

Ann Plumley

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Ribbing Each Other

Romans 12: 1-8

I love the word “discernment” found in our passage this morning from Romans 12: 2 (...be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect...).

My siblings and I were blessed with wise and loving parents. They passed *some* of that on to us – to this day, we are close friends and we regularly seek counsel from each other.

When we do, however, we *never* ask: “*What Would Jesus Do?*” The treasury of Plumley family stories includes the time when my puzzled brother tried to figure out what was *really* being requested when my niece asked for a “donut bracelet”. After gentle inquiry, he discovered that young Emma thought WWJD stood for: We Want Jelly Donuts.

Well, perhaps we *do* crave jelly donuts, but that’s not what my siblings and I seek when we call each other and slide... “by the way...” into the conversation.

Sooner or later, following that cue, one of us will ask something like, “What would Ozzie and Harriet do?” Those weren’t their real names, of course, but we use the proxy “Ozzie and Harriet” to evoke the hard-earned wisdom of the loving and faithful life that we learned from our parents. The lessons of that increasingly remote era in which we grew up often speak to the current pickles in which we find ourselves, as does today’s Bible passage.

Yet – still – I find myself indelibly marked by the two big lies of my childhood:

Lie Number One: My dad told me. My dad *promised* me, that if I ate each entire helping of cooked carrots, that my hair would become curly. I gagged and I choked. He exploited the vanity of a little girl in the late ‘50s – there was *nothing* I coveted more than curly hair - *nothing* I mourned more each morning, *every* time I glimpsed myself in a mirror: my hair was still straight! And yet I *had* eaten those mushy, yucky cooked carrots, albeit with no song of rejoicing on my lips. Still! Yet! No Curly Hair! The injustice of it! Where was *God?!* I wondered?!

I’m pretty much over it now.

Lie Number Two: “*You can be anything you want to be.*” This lie came more from my mother than my dad, though I heard it from him also. There’s a lot behind this delusion, this lie, and we will not now go into the aspirations of my mother stemming from her own

family of origin experiences, which, when combined with the onset of the modern feminist movement led her to tell her first born daughter – that would be me – repeatedly: “*You can be anything you want to be*”. She said this with conviction – There were *no* limits on what I could be, what I could become, and she willed me to believe this also.

Sounds great, eh? Challenging. Liberating. Empowering... This is what we want *all* children to be told...to be affirmed in... Positive self-esteem is a very good thing, indeed.

Everything seems right with this statement except that it’s not Biblical. Oh, and by the way, it’s not true, either.

I’d make a lousy accountant. If you looked at my resume, you’d see a MBA degree – trust me – I know we’ve just met, but *really*, I’d make a lousy accountant.

I’d also make a poor nurse – I learned this in college – we don’t need now to go into *how* I learned this... In college I learned that I retch in syncopated time with everyone who throws up. It’s my only innate musical ability, so a career in music isn’t all that promising, either.

During my 20-year career as a business consultant, I observed people who seemed *called* to their role, people who had amazingly interesting and important jobs; craftspeople who took justifiable pride in their work; business people who could point to the long-range impact of what they did on the lives of others, and inspiring leaders who could get diverse groups to support a good cause. Dreamers of dreams and prophets, in their own way; exhorters. The vast majority of people I met took their work seriously, thoughtfully weighed consequences and consistently made ethical business choices. Faithful choices, as best I could tell.

All had roles that I’d not do well.

This didn’t stop me from giving advice, necessarily – I was a consultant, after all, but as interesting as the business issue was; as dedicated and talented as were the many people with whom I worked, rarely – a couple of times, but really - *rarely* did I covet their jobs, rarely did I *really* want to change places.

I felt called to my work then, as a consultant. Perhaps – and I hope – you now feel called to your vocation. I hope and I pray that as I come to know you, you will tell me stories of how your work compels you, and that you see God often – perhaps every day, at the core of your work.

I also hope and I pray that your involvement in the church – this church, First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, United Church of Christ – or if you’re a visitor, I hope and I pray that your work in your home church, invigorates, stimulates, forms and challenges you in similar ways. If you’re checking out First Church today as a potential church home, I hope and I pray that you discern this community to be a congregation where the best of the best of what God has embedded in your heart and in your mind will be called forth. I hope and I pray that we all know ourselves and each other as called and equipped Christians, as First Church Saints.

But maybe not.

Some days, some times – surely it *could* be the case that what you are doing at work, here at First Church or in your other life roles and covenantal relationships, perhaps what you are doing seems forced, compelled – not so much by God, as by Guilt. Perhaps you are doing something by rote, focused on meeting expectations, doing stuff you just so happen to believe no one else could do as well, or as quietly, or as martyr-ishly as you ... I suspect you don't talk much about those moments, these feelings. I sure wouldn't. I sure *haven't* at the times in my career, *and* in my church life when I have felt stymied, blocked, suffocated and inert.

Perhaps your search for Christian vocation, at work and in the church has seemed fruitless, dry, annoying, boring, frustrating. Not as *full* as you sense is possible. There's something more, and you have an inkling of it. You carry with you the sense of a promise more nourishing than the quick sugar-high of a jelly donut, more substantial and sustaining than whatever an extreme makeover could provide by way of curly hair. You cannot be *anything... you... want to be*, but you carry with you the seed of God's promise, the truth that you *can* be the one thing, or rather the wonderful composite, the unique, singular and marvelous bundle of Christian gifts that God has equipped you to be. And, as an amalgamation on a different order, if and as you are, as we each, individually, live into the gifts and graces given us by God, First Church then lives into the vision discerned from God: an Open Door, Open Spirit, Open Road, and an Open Table on the Way of Hospitality.

I recently read an essay about the craft of pottery. I learned that a potter's rib is "a smooth flat tool made of a piece of hardwood, plastic, or shell that fits into the palm of the potter's hand. Curved on one side, with a straight edge on the other, (a potter's) rib is used to pull up a cylinder or bowl out of a spinning lump of clay. (Using the rib,) the potter applies pressure both inside and outside to slowly draw the pot into the desired shape, liberating it, in a way, to be the flower vase or serving dish the potter intends it to be. If too much force is applied, the rib punctures the pot and sends it spinning off-balance back into a lump. If too little pressure, the lump of clay never moves and does not fill out its intended shape. The rib is a tool to help the potter, but the potter retains the privilege of determining the pot's shape, the color of the glaze, and whether it is to be used as a bedpan or a bridal cup."¹

Together as Christians, we engage in dialogues through which God shapes us, you and me, in ways which enable us, me, you, each a unique person, to be God-imagined Christs for this time, this place, this church, and this world. We are formed, each rib forming every other rib, to be a jar of clay holding and pouring out sacred mysteries.²

I'm here as your seminarian this year in large part because I hope and I pray that you understand your calling – and share in our universal vocation to be potter's ribs – all to me, and all to each other. That we grow together into rib-ness, ribbing each other along the Way of Hospitality.

I long to live into the *sense* of my mother's conviction – "you can be anything you want to be" – but to transform and renew it into a call to a life that witnesses to the reality of God's

¹ Brian A. Williams; *The Potter's Rib: Mentoring for Pastoral Formation*, (Regent College Publishing: Vancouver BC), 2005, page 99 passim.

² Ibid.

promise found in Romans: You can be what and all that I have created you to be. I made you a prophet! Prophecy! You're an exhorter? – Exhort! You're called to be Harriet, or Ozzie? Well, both Ozzie Nelson and Ozzy Osbourne were created in God's image, so be Ozzie, if that's your calling. But still, I hope and I pray we can all agree – in our better moments – to let God be the potter.³ Let's resolve simply to be potter's ribs – shapers and formers, lifters up of lumps of clay – *ribbing* each other into the shape the Potter meant us to have, each and all of us together with ample capacity to hold and to spill over the abundant gifts of the Potter to the world.

It is good, and acceptable and perfect that we should do so.

³ Romans 9:19-21