need to dust off my old style once again. No fussing and trying to convince me that it wasn't so bad. She just spoke truth in love to me, and I felt *koinonia* in the midst of it. It buoyed my spirit to have all those people still continue to treat me warmly and welcoming even though they didn't enjoy the sermon! I'm not sure why that surprises me so much.

I guess my experience at my home church is that the pastor is so worried about pleasing people that she doesn't succeed in telling the truth in love very often. She glosses over things and says niceties about awful situations that make you wonder if you are really on the same planet. And she treats me differently when I have preached something or done something in a manner that she feels casts the church in a good light or left a good impression on people. She kind of ignores me or brushes things off when I haven't done such an outstanding job. Now that I'm actually writing this down, it's no wonder that it feels good to not be working there with her any longer. As pastors, we cannot be so focused on image. More than anything, I feel strongly that authenticity must take precedence over being "correct" in manner or form. Otherwise, everything feels like a performance and church doesn't become a place where the spirit can move as easily.