

Preached by Dr. David M. Hughes
First Baptist Church
Winston-Salem, NC
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MY STORY

Romans 8:28-29; 12:1-12; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

How do you conclude 22+ years of ministry in a pulpit? Believe me when I say I have wrestled mightily with that question the past few days!

For several years now I have followed the lectionary provided by the Church at large to guide me in my preaching. Preaching from the lectionary has stretched and enriched my preaching, and hopefully benefitted our church.

But these last three Sundays I am departing from the lectionary to tell three stories....

My story as a one person's testimony of God's power to transform lives.

Our story as a congregation, reviewing what God has done and wants to do in and through our church.

And finally, and most important, God's story as we labor together to build his kingdom in our community.

To be a pastor and tell your story to your congregation is a calculated risk. As you pull back the curtain on your own life you risk telling people more than they care to know about their pastor. You risk looking like an egomaniac, making it all about you. At the same time you risk disillusioning people who thought you had it more together than you really did. Even so, I want to update my story of transformation, and how it relates to what I am about to do.

When I was a child growing up in a Baptist church, I thought being a

Christian meant affirming certain beliefs and actively participating in my church.

I was baptized at the tender age of seven, publicly rededicated my life an embarrassing number of times, and was at the church almost every time the doors were open. Unless we were sick unto death, my family was at church.

Why? Because being a Christian equaled actively participating in church. The more active you were in church, the better Christian you were.

But that approach to faith came unglued when I attended Wake Forest University in the early 1970s. For the first time in my life, I didn't have to attend church, and I began to sleep in on Sunday mornings. More importantly, the doctrines and values I had been taught in church were vigorously challenged in the classroom, and I began to question the truth of Christianity. Eventually I quit church, joined a fraternity, and enjoyed life!

And yet, there was a gnawing emptiness in my soul that would not go away. Slowly but surely, I began to take another look at the Christian faith, thanks in no small part to a coed I was dating named Joani Ray, who was an active member of the college ministry of this church.

Eventually Joani and I got married and moved to Princeton, NJ where I enrolled in seminary, thinking I would get the necessary degrees to teach religion in a university setting. But a funny thing happened on my way to a Ph.D. My faith came together and I felt called into church ministry. Eventually, I did earn a Ph.D., but my primary calling in life seemed to be to serve the local church.

That calling led me to churches in Baltimore, Maryland; Bagdad, Kentucky; and Elkin, North Carolina before landing me here in 1991. **As I look back on those days, I realize my faith was defined by the work I did for God.** Being a Christian meant serving God as an effective pastor. The better a pastor I was, the better a Christian I was.

Complicating matters was the obsession I had with success. I had been elected to

a number of offices and won a number of awards in my life, and yet somehow these successes were never completely satisfying. I always could have, should have done better.

So my successes in ministry were never enough. And my failures were deeply painful. When things didn't go as I had hoped, when people were unhappy with me, when I didn't meet my own goals I often felt like a failure. And I assumed God considered me a failure, too.

Over time, I began to notice other troubling issues as well. For example, my Christian talk consistently ran ahead of my walk. I was keenly aware that I wasn't personally experiencing all that I was preaching. When you are preaching and teaching week in and week out, you risk becoming a talking head in a way your life can't possibly match. I talked warmly about the love of God when God felt distant. I preached movingly about the grace of God when I felt like a failure.

And for all my talk about the practice of spiritual disciplines, I was sporadic at best in my own practice. I remember all too well the week I was too busy preparing a sermon on prayer to actually pray. And over time I fell into the habit of only reading scripture to prepare for the next sermon, bible study, funeral, or wedding.

For a season I did manage to memorize scripture. At one point I had the entire Sermon on the Mount committed to memory! Memorizing scripture is a wonderful exercise, and I still do it. But I soon came to see that it was one thing to recite, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," and quite another to live like it.

The worst part of it all is that I had no clue what to do about getting my own spiritual life together. Which is rather embarrassing to admit after 7 years of theological education and decades of church ministry!

Meanwhile, I was also noticing a growing weariness in my soul. I remember thinking the weariness would go away with time away at the beach. But it didn't. I kept

grinding away, of course, because that's what the job required. But I privately began to wonder if I could survive the ministry until I retired.

This state of weariness and discouragement came to a head at the conclusion of our Heritage and Hope capital funds campaign six years ago. The irony of it all is that the campaign went very well, and this sanctuary received a beautiful face lift as a result. But when all the celebrations were done I realized I had precious little left in my spiritual tank.

It was during this moment of struggle that I first became aware of the Transforming Center, founded by Ruth Haley Barton. Many of you remember that we invited Ruth to speak here to encourage us to renew our spirit even as we renewed our facilities. Sensing my sagging spirit, Ruth invited me to attend a two year program for pastors and church leaders called The Transforming Community. Another community was about to start, and she assured me it would help me where I needed it most—in the transformation of my own soul.

Frankly, I was suspicious of this claim. Like most pastors, I get a steady stream of invitations to this seminar and that conference, promising to turn me into Billy Graham and my church into Willow Creek. Ruth's invitation sounded like one more example of hype that I had stopped believing long ago. *Besides, I had privately given up ever seeing my life changed, and had decided the only way forward was to gut it out for the long haul.*

But providentially, some leaders of our church learned of Ruth's invitation and would not let me say no. They knew I was overdue for a sabbatical leave, and that it would be some time before I got one. They were convinced this would be the perfect bridge to keep me going. So with their strong encouragement, I got on a plane and flew to Chicago, and then taxied 40 minutes north of the city to a Catholic center for the first retreat.

Never have I felt more out of my element than I did the first night of that retreat in April, 2007! I was a southerner in the north, a Baptist in a Catholic center. Worst of all, there was no television to watch, no Internet to surf, no iPod to listen to. After a meal, some introductory teaching, and worship, we were asked to return to our single rooms, unplug from our technology, and be silent until breakfast the next morning.

The silence in that place was deafening, and so was the internal noise of my soul. After an hour, I was ready to come out of my skin! Honestly, if I had driven myself to the center, I might have bailed out! I had a perfectly miserable night alone in that room. But one thing was clear...my soul was anything but well, and I needed help!

That was the beginning of a two year adventure that slowly but surely restored my soul. For the first time in my 55-year-long life, I was being taught in a thoughtful way how to put the essential building blocks of spiritual formation in place so that incrementally, over time God could transform me at the deepest levels of my soul. Our scriptures for today calling all Christ-followers to spiritual transformation stopped just being familiar bible verses, and started becoming personal reality.

Meanwhile, my view of being a Christ-follower began to shift. Following Jesus no longer equaled participating in a local church, or serving God as a successful pastor. Now, it meant receiving God's infinite love for me, and following my deepest desire to be intimate with him. Out of that intimacy, and through the practice of disciplines like solitude and silence, an amazing thing was happening! I was becoming conformed to the image of Christ at deeper and deeper levels, and although I wasn't talking about it, many of you were beginning to notice it in my preaching and demeanor.

As that two-year community came to an end in January 2009, I expected to say goodbye to the Transforming Center and continue to serve as pastor here with new wind in my sails. Much to my surprise I was invited to return to serve as a leader with the next community, and the leadership of our church granted me permission to do so. And

while I did get the opportunity to lead that community, the most important result of that repeat experience was that God led me into even deeper levels of learning and transformation.

Meanwhile, I was meeting scores of pastors and executive leaders of Christian organizations. It didn't matter whether they led mega churches of thousands, or small churches of 100. Their stories were much like mine—the wells of their souls had run dry, they were weary in body and soul, and they had not a clue what to do other than keep grinding it out. I found myself being drawn more and more to these colleagues in ministry, and energized by the thought of helping them launch their own journeys of soul transformation.

Now, amazingly enough, I have the opportunity to do that as I become the first Executive Director of the same Transforming Center that helped me recover my soul. I am so excited about the prospect of helping church leaders from around the country start this journey, for as Ruth Barton often says, “the most important thing we bring to ministry is a transforming soul.”

But I must quickly add that I am deeply grateful to you, FBC, because without you this opportunity would never have happened. You encouraged me to get involved with the Transforming Center, and then allowed me to stay involved even at some cost to you. The benefit is that for a season you got back a new pastor. Now, you have an emissary, an extension of you working with the Church at large, helping church leaders minister out of souls that have been dramatically altered by the author and finisher of our faith.

One final word. This journey of transformation is not restricted to pastors. It is for every living, breathing soul. Many of you are already well on your way, and others are not far behind. If you have yet to start the journey, do not despair! I can assure you God is ready when you are. And if I can do it, so can you.

I'll be the first to admit if you make this journey there's no predicting where it will lead you. But regardless, God will be there. And that's all that really matters.