



Clerg-E



An E-Zine for Ministers - September 2007

What's A Minister to Do With Harry Potter?

By Bass Mitchell

Unless you are from Mars, you have heard that it is pretty much Harry Potter Year here on Plant Earth with a new movie that has just been released and the final book recently published. There seems to be at least three responses to Harry.

Anger



One response is that some people are mad about them, upset, angry. Why? Some are literary

critics who think they just aren't that good, while others oppose them on religious grounds. Some churches have even had bonfires to burn the books. One man interviewed said that they did this because they were convinced these books were evil and a great danger to children and youth, that they would lure them into the occult. When asked if he had ever seen one of the movies or read any of the books, he admitted that he had not.

Crazy

Another response is from a lot of people who are also mad about these books and movies – but mad crazy about them. My daughter is one of them. I got an email from her this week. She was so excited because she had

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a ticket to the first midnight showing of the new movie, and also the newest Harry Potter book was going to be delivered right to her door. She said that she would probably stay up all night reading it! She's not alone, of course. These books have sold hundreds of millions of copies and have been published in 63 languages.

So What?

And then there's another group who could care less and wish the whole thing would go away, you know, like anything



about Paris Hilton! They can't understand why so many people are mad in one way or another about Harry.

Where I Was

For the longest time I was in the third group. The stories just did not sound all that interesting to me. So I was slow hopping aboard the Hogwarts Express (for you Muggles that's the train that takes the students to school). But my daughter and so many others were talking about the books and started asking for my opinion about them. I thought I'd better read at least one. I ended up reading them all and I've come to some conclusions about them.

I Can Understand

First, I can understand and respect those who are mad about Harry in terms of being concerned about the possible negative impact they might have on children. These books are not, in my opinion, appropriate for young children. The books, as they go along, get darker and darker, and I feel are just too intense for young children. And it is also true that there is a growing new age movement that makes use of occult-like practices and beliefs that could well be attractive to some impressionable youth. So if we allow our children to read these books, we need to help them understand that things like magic, witchcraft, spells, are not real, they are things a writer uses to tell a story. They certainly are not things Christians believe in or practice. You might well do the same thing with the Wizard of Oz, for example, and even a good number of television shows. We need to take a more active role in what our children read and watch.

I Can Understand Them, Too

The second conclusion I reached after reading the books is that I can also understand why zillions of other people are mad about Harry in terms of loving these books. I think they are well written, often funny, and insightful. As I read them, they

are not primarily about magic, wizards, or some fantasyland. They are very much about the real world in which you and I and our children and youth live every day. They deal with issues like growing up, discovering who you are, what your gifts are, using them well. These books are about friendship and how the choices we make often make us. They deal with loss, death, power, injustice, evil and the overcoming of evil. And as strange as it may sound, the main theme that underlies these books, as I read them, is love, a love so great that persons would sacrifice their lives for others.

Not Of But In the World

The third thing I learned was that it really was not a helpful position for me to just not care or ignore this phenomenon. I think we Christians cannot stick our heads in the sand. We need to be aware of what is going on in our world. We are not *of* the world but we are still *in* it. I strongly feel we should be on the lookout for ways we can share our faith in our time. There are opportunities all around us to present the Gospel – the Good News of God's love. That Gospel does not change; however, we must share it in ways that modern people can identify with and understand.

Jesus took images and events right out of the everyday life of his time to teach persons about God and God's love.



Karl Barth, the great German theologian, is credited with saying that a preacher (and I would also add the

church) should hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, bringing the two together. In other words, relate our faith to today. I would suggest that in addition to the newspaper we also hold movies and books and even music. We need, you see, a

firm grip on the Scriptures and our faith, but we also need to know our times, to be ready to use images, metaphors from our culture to help persons hear the Gospel in a fresh way.

I was teaching a class in college some time after the Star Wars movies came out. The class was really into those movies. So, I used those movies to help them understand the Book of Revelation, because the themes in it are very much the ones that George Lucas presents in Star Wars. And they got it. They understood it.

When the Lord of the Rings movies came out, based on Tolkien's classic books, all the kids in our church were into those. So, I developed a confirmation class that used parts of those books and movies to help them understand the basics of Christian life. And I really think they got it. They understood.

And I believe that you can do the same thing with the Harry Potter books. In fact, on July 29th and August 5, after our worship services, we held a forum on these books, looking at them from the perspective of our faith. The group included people of all ages – from children to older persons, and the discussions were insightful and stimulating.

I want to share with you just one example of what I found in these books that I think provides a way to speak about our faith to the many persons who are reading them..

Harry is an orphan. His parents, Lily and James, were killed by the evil Lord Voldemort, who craves only power – who is an empty, soul-less shell of a man who does not even resemble a human being any longer (which I find a pretty accurate picture of what happens to anyone who lives only for themselves). Not only did he kill Harry's parents, he tried to kill Harry (though Harry

was still in diapers), leaving a scar on Harry's forehead. Voldemort failed. Dumbledore, headmaster at the school Harry attends, explains at the end of the first book why Voldemort could not kill Harry. Listen to his words:

"It was love, you see, the love of his mother that led her to sacrifice her life for him. In a way it was the shedding of her blood that saved Harry's life. That love left a far greater mark on Harry than evil ever could."

Is it just me or does this sound slightly familiar?

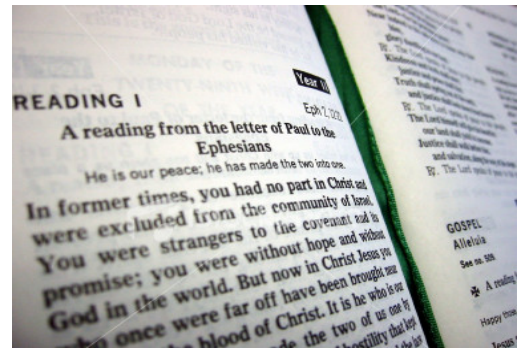
The heart of our faith is contained in that simple verse we read today – John 3:16 – that God so loved not just one person but the whole world that God sent His only beloved Son, who willingly gave his life on a cross to save us, to give us abundant and eternal life! That is how much you are loved! What Harry's mother did for him, Jesus did for us all. His love has marked us, too. It is the mark that was placed on our foreheads when we were baptized...it is the mark of the cross (+) the sign that we are protected by the greatest power of all – the love of God.

I'm not mad about Harry in terms of being overly concerned about the harm these books might do, nor am I overly enthralled with them. What I am mad about, what excites me, is God's love. And if I can use something from today's culture to help more persons feel the same way, I will.

The bottom line is that more than anything else I want for myself and for you is to fall madly in love with God, for God is madly in love with you. If you don't believe it, just remember the Mark – the Cross. Amen.

PREACHING THEMES FROM THE REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

Each edition of *Clerg-E* will preview upcoming passages from the Revised Common Lectionary, giving some commentary on them and some possible preaching themes.



For September 2007

Proper 17 (22) Jeremiah 2:4-13 Psalm 81:1, 10-16
September 2, 2007 or or Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 Luke 14:1, 7-14
Sirach 10:12-18 Psalm 112

Radical Hospitality. In his fine book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Bishop Robert Schnase writes "Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Radical Hospitality. Out of genuine love for Christ and for others, their laity and pastors take the initiative to invite, welcome, include, and support newcomers and help them grow in faith as they become part of the Body of Christ." He gives some examples of what he means by "radical Hospitality." This is, in fact, the first of the five characteristics he explores. We are presently using this book in preparation for our annual planning retreat.

The Epistle and Gospel lessons for today both deal with a theme that might well be called, "Radical Hospitality." Hebrews 13:2 says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." And in Luke 14:12-14 Jesus says that when we plan a banquet or feast the guest list should include people we might not often even think about – the poor, crippled, lame, the blind.

This might be a good sermon to help your church explore what it would look like if the congregation practiced "Radical Hospitality." What attitudes and habits would that require? What specific things would be done?

In my own church, United Methodist, we have a catchy national slogan, "Open Hearts, Open Minds Open Doors." It has a radical hospitality ring to it but I fear it is more slogan than reality. What would happen if we actually put it into practice?

Accept No Substitute. Quite frequently I get something in the mail or hear a commercial that tells me, "Here's the real thing. The best. Accept no substitute. No imitation. There are a lot of them out there but they can't match ours." I must say that I have been "burned" quite frequently trying to get a bargain or save money rather than spending a little more and getting something of higher quality. There's something to that "accept no substitutes" saying.

If I had to summarize what Jeremiah talks about today, "Accept No Substitutes" would be pretty accurate. The people are being accused of unfaithfulness and stupidity. They have been like a people who would, through great effort, hewn out for themselves cisterns, holes in soft limestone, as wells, to hold rainwater, when all the while right beside them free and abundant was a never-ceasing spring of fresh water. In a land that still suffers drought, cisterns were often made and the

insides plastered to catch rainwater. But they often cracked and the water seeped out, so they were not reliable. But also the water in them was often stale and polluted. No one in their right mind would choose a cistern over a spring. But this is exactly what the people, God's people had done. They had forsaken God, a fountain of living water, for cisterns, broken cisterns at that (Baal worship) that could not satisfy their thirst and was totally unreliable. Baal was the Canaanite sky god thought to bring rain and fertility. He was a god (many gods and goddesses) one could control, could manipulate for one's own benefit. The worship of Baal promised them something they thought they could not get from God - for what they thought would enrich them, assure them productivity and prosperity. The irony is that this is the one direction in which they would find none of these things! This was but a cistern that, at a distance, seemed to promise a lot of water, but when approached and the bucket let down, was empty or worse polluted water. They were accepting a substitute when they could have had the real thing, the far better thing. Indeed, for Jeremiah, there was no substitute!

I think the Hebrews reading today also addresses this: "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me.' " (13:5-6). The great cistern for people in my country, America, is materialism. We get the message in so many ways that the more things we have, the more money we can make, the happier we will be. We have "In God We Trust" on our currency but that is really a joke or worse blasphemy. The most popular people for us are those who are wealthy, who are success stories, who come along with their books and tapes and videos trying to tell us how we can be prosperous like them in three easy steps or less or even overnight. And we buy into it. That cistern looks awfully appealing. But it turns out to be a very poor substitute for the real thing – for what we truly need – a relationship on trust in and dependence upon God.

Proper 18 (23)
September 9, 2007

Jeremiah 18:1-11
or
Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalms 139:1-6, 13-18
or
Psalms 1

Philemon 1-21 Luke 14:25-33

On Becoming Spiritually Literate. One of the outstanding characteristics of the prophets is that they were able to read the world spiritually. They were always looking for God, listening for some word from God. Often this came to them not in some great spectacular vision, though that sometimes happened (like Isaiah in the temple), but in the normal course of everyday life. Hosea's message is shaped by the painful experiences in this relationship with Gomer, his wife. We saw how Amos, for example, receives profound messages from God through seeing a plumb line and a basket of ripening fruit. Last Sunday we saw how Jeremiah did the same while seeing someone digging a cistern. Today he is out and about again. This time he passes the local potter and while standing watching the man work receives a word from God. My homily for this week is based on a similar experience. I entitled it, "Conversation With a Potter."

I am convinced that what the prophets had we can have. We, too, can grow in our ability to read all of life spiritually. There is so much to hear if we take time to listen. So much to see if we pay attention and know where and how to look.

I think a key to this is living in expectation. If I know any moment that a friend will come by, or call, or email or contact me in some way, I will be paying attention. I will be sensitive, alert. I know he is going to call. I think it's the same with God. God is always with us, always seeking to communicate with us. When we really believe that and live like it, every moment of every day

There are times in our lives when we must face up to the truth about ourselves and admit our sins, take responsibility. To do otherwise brings far more hurt and pain for us and others.

The truth really does set us free. Trying to hide it, to cover it up, enslaves us.

Confession is good for the what? Right. For the soul. Keeping it inside us eats away at our souls like a poison.

Paul does say what a miserable sinner he is, but look at what he says time and time again in the same breath:

"But God was merciful..." (vs. 13b)... "Our Lord poured out his abundant grace on me...the worst of all sinners" (vs. 14, 15).

The implication is that if God's grace could do all of this for me, the worst of sinners, then it can do the same for you.

We can't truly experience this overflowing, wondrous grace and forgiveness until we freely, honestly admit with Paul that we need it, that we, too, are sinners, one of the worst of them.

<u>Proper 20 (25)</u> September 23, 2007	Jeremiah 8:18-9:1	Psalm 79:1-9		
	or	or	I Timothy 2:1-7	Luke 16:1-13
	<i>Amos 8:4-7</i>	<i>Psalm 113</i>		

Think Globally, Act Locally. If I had to sum up this passage from Paul in 1 Timothy 2:1-7, I would say, "Think Globally, Act Locally."

John Wesley reportedly said, "The world is my parish." Paul was saying that same thing here for all of us. God's concern is a global one, is universal. God loves everyone. Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. It is God's desire that the whole world know the truth, that all be saved. It is God's desire, therefore, that we pray for all people, including leaders.

Paul had everyone in mind. He saw the whole forest but he also saw each tree. He acted locally. Wherever he was, he shared his faith, he proclaimed the Good News, he prayed for the local leaders. We can think so globally that we get overwhelmed sometimes by the problems everywhere. Or, we can be so general in our prayers that we forget to be specific, to see the needs right at our doorsteps, in our communities where we can act locally, can make a difference.

A little boy was walking along the beach. Each time he saw a starfish washed up on the beach, he put it back into the water. "You can't save all those starfish," someone told him. "I can save these," he replied, and kept on his walk down the beach.

Imagine what a difference we could make globally if we acted like this locally, if each of us did what we could in the day of Christ where we are to make a difference, to pick up starfish, to heal, to forgive, to light a candle in the darkness.

Proper 21 (26)
September 30,
2007

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
or
Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16
or
Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

The Difference (Luke 16:19-31). One night a man had a dream. He had died and stood before God. He was given a choice of the up elevator or the down, to heaven or hell.

"Could I check them out first?" he dares to ask.

Surprisingly the answer comes back, "Certainly."

"Well, let's check out hell first."

So down he goes. The doors open and there before him is a huge banquet table with the most delicious food he has ever seen. People are sitting all around it. But they look hungry, starved, in fact. Then he notices that their arms seem fixed at the elbows so that they cannot bend them. They cannot eat.

"Well, let's try up," he says, stepping into the elevator.

Soon the doors open. Startled, he sees the same scene as below - a large table, delicious food, and many people sitting around it with their elbows also unable to bend. But there is one difference - they all look fed, full, happy.

"I don't understand," the man says. "How did you...?"

Seeing his confusion, one of the persons at the table explained, "Oh, you've just come from the other place. The difference between there and here, you see, is that we have learned to feed one another," and he took his fork and fed the person next to him who did the same for him.

Lectionary Resources

Homiliesbyemail.com has tons of lectionary resources. The basic one provides an exegesis, homilies, sermons starters, illustrations, children's messages, and worship aids – all for only \$59.95 a year. For free samples, email Debbie@homiliesbyemail.com

"I Love My Church"

This is a stewardship program developed by Bass. It can be used over five weeks or compressed for one Sunday. Everything you need is included in the packet, which is sent by an email attachment and/or download. Power point slides are also available. For more information, visit the website at homiliesbymemail.com or email debbie@homiliesbyemail.com

Sermon of the Month

Clerg-E accepts submissions for consideration for Sermons of the Month. Send them to clerg-e@homiliesbyemail.com and include if possible a digital photo and brief bio information.

Buying Land in Anathoth

Texts: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

I Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

By Bass Mitchell

In the text from Jeremiah, he buys a field. Why in the world would he do that?

He must have been just a little crazy or at least foolish. Apparently he didn't even believe all the things he had been saying...that the stock market was about to crash, real estate was about to bottom out- for the Babylonians were coming! They were already at the city gates! There goes the neighborhood!

But Jeremiah buys a field anyway. Why?

It is a field that has been in his own family, land near his hometown of Anathoth (a few miles north of Jerusalem). He had the first rights (perhaps as the oldest male) to redeem or purchase it. So maybe he did it for sentimental reasons...family and all that... But the Babylonians were coming and they were not family! They would not recognize any deeds or any family sentiments.

But Jeremiah buys the field anyway. Why?

Maybe as an investment, you say. Real estate is a good investment usually. But the Babylonians were coming and soon they would be the landlords.

Poor old Jeremiah. He should have stuck with being a prophet and preacher, don't you think? He was no businessman.

Jeremiah buys a field...what could he have been thinking?

Well, Jeremiah was indeed making an investment...an investment in the future. His investment was not money - but something far more valuable to him - faith, not in a piece of land or in silver or gold but in the Creator of all land, the One who owned everything, the One on whom he knew his future and that of his people and their country truly depended.

Jeremiah buys a field as a profound act of faith, an example of hope for a people who were about to lose everything...their homes, their money, their land, even many of them their lives. Their deeds and boundaries and bank accounts were about to mean nothing. All that had given them security before would be taken away...and Jeremiah then vividly acts, buys a field to show his trust in God as the one and only true source of security. Though he did not live to see it, indeed that day came and still is when "houses, fields, and vineyards would be bought and sold again" (Jeremiah 32:15).

How the message must have brought comfort to them in the days and months and years ahead, and even to this day, "Go and tell everyone, Jeremiah bought a field in Anathoth!"

Such faith in the midst of such pain and seemingly hopeless situation is astounding...it is a message I needed right now...perhaps you, too...

Dr. Joey Jeter (who teaches preaching at Brite Divinity School) tells of a time soon after his wife was diagnosed with cancer. It was a hard time for them—a time of surgery, chemo—anger, depression. Some people never understood (especially "under the circumstances" why they would buy a piece of property during that time. They called it "Anathoth" (shared by Darrell Manson).

Jeremiah buys a field when the Babylonians are at the gate. Mr. and Mrs. Jeter buy land in spite of the sound of illness and death knocking at their door. Not financial investments. Money, land has nothing to do with it, really. They were staking their claim not on land but in God. They make a deposit of faith in God's bank of goodness and love and faithfulness, in spite of the circumstances.

My friends, this is a deal we cannot afford to pass up either...

This is real estate we all must own a share of...

It's on the market right now:

FOR SALE: LAND IN ANATHOTH.

Cash or check not accepted. Not needed.

Loans? Not required.

Credit check? None made.

Just take out your trust, no matter the circumstance, and deposit it in God, and the deed is sealed for all time. Amen.



Bass Mitchell serves Epiphany UMC in Vienna, VA. His wife, Debbie, is a graduate student in landscape architecture at Virginia Tech. They have two young adult children. He has written many articles for various publications and has had four books published.

A Prayer Before Entering the Pulpit

I admit to being a fan of the late Fred Rogers or "Mister Rogers," as many knew him. Several bios of his life have been written and I have enjoyed them all. There was something about his gentle, kind, caring spirit that reached out to you even through a television screen. And in a time of computer animation and Muppets, his simple handheld puppets still held a special magic and wonder. I will never forget reading some interviews he gave while I was preparing an article on him shortly after his death. Many things stood out to me but especially something I have taken to heart. It was a prayer he said every time before he went out to tape a program, preach, or speak. It simply said this:

"May some word of mine become Thine. Amen"

That is a prayer I pray each time I sit down to work on a sermon and before going out to lead worship, preach, or teach. I have found it wonderfully centering and comforting. May it also be thus for you.

-Bass

The Lady in the Elevator

Rev. Pamela J. Tinnin



Pam Tinnin

My husband Zack usually gets up earlier than I do, but sometimes we rise together in the dark, stumbling around, our conversation at first limited to those first mumbled greetings. One morning I stepped out onto the back porch to feed the cats. High above the trees that were silhouetted against the sky was the round white moon, its pale glow giving scant light. The only sound in the quiet house was the muted cry of the coyotes that live in the canyon below us. When I heard that howling, I felt a wave of loneliness and thought of all the folks in my eleven years of pastoring who have lost their husbands or wives and gone through the painful process of learning to live without them. What must it be like with no one to share those first morning moments, no voice to break the silence, no comforting

warmth next to you on the couch? Then I remembered the woman I'd seen in the elevator.

It happened when I went to visit Babe Lambert at the hospital. After we chatted and prayed together, I said good-bye and walked down the hall to the elevator. When it arrived, I stepped in and pushed the button. The doors closed and there was that little lurch that always makes my stomach uneasy. I watched the floor lights change...3...then 2...and the elevator stopped. A woman stepped in, tall and elegant and in her sixties, she wore her hair in a sleek, stylish cut, her eyes hidden behind dark glasses. As the elevator began to move, there was a noise like someone choking. I looked at the woman, and if I hadn't seen the tear, just one, moving slowly down her cheek, I wouldn't have guessed the noise had been the sound of weeping. She turned away from me then, her face towards the wall.

You're a pastor, I told myself. Do something. But the light at the top of the door blinked "1" and we were on the ground floor, the doors sliding open. As she brushed past me, I touched her arm, and said, almost in a whisper, "Can I help you?" "No," she answered, her voice sounding angry. "I'm alone now. Nobody can help me." She pushed past an elderly couple waiting nearby, and never looked back. I stood there, watching her walk out the main front door, watching until she turned the corner.

I asked the volunteer at the front counter if she knew her, but she said no. "But I'm only on duty one day a week—ask the nurses upstairs," she suggested. So I found myself back in the elevator, with that same lurch, and that odd sense of rising. At the 2nd floor, I got out and approached the nurses' station. Strangely enough, none of them remembered seeing her. A young, dark-haired nurse said, "Of course, there are a lot of people who leave here crying."

How true...when you spend much time at a hospital, you see a lot of tears. But the thing that bothered me the most was that the woman in the dark glasses was by herself—she had to endure whatever terrible news she'd received with no one to speak a word of comfort, no one to hold her hand. Trouble finds us all—no one is immune. But when tragedy comes, no one should be alone. After all, we've been given each other to help bear the load.

For several years now a friend of mine has been keeping her eye out for a piece of property. She wants to buy enough land with several larger homes and some smaller cottages so that everyone she cares about can live together in their senior years. She intends to name it "The Alone No More Commune." My husband and I already have our reservations. When I mention this, people usually laugh, assuming that I'm joking. Who knows? I can think of worse ways to spend your later years than in the company of friends, friends who would be there to help you through the tough times and to celebrate the good ones.

Again and again, like that day in the elevator, I see such loneliness, such sadness—people who've lost their partners, men and women struggling to survive on the streets, families fractured by divorce, the stunned survivors of a mass shooting, an Iraqi woman kneeling by the body of her child. I can't help but wonder why we haven't found better ways to care for each other. Perhaps because it seems too hard. Sharing our wealth helps, but it's not always enough to write a check. Sometimes people need a personal, one-on-one response, and that's often the hardest thing of all.

We are disciples of Jesus Christ, called to follow God's commandments. And what is the greatest commandment? We find it in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. When asked, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' There is no commandment greater than these."

There is no commandment greater than these. Of course, we could play the lawyer's game like the one who questioned Jesus, asking "Who is my neighbor?" But we already know the answer. Our neighbor is *anyone* in need...*anyone*.

Well, I tried with the lady in the elevator, right? The truth is, not very hard. I could have run after her into the parking lot. I could have told her that maybe I couldn't help her, but God could. I could have offered right then to take her somewhere for coffee. But I was too worried about looking foolish, too concerned with what people thought, too afraid she'd turn me away again. But the thing is, loving our neighbor *is* putting ourselves out there, accepting risks, taking the chance of making a fool of ourselves.

That long ago morning, as I sat watching the moon's shimmer fade with the morning light, I found myself wondering about something. Do you think if we learned to live as Jesus lived, to love as Jesus loved, it's possible we'd all find a place called "Alone No More?"

Blessings and peace. Pam

Pamela J. Tinnin is a freelance writer, performer, retreat and workshop leader, an editor for the University of California, Berkeley, and a sheep rancher on a mountain ranch in Sonoma County, California. She is ordained in the United Church of Christ and serves as pastor of the Guerneville Community Church-UCC, Guerneville, California. Her first book, "Bit Players in the Big Play," a collaboration with Peter Perry and Bass Mitchell, was released in 2004 by CSS Publishing. She has three adult children and five grandsons aged 3 to 14.

Holy Humor

We are always looking for humor that can be used in preaching, teaching, bulletins, or church newsletters. If you have a joke or something funny that has happened to you, send it to clerg-e@homiliesbyemail.com

What Would You Miss Most?

A friend and his wife were considering traveling to Alaska for a trip that the husband had long dreamed of taking. He kept talking about how great it would be to stay in a log cabin without electricity, to hunt moose, and drive a dog team instead of a car.

"If we decided to live there permanently, away from civilization, what would you miss the most?" he asked his wife.

She replied, "You."

A Little Confused?

The children begged for a guinea pig, and after the usual fervent vows that they alone would care for it, they got one. They named it Danny. Two months later, when Mom found herself responsible for cleaning and feeding the creature, she located a prospective new home for it. The children took the news of Danny's imminent departure quite well, though one of them remarked, "He's been around here a long time--we'll miss him." "Yes," Mom replied, "But he's too much work for one person, and since I'm that one person, I say he goes." Another child offered, "Well, maybe if he wouldn't eat

so much and wouldn't be so messy, we could keep him." But Mom was firm. "It's time to take Danny to his new home now," she insisted. "Go and get his cage." With one voice and in tearful outrage the children shouted, "Danny? We thought you said Daddy!"

Oops

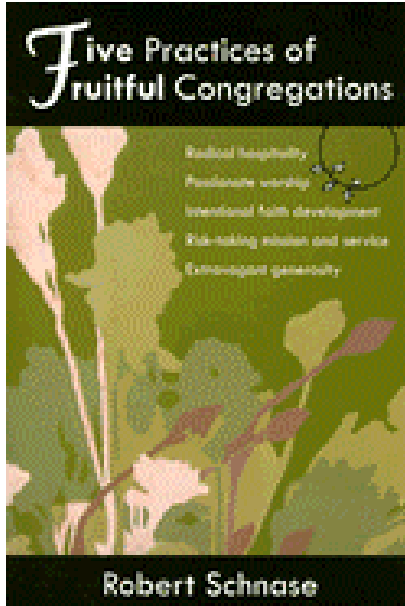
Hospital regulations require a wheelchair for patients being discharged. However, while working as a student nurse, I found one elderly gentleman--already dressed and sitting on the bed with a suitcase at his feet--who insisted he didn't need my help to leave the hospital.

After a chat about rules being rules, he reluctantly let me wheel him to the elevator. On the way down I asked him if his wife was meeting him.

"I don't know," he said. "She's still upstairs in the bathroom changing out of her hospital gown."

Lectionary Leaf

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Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations

Reviewed by the Rev. Tom Berlin tberlin@florisumc.org

How can churches today be as vital as the early Christian communities described in the Book of Acts? How can we reclaim the fruitful piety of the early Methodists? *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, a new book by United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase, describes five foundational practices to help congregations be fruitful in ministry to their members and in service to the world.

The book's goal is to help congregational leaders examine their ministries and assess church practices. But it is much more than detached ministry evaluation. Schnase invites readers to consider what life is like to those entering church for the first time – a challenge to those of us who cut our teeth as infants on the back pew of the church. He helps us see the church through the eye of the visitor or new member, pushing us to remember what life was like before we first felt the comfortable embrace of the church.

After establishing this point of reference, Schnase invites us to reflect, "Do we really long for this newcomer to know the joy of the Christian life?" "Do we share the desire that compelled Jesus, the apostles, and John Wesley to help others find a vital faith?" This book is an invitation to consider what life would look like if we truly lived in God's kingdom and ordered our church around practices that invite others to join us.

Analyzing the basic building blocks of congregational life, Schnase goes on to define the key practices of fruitful congregations. These practices include:

1. Radical hospitality – the active desire to bring people to Christ and his church
2. Passionate worship – fresh encounters with God that transform lives
3. Intentional faith development – learning together in community
4. Risk-taking mission and service – an outward focus that changes the world and invigorates the church
5. Extravagant generosity – sharing that exceeds all expectations

The adjective in each of these phrases is the key to understanding what makes it fruitful. Without the modifier "radical," hospitality describes the status quo. Worship, unless it is "passionate," is business as usual for the church, and so on. As Schnase points out in his final chapter, God longs for the church to be so much more than it often is today in the United Methodist tradition.

Each chapter provides biblical insight and is grounded in Wesleyan theology. Case studies and examples are helpful in understanding how the practices can be applied. And those using the book with small groups or leadership teams will find discussion questions at the end of each chapter.

Five Practices is a thought-provoking book for congregational leaders who want to see the church fulfill its mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ.