

Don't Fuck the Flock:
Relational Context and Sin
An Essay for Prairie Group, 2015
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In early 2008, when it was clear that the Unitarian Universalist Church, Rockford, might be my next settled ministry, I began asking a question. I had reviewed their ministerial record, including that section where congregations list their previous ministers and their reason for departure. I recognized a few of those names, including Anthony Perrino, who served the church from 1972-1977, before he departed for Santa Barbara. I don't know where I first heard Tony's name and Tony's sins; it might have been from you, Kendyl, when I was your intern. But I knew something of the story.

So I asked. I asked the interim: Did Tony misconduct himself when he was there? The answer: "I haven't heard anything." I asked the search committee - some were shocked to know that in Santa Barbara, Tony had sex with at least 26 women in the church. Others knew the story and knew that Tony very publicly had an open-marriage, but they were unaware of any abuse within the church. I asked the District Executive, who knew nothing. Likewise the transitions director.

So I began my ministry there, suspecting but not knowing. Within days, the strangeness of the congregation around issues of sexuality and power started to show. To this day, I can't even articulate what it was, but there was something weird. So I asked. In a sermon at the end of September, I said, look, we can't move forward without naming the past. Tony left here and went to Santa Barbara and abused his power sexually. And if there is something you want to talk about, I'll listen.

Folks told me their stories in the line out the door of the sanctuary.

Of course he slept around. He showed up at the singles group that met at church and went home with whomever would take him. One woman said she felt good that he was so interested in her, she didn't think it was wrong and didn't know why I brought it up.

The next week, I went to the minister's retreat, my first in my new chapter. I mentioned all this and one of our long-tenured colleagues took me aside later. He said, you know it wasn't just Tony, right?

He told me everything he knew. And he knew a lot.

Between 1945 and 2008, the church I serve now had four ministers who served for more than three years. At least three of those four committed acts we now clearly define as ministerial misconduct.

It's possible that this is why the Program Committee asked me to write this paper. Or maybe, after assigning so many of you topics over the last three years, such an assignment was inevitable. For reasons in addition to our discipline, I could not say no. I feel strongly about this topic, but I do not relish the task of speaking about it before you.

Why was there such silence to my questions? Why did the authorities, who should have known, and told me, not know? How could that be?

We are so quiet about these things. Less than we were seven years ago, but still. Some cherished colleagues, our mentors and friends and relatives, even our beloveds, have engaged in harmful, abusive behavior. We recognize their humanity and do not wish to be cruel. We are instructed by our covenant to not speak ill of our colleagues, and so we might gossip quietly, but it is something else to name names in public. And I know in this room there are those who are survivors of clergy misconduct, who are after-pastors in such systems, and there have been, if not are, members of this group who have engaged in behavior we would now say was out of bounds. This topic is important. I could not say no to the assignment. But I do not relish the task.

In the modern age of Western philosophy, relational context made little difference for morality or the definition of sin. A Kantian Deontologist would ask whether the act was just. Kant searched for universality in morality; that what was just was just no matter who the persons involved might be.¹ In practice, this tended to make universal the social norms of German upper-class male philosophers. "Sin" was not used as the term to describe bad acts, of course - we might call them "unjust" or "against our duty." Utilitarian, or consequential, ethics looked instead to the results. Was more happiness produced, or less? (If she married him, then it wasn't a sin. But if it tore apart the church, well, then he sinned.)

¹ It goes without saying that this is a gross simplification, as is the foregoing description of utilitarianism. I hope my college ethics professors will forgive me.

Feeling that these two approaches were unhelpful in capturing the power of relationships, stories, and the nuance of actual ethical matters, Phillipa Foot and others turned to the virtue ethics of Aristotle. Knowing the context of the actors and the situation they found themselves in, we would tell the story of what happened and judge the presence or absence of virtues such as courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom. Aristotle's own sense of relational context was deeply hierarchal - one could treat women and slaves in ways one would never treat a free, well-educated male citizen. Yet, his understanding that the relationships between the people involved matter for ethical discernment is more accurate than a faux-universalist standard. There is something wrong with us if we treat strangers like our best friends, or vice versa. We do not speak to a young child the same way we talk to the Mayor, and we can do things with our own body, money, or time that we ought not do with the bodies, money, or time of others - at least not without their permission.

Our understanding of sexual and other misconduct in ministry is grounded in this virtue-ethics understanding of relational context. The person we serve in professional ministry has a different ethical status to us than the person we do not serve. All people are due ethical conduct, but our interactions with some persons face a heightened scrutiny.

That relational status matters for definitions of misconduct is not unique to ministry. As Stephens writes, "Doctors, lawyers, social workers, teachers, law enforcement officers" all have a "Fiduciary duty," a "professional obligation not to exploit others . . . For those in such roles, sexual misconduct is never simply an "affair." It is a violation of the power and authority of the professional role."² That professional role, for us, is also a spiritual role, as Deborah Pope-Lance put it in her 2011 Berry Street Essay:

In ministry, relationships are the basic tool of the trade. Through a minister's relating pastoral care is extended, spiritual life nurtured, psychological health promoted, divinity experienced, and grace mediated. . . . Regardless of our desires or our opinions about whether or not ministers should be allowed to form special relationships with those they serve, we ministers already have a special relationship---a ministerial relationship. . . . The special relationship gives us as ministers a capacity, an opportunity, a power, to deeply influence, to profoundly change, and to potentially transform the lives of those we serve.

² Darryl W. Stephens, "Fiduciary Duty and Sacred Trust", in *Professional Sexual Ethics*, ed. Jung and Stephens.

Because of this power, ministerial relationships are said to have boundaries. These boundaries set limits on the sorts of activities that should occur in the congregant-minister relationship. They maintain the purpose of the special relationship, e.g. to serve the congregant. Boundaries provide for a safe, effective container for the exercise of ministry's power.

Crossing these boundaries is unethical because it violates the trust, misuses the power, and shifts the focus of the congregant-minister relationship. When boundaries are crossed, the special relationship loses its transformative potential but retains its influence, its privileged access, and its power.³

Without an understanding of ministry as having this transformative potential and special relationship, we cannot understand the true sin of misconduct. It is not that we have violated a rule imposed from outside, or that we have created potentially devastating consequences for the congregant, the congregation, our colleagues, and the tradition as a whole. It is, instead, that we have acted in a way that betrays both our calling and the trust placed in us by others. We have acted with vice instead of virtue, and used our authority inappropriately.

Yet, using relational context to understand the dangers of ministerial misconduct can present other dangers. Stories don't have universal interpretations. The richer the story, the more we might feel a sense of empathy for the misconducting minister. We can tell the story not as betrayal of role but as faithfulness to the mystery of the human heart. There is something in us, isn't there, that longs for the romantic rule-breaker? The love that cannot be stopped by social mores? Unitarian Universalists have often seen supporting such relationships as a matter of justice. We are standing on the side of love, aren't we?⁴

Sometimes we understand clergy sexual misconduct, in particular, as a violation because of unequal power relationships between clergy and lay-person. Some of the essays in *Professional Sexual Ethics* take this tack. The congregant comes to us in their vulnerability and need, and sees us as God-like in our authority (congregants need not believe in God to perform this transference). And, often, clergy do have a measure of power over congregants. But relying on "unequal power" will quickly complicate matters.

³ Deborah Pope-Lance, "Whence We Come and How, and Whither."

⁴ Indeed, Tony Perrino preached, in his very first sermon in Rockford, that his open marriage was more responsive to the free spirit of Love than the hidebound tradition of monogamy. It was one of the sermons he did not plagiarize from other colleagues.

Sometimes we ministers often feel powerless in our congregations.⁵ And, famously, Carolyn Buck Luce is reputed to have protested vigorously any description of her relationship with Forrest Church as one where she had less power than he did.

It is indeed problematic for us to assume that we have great power over our inherently weak congregants, and to place the prohibition against misconduct on this ground. It is not about power, Pope-Lance and Stephens remind us, it is about our role. Power is malleable and changeable from context to context. But our identity as minister is fixed so long as we shall serve. The law may see clergy misconduct as an abuse of power (and in 27 states, it is spelled out as illegal), but we are asked to see it, instead, as a violation of relational trust and sacred potentiality.

There is another danger with using relational context to understand the violation of clergy misconduct. When we tell the stories of ministers who have fallen into sin, we place the sinner at the heart of the story. We place the minister at the center of the narrative, and reason about the ethics of the act from the minister's point of view. What did the minister do and why did they do it? (Deontological and Utilitarian ethics make this problem, if anything, worse, by locating the discernment of duty or consequence in the hands of the potential violator.) Do we even know the names of those lay persons who are survivors of clergy sexual misconduct? Unless they become ministers themselves, do we know them at all?

What might it mean if we re-centered the conversation away from *our* misconduct and placed more emphasis on the experience of the people of the church? Imagine a person, both whole and broken, who seeks in the church a ground for meaning, a place of community, and a home for their heart. Away from the emptiness and violence of the outside world, they seek in the church a safer place to live their lives. Can we tell their stories alongside the ones we know so well?

The stories should not be hard to find. "One in 33 American adult women who go to church regularly has been the victim of a sexual advance by her religious leader."⁶ This comes from the research of Dr. Diana Garland, Dean of Baylor's School of Social Work. She says "most people assume that it is just a matter of a few charismatic

⁵ By analogy, something similar happens with professors. Sometimes a complaint from a student can end a career. See, for example, "I'm a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me" by Edward Schlosser, June 3, 2015, Vox.

⁶ Jill Scoggins, "Abuse of Power" *Baylor Magazine*, Winter 2009-2010. at <http://www.baylor.edu/alumni/magazine/0802/news.php?action=story&story=65592>.

leaders preying on vulnerable followers . . . What the research tells us, however, is that clergy sexual misconduct with adults is a widespread problem in congregations of all sizes and occurs across denominations.”⁷ Garland’s study includes first-person testimony from survivors of clergy sexual abuse. One was a seminary student, faced with vocational doubts.

One Ash Wednesday, Carolyn was in tears, full of doubts about her faith. Her husband suggested that she contact the pastor for guidance. The pastor told her that she was in crisis and offered to rearrange his schedule to provide a counseling session at her home. After the first session, the pastor told Carolyn that he "thinks of her as a man thinks of a woman" and hugged her.

Despite her misgivings about this incident, because of his position in the church Carolyn trusted him and benefitted from the spiritual guidance. As they continued to meet, the pastor told Carolyn that they were "spiritual lovers" and mentioned St. Francis and St. Claire, knowing they were her favorite saints. On another occasion, he kissed her on the lips in his office, but said it was a mistake and would never happen again. He told her he was concerned about her marriage. Carolyn recalls he used a particular Bible story to encourage her to forsake her children and husband and follow him.

One day in counseling he raped her. Afterwards, he said, "I knew you wanted that. We need to keep this secret because it would ruin the church." The pastor told Carolyn that God had put her on earth for him, and used the language of incarnational theology to make this point. He sexualized the liturgy and Bible stories.

"If this was any other man, I would have known it was not right," said Carolyn. "But church is supposed to be a sanctuary. I couldn't make sense of what was happening. He broke my connection to all that is holy."

Carolyn said all she had ever wanted was to serve the church and teach her children to love God, but all that has been taken away from her.⁸

The pastor in Carolyn’s case engaged in all the typical behavior of sexual abuse: identification of a vulnerable person, grooming, secrecy, threats, and isolation. One of the reasons to give more attention to the stories of the survivors of misconduct is to

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ At <http://www.baylor.edu/clergysexualmisconduct/index.php?id=63776>. A video of Carolyn’s story can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ra3-hfi-yRI>. It is heartbreaking.

disrupt the narrative of romance and innocence. One can imagine that the pastor in this case had a very different story to tell: how Carolyn, almost a colleague, not *really* a congregant, and he connected at a deep vocation level. Though she was married, it was unhealthy, as far as he could tell, and he was trying to rescue her from a bad situation. He made subtle advances, and she continued to seek him out and spend time with him, indicating her interest. The outmoded rules of his denomination required secrecy, but they loved each other and so what were they to do?

Knowing Carolyn's story, we find the pastor's story incredulous. But if we didn't hear that story first, what might we think? If the pastor was our friend? If the pastor said, she's just saying all that to appease her violent husband? This is not just a question of "who we believe" or even "what happened." It is a larger epistemological shift. As liberation theologians claim that a displaced farmworker understands the world economy better than the central banker 4000 miles away, we might admit Carolyn knows what happened better than the pastor does.

As Pope-Lance says, the true nature of clergy misconduct - be it sexual abuse, financial misconduct, bullying behavior, or something else - is narcissism. "A self-attentive and self-referential attitude. An obliviousness to others' needs. A lack of empathy."⁹ We place our needs at the heart of the ministry, instead of the needs of those we serve. Or we delude ourselves into thinking that we know their needs, and that what they need is, conveniently, what we want. To center the stories of survivors is to challenge this narcissism and self-delusion.

Narcissistic ministry expresses itself not just in sexual or financial misconduct, of course. Even those who stay on this side of that line might forget, sometimes, that they are not the purpose of the church. Every time we preach what is on *our* heart instead of what is on the hearts of our listeners, we engage in a kind of narcissism. (My predecessor once preached a mother's day sermon entitled "give yourself a hand." No other details were given in the newsletter. The actual topic of the sermon was masturbation. The sermon praised the practice, and included some 20 euphemisms for it. There's "unnecessary sexual innuendo"¹⁰ and then there is using the pulpit for a kind of spiritual and sexual assault.)

When we ask, "why are they out to get *me*?" we erase the usually genuine priorities and passions of faithful people. Those who serve after misconduct often find it

⁹ Pope-Lance, "Whence We Come and How, and Whither."

¹⁰ John McClure, "Preaching and Sexual Ethics" *Professional Sexual Ethics*, p.160.

is this overall attitude of narcissism and role-confusion that causes difficulty, more than the particular act of transgression. It is why “afterpastors report feeling pushed and pulled [and] describe leaders who manipulate and intrude, who expect too much or too little, who sometimes coerce and threaten.”¹¹ Not just as regards misconduct, but in all of our ministries, we would be well served with a stronger focus on the lives, stories, and spiritual work of the members, friends, and visitors of the congregations and communities we serve.

Another reason to give less emphasis to the actions and motivations of ministers is, paradoxically, that making the question of misconduct mostly about us absolves congregations of responsibility for the care and tending of ministers. It is another kind of narcissism to think that we are the only ones responsible for healthy ministry. In this consumeristic age, such an attitude is a particular violation of our commitments to the priesthood of all believers and to our sense of covenant. There is a reason that multiple ministers often misconduct themselves in the same congregation, sometimes over decades or even hundreds of years. Some systems seem to be fed by conflict, some by sexuality, some by power, and some by crisis. The patterns of abuse are well-grooved, while patterns of health feel like off-road travel.

Healthy congregations play a role in the establishment of boundaries and the health of ministries. There is truth to Jeane Hoefft’s claim that “most of the time, [clergy sexual misconduct] happens when a pastor loses touch with his own emotional needs and turns to inappropriate ways to fulfill them.”¹² But her repeated emphasis (common to these discussions) that “pastors must give attention” or, in her case study, that the pastor “must reflect carefully on her own needs for friendship and intimacy, so that she might choose wisely in caring for herself, for Jason, and the rest of the congregation”¹³ re-inscribes a clergy-centered view of the congregational system. A congregational system that depends only on the pastor for the maintenance of healthy boundaries as well as the pastor’s emotional and material life is a system where misconduct is more likely. It is probably also a system where many members live their own spiritual lives vicariously through the minister and take little to no responsibility for their own soul work, conflict transformation, strategy, or justice ministry.

This is not to say that we should be unaware of our emotional, material, sexual, and friendship needs. We need to be highly aware of these needs; to distinguish

¹¹ Pope-Lance, *ibid.*

¹² Jeane Hoefft, “Pastor/Parishioner Relationships” *Professional Sexual Ethics*. p. 185.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

between healthy and unhealthy needs, and to make effective efforts to meet our needs as best we can in ways that respect the stories and relational context of those we serve. I hope, however, that none of this subsequent discussion of the needs of the minister will decenter the narrative primacy of survivors, or absolve congregational systems of their mutual responsibility for the covenant of the religious community and its clergy leader. Indeed, I hope that a clear-eyed analysis of our emotional, sexual, material, and friendship needs will draw us into more solidarity with those we serve instead of continuing to mark us as separate and apart - as if those we serve do not also sometimes feel lonely, poor, horny, or sad.

Human beings, including clergy, have desires and needs which are legitimate and which are illegitimate, or fantastical. Ralph Helverson wrote that “we have religion when we stop deluding ourselves that we are self-sufficient, self-sustaining, or self-derived.”¹⁴ Yet this spiritual maturity is often lacking in both our wider culture and in our congregations and ministries. Clergy misconduct, be it financial, sexual, or emotional, often arises from an adolescent or colonizing need for power and control. Ministers are sometimes likely to act out in sinful ways when we feel a diminished sense of authority and control over others or over the world at large. Sexual activity, in particular, can be a place where those who feel powerless feel more powerful. To control others and bend them to our most private will and desire can, temporarily, make someone feel like a king, exercising *ius primae noctis* over medieval subjects. Though not exclusively, this is, in our culture, primarily expressed in the sexual domination of men over women. One need not concede with Dworkin that “the hatred of women is a source of sexual pleasure for men its own right”¹⁵ to see that much sexual abuse, committed by clergy or others, is about controlling the bodies and souls of others. When our desire for power is frustrated by congregational resistance, the natural give-and-take of compromise, financial realities, or life in general, some turn to objectification, domination, and abuse as a way to meet these spiritually-immature but all-too-real desires. In this case, the work of mentors, colleagues, and congregations is to preach and teach that such desires for control are spiritually bankrupt.

Other human needs, which clergy share, are both legitimate and vital. It does not excuse misconduct, but some congregational systems which have experienced misconduct time and time again are those same systems most likely to ignore these needs — to reward overwork, value ministerial enmeshment, and provide little space for personal privacy. Sometimes we feel, as Hauerwas puts it, “nibbled to death by

¹⁴ SLT, #654.

¹⁵ Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, p. 138.

ducks.”¹⁶ For those in committed romantic relationships, the church both pulls the minister away, by demanding time and emotional energy, and at the same time pushes the minister to depend on the spouse since they have few other friends. As Hauerwas says, however, “no spouse is required to love another spouse that much.”¹⁷ Single ministers lack even this escape. We are both connected and apart. “Clergy are often desperate to be known by another human being. It is not accidental that sexual relations are often described in the Bible as knowing.”¹⁸

Not all people are sexual, but most are. We crave to know and be known and experience the joy, energy, release and intimacy of sexual connection. Not all people need friendship, but most do. We need people we can share our deepest hearts with, can be real with, and who will be there for us in good and bad — and whom we can be there for in return. These needs for mutuality and meaning are real, human, and good; so long as we meet them in ways that are also mutual, consensual, and honor our sacred trust to others. Many people - not just clergy - struggle to meet these needs in our commodified, lonely, and isolated world. It is another narcissism to think we are the only ones who cannot always easily meet these needs. What is different about us, frankly, is that the opportunity to meet these needs in ways that violate our role responsibility is both easier and more disastrous than many other professions.

After my marriage ended (being an after-pastor didn't cause my divorce, but it didn't help either), I dove too quickly into dating for the first time since college. Just as quickly, I backed away and tried to focus on being happy by myself. I self-imposed a break from any attempt at dating. One Sunday morning, during that break, when I was feeling particularly lonely, I looked out over the congregation. In the second row on my right sat a young woman, a member of the congregation, who I knew well. I'd seen some leadership potential and recruited her for a committee. She was friendly and smart. She was a runner, as I had become. She had recently broken up with her boyfriend. And I had this thought: “It would be easy.”

It would. I would invite her to go for a run - include some other UU runners while we are at it. Have lunch, talk about her future roles in the church. Take it from there. I knew she liked and respected me. It would have been easy. I didn't have to go searching for someone to be with - she was right there.

¹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, “Sexting the Ministry” *Professional Sexual Ethics*, p. 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

I understood, then, how it happens. Not the predatory response, but the needy one. How frustration and temptation and self-rationalization can join forces to create the conditions of misconduct. Sitting in my chair on the stage while the choir sang the anthem, trying to get my head and heart back into focus on the upcoming sermon, I understood how a pastor can get lost on the journey. It is the nature of human beings, not just ministers, to need to be needed.

What does all this have to do with sin?

If we place the experience of survivors of clergy misconduct at the center of our epistemology, in particular, and the lives of those we serve at the heart of our story, more generally, then it seems to me that the constitution of sin is attempting to meet our legitimate human needs in ways that turn those we serve into objects who serve us. Our need for human touch is not a sin - indeed, mutuality and joy is a blessing - but to meet that need in our professional role is a sin. On the other hand, we can also say that attempting to meet the illegitimate, spiritually immature need for power is sinful in whatever way we might try to meet it - through our role or not. Either way, the reason it constitutes a sin is because it treats us as the only actor on the stage, instead of one among many.

With such an understanding, we can clearly acknowledge that we have and will sin. Even if we don't have sex with a person we serve in ministry, or steal money from the congregation we serve, or plagiarize a sermon of a colleague, we have and will sin. From time to time, we will treat other people as objects in our story instead of as actors in their own. We will do it to congregants and colleagues. We will do it to strangers and friends. We will do it to baristas and boyfriends. We will do it to family and friends. We have and we will.

This is not a ministerial sin, it is a human one. We are not that special. This does not mean we humans are evil or that our flesh is corrupted. Sin can be real without being original. But it is a theological matter, a question of making the love for neighbor not just a precept of justice but a matter of narrative authority. We are storytellers, but that does not mean we should tell other people's stories for them; at least not for our own benefit.

When we acknowledge that our needs are deeply human and not unique to ministry, we can, perhaps, do a better job of encouraging congregations to develop systems where all the members and friends seek healthy ways to meet their legitimate needs and mature beyond their adolescent ones. A common characteristic in

congregations where there is misconduct is that laypeople also treat other laypersons as objects to be consumed or controlled instead of actors in their own right. It can be a powerful theological witness to say that sex, in particular, is no sin - it is a blessing. But it is a sin to get it in a way that devalues the agency of others. This goes for us as much as for everyone else.

An understanding of clergy misconduct as misusing our relational role to meet legitimate human needs makes clear what we mean when we say that such misconduct is narcissism. It is narcissism because it assumes that our needs are different than other human beings, and because it then abuses what is different about us - our sacred trust and role - to meet those needs. We can then see the wider context of ministerial misconduct. We all sin sometimes - we all sometimes forget our role or feel more needy than we can contain. Ministerial narcissism isn't a question of "allowed or disallowed" but rather a continuum of self-importance. When we feel ourself slipping down the line, it is time to get clearer about our unmet needs and the proper way and place to meet them. It is a time to confess our sins, to avoid self-righteousness, and recenter the lives of those we serve, and the larger mission of ministry and life, at the heart of the story.

In the end, we can say that some categorical imperatives do apply. Some acts treat those we serve as objects with such decisiveness that we can make a universal rule. Namely, do not steal from, and do not have sex with, those we are called to serve professionally. When we have come to this end of the continuum, we have gone much too far. But it is not the case that the only sins are this extremes. Instead, we can see our ethical and sacred obligation as one where we must always work to be aware of and keep our narcissism in check. It's no coincidence that three of Stephen's five dangers signs - self-importance, creating dependence, and self-deception - are all derivatives of narcissism.¹⁹

A sinful self-centeredness is not expressed only in using others for our own needs. It is also a sin, it seems to me, to wallow in self-pity. When I was sinking down, it was too easy to forget that I was not alone, that others struggle, too, or that life - even when you are lonely - is still a gift we are called to use to build the common good.

Just as self-pity is thus a ministerial (and human) sin, so is too much self-reliance. When we think that it is, in fact, our will "that carries the house through the

¹⁹ Stephens, p. 28

night,” this is a sin. “Love and the work of friends and lovers belong to the task are its health.”²⁰ To do this work - or indeed, to live a human life - without joy, without gratitude, is a sin. Indeed, these sins of joylessness and entitlement are often the true cause of clergy misconduct. When we are blind to the wonder and goodness of the holy, other human beings, and the privileges of our calling, we are that much more likely to let our needs drive us toward relational betrayal.

A few days after I returned from the chapter retreat in the fall of 2008, I made a telephone call to Jory Agate, at the UUA. I said “help.” She gave me Deborah Pope-Lance’s number and sent a check to pay for the consultation. It was profound ministry. Years later, that Sunday, after I had experienced the temptation of need and presence, I called a colleague. “So, this happened.” Knowing that someone knew kept me on the right path. Admitting it out-loud broke the spell. Those are just two examples. Most of the rest of the examples I could share involve you, this room. We are survivors and after-pastors and sinners, are we are also each other’s lifeline. In my pain and need, it is you who have called me back to joy, and meaning, and blessing. It is you who have kept me from the worst of sins, taken my confessions for those I have not avoided, and, I hope, forgiven me for them. It is you who have been the health of the task, and its grace.

When we understand sin as a matter of relationship, it raises the stakes. It is not just about following rules or having good outcomes. It is about how we see and treat each other as human beings. It is about whose story counts. It is fraught with danger and it is not easy. But it is also good news. For just as relationship is the need and the the danger, it is the salvation. What saves us? Our friends. Our love. Our care. Our stories, all of them. Our grace. Each other. What saves us? The wisdom that, really and truly, it is not just about us, but about a sacred story in which we are only a part, and that others too inhabit this beautiful, tragic, awesome world. The heart-knowledge that, “deep down, there is another truth: we are not alone.”

²⁰ Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?*