

Like him or not, most would recognize a picture of the current bad-hair candidate for President, but many perhaps ignored his not-very-Presidential comment about another candidate's "big ears." Well, that remark brought to mind a past Presidential candidate, sort of a Harold Stassen of his era who has run many times, who also had big ears: the unforgettable Alfred E. Neuman.

Now, for those who do not remember him, he was the character that always appeared — I think still does — on the cover of "Mad Magazine," and his only known words were, "What? Me worry?"

To which I add, "What? Us minister?" and to which I say, "Yes!" And if you are wondering *where*, well, as I continue to try to draw some ideas for preparing us as Christ's Church to go out into a world too often — and in some places, too violently — opposed to Christians and Christianity, I continue to use as a stimulus to my messages Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book written to the community of his illegal and underground seminary in mid-1930's Nazi Germany, *Life Together*. The English translators — and I do not have a German copy so that I could try to second guess — translate the title of his fourth chapter as "Ministry," but what he is really talking about is what I often describe as the second leg of the tripod on which a Church must stand, the *mutual support* that pairs with *fellowship* within the congregation.

In no uncertain terms, this mutual support is an important aspect of what makes us an *agape* community and not just — not that there is anything wrong with such a community except that it is not a church — and not just a *phillios* or fraternal organization or club.

So the answer to "What? Me minister?" is a resounding "Yes" and the "Where?" answer is "Here, and wherever else you are with a member of this church, this *agape*, community."

I want to give some examples that show of what I am speaking. [ ]

But the types of ministry we show to others in our church community can also be shown to those within our larger communities. In neither Community Church's nor First Presbyterian's worship attendance do we have members who are living in seniors' or assisted living complexes, but in a previous pastorate, I did. (By the way, as an aside, I am slowly working to try to generate outside interest in investing in assisted living in Florence, where I *had* believed it would be reasonably easy to start.) I used to encourage such members that though they were essentially physically confined and not able to go out into the community on behalf of Christ, they could carry him to those with whom they lived in the simplest of ways: Smiles, hugs, warm words, assistance in moving about, being near.

Bonhoeffer was, not surprisingly, dealing more with young men — and they were all men — and not the age of most of us, but what he had to say is relevant to everyone.

And essentially, he offered what are really guides to daily living with anyone, including one's spouse or children or grandchildren or in-laws or whatever.

So what does such ministry involve? Well, first, in his terms, *The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue*. What? how is "holding my tongue" ministry? doesn't the writer of Ephesians speak of "speaking the truth in love"?

Hmm. For those of us who are husbands, after learning the two most important words in the English language, "yes, dear," we learn that the answer to the question, "Do I look fat in this dress?" can suggest that sometimes "truth" and "love" are in conflict, and that while it may be tempting to answer, "Do I look stupid?" *holding one's tongue* and either saying, "of course not" or "no, but it doesn't do you justice" would be decent equivalents. "Speaking the truth in love" is often a defense to justify our words when we voice disapproval of friends or family.

And in more universally practical terms than, "Do I look fat," *The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue* requires that we know when it is not important to win an argument, correct a statement, or add our two cents or toot our own horn. And my gosh it is not always easy, but the justification is always as in so many other situations to be found in, "Love your neighbor as yourself." We should be as concerned about our neighbor's ego or feelings as much as we are about our own, and if what we would say would injure his or her ego or feelings, or deprive him or her of a smidgen of merited attention or approval, then perhaps *The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue* is necessary.

*The Ministry of Meekness* is another of Bonhoeffer's ideas, which he expresses as the need first to see ourselves as sinners who are dependent on forgiveness through Christ, for when we do so see ourselves, that, in my words, "There but for the grace of God go I," we can put on meekness. How appropriate that today we read the wonderful parable, "The Prodigal Son."

*Meekness*, easier said than lived. I often have to remind myself of a 1950's very public incident from which I first learned the word, *humility*; it was when radio and TV personality Arthur Godfrey ("Seems like o - o - old times, Ha wah yah Ha wah yah Ha wah yah") fired several of his on air talent, singers Marian Marlowe, who went on to play the role of the rich woman in the original Broadway cast of "The Sound of Music," and Julius LaRosa, whom Godfrey said, "lacks humility."

But *meekness* and *humility*, the latter especially contrasts with the biblical sin of *hubris*, Adam's sin and that of the builders of the Tower of Babel. The former appears in Jesus' words in the Beatitudes, "*Blessed are the meek. . .*" "*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*"

"Practice meekness" is easier to say than to do, but lets try *The Ministry of Meekness*. The first step is simply to realize that whatever sins and shortcomings we see in the other, we have our own sins and shortcomings, as well. Let us not identify with the older son in today's Gospel reading, but with the prodigal.

Next, Bonhoeffer offers *The Ministry of Listening*. Ouch. There is nothing so challenging for the alpha male or the engineer, maybe for the lawyer as well, certainly for politicians whether of unruly hair or big ears or big egos, which I guess characterizes them all, nothing so challenging as simply *listening*. Yet, realistically, listening can be easier than trying to force a conversation. It was with difficulty that I realized that when someone tells me a problem, they might not be looking for my clever solution to it, but rather for my acknowledgement that *they have a problem*. They want me to listen to their problems in order to validate them, not to analyze and solve them; I hope you understand this better than I. And I am going to carry this a bit further into what I'll call, *The Ministry of Presence*. I would suggest that Bonhoeffer's *Ministry of Listening* is a subdivision of this *Ministry of Presence*. With friends, with fellow congregants for whom things might not be going well, with those in the hospital with difficult illnesses or injuries, *just our being there* is an exercise of *The Ministry of Presence*. It is a matter of letting people know they are not alone, that people do care, and that they are never separated from the true *agape* community.

By the way, though I depart sharply from Bonhoeffer, he says that if we cannot *listen* to our fellow members of the congregation, soon we may not be listening to God, either.

*The Ministry of Helpfulness, active helpfulness*, is one in which many of you do engage, offering a ride, watching a dog — er, watching a pet, — taking to the grocery store or doctor or wherever. I think you are pretty good at this form of ministry, so allow yourselves to say, “by gosh, we *do ministry*, here.”

Bonhoeffer then offers *The Ministry of Bearing*. Our *Ministry of Holding One's Tongue* could be called a “Ministry of Forbearing,” but *The Ministry of Bearing* is a bit different, for Bonhoeffer was dealing with the reality that serving a brother or sister sometimes will act as a restraint on our own personal freedom. When a brother or sister needs a ride to the doctor and asks us to bear the burden of transporting them and we want to watch “Judge Judy,” we bear the burden — and I am obviously being a bit silly — bear the burden of having to miss “Judge Judy” or recording and watching later.

A silly example, perhaps, but there is a serious point to be made: it is in bearing another's burden that we imitate Christ, who bore our burdens for us.

And that we not just imitate but *be* Christ to a world that so badly needs him is our real collective *ministry* as his Church.

No matter who should become the next President, that will not change, nor will the need for ministry here, among us and among our friends and neighbors. We may or may not be worried about who will become President — though I most certainly am, — but we need not worry but that we can do the ministry here for which we have been called.

March 6, 2016 Lent 4

Page 4 of 4

And when we can do Ministry among ourselves well, it is but a small step to carry it into the world. The government can spend money, but it cannot do ministry, only the people of God can do that. So in the words of a past Presidential candidate, "if not us, who? If not now, when?" To which I would add, "if not here, where?"

Lets not "worry"; lets do ministry, starting with ministry to each other. Amen.