

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church August 5, 2018

The sermon consists of two chapters of the book Pastor Bill is writing.
The common theme is “Values.”

Topless and Bottomless Waitresses
by Bill Chadwick

It was a church conference in Louisville in June, many years ago when I was young and single. One warm and humid night (obviously, Louisville), I stayed out late with a new friend. When we finally said good night and I returned to my hotel room, it was one in the morning. I expected to get some grief from my roommate, Greg, a married, middle-aged senior pastor of a prominent Twin Cities church.

To my great surprise, he wasn't back yet. Moments later he came through the door and, when he saw me, erupted in giggles. He was delighted to find that I was still up. He had a tale he wanted to tell, if he could ever stop laughing. I immediately suspected that he may have had a drink, or three.

“Bill, you wouldn't believe the night that Donald and I had.” (Donald was another member of our Twin Cities group who had come to this national convention. At the time, he was a seminary president.)

“Try me,” I said, thinking of my own.

He sat on his bed. “Well, you know all the bars we pass on the way to the convention center—the ones with the big signs—‘Topless and bottomless waitresses’?”

“They're hard to miss,” I said.

“Well, Donald and I had been at a party. Admittedly, we’d had a couple of drinks”—more giggles—“and we decided it would be instructive to go inside one of those bars. So we did! We left the party and we walked to one of the bars and went in!” More uncontrollable laughter. “Bill, the signs do not lie,” he went on when he could manage it. “Topless and bottomless! The waitresses did not have *any* clothing on! Not a stitch!”

“Well, I figured they weren’t wearing belts,” I said.

Ignoring my sarcasm, Greg said, “Bill, you won’t believe it. After just a few minutes, we got used to the waitresses being naked.”

I pondered that.

“We asked our waitress about herself, if she had a family, where she grew up. Normal questions. But immediately she got suspicious. She said, ‘Who are you guys?’ She said nobody ever asks them ordinary questions about who they are as human beings.

“So I said, ‘We’re Presbyterian clergymen. I’m a pastor and he’s the president of a seminary.’

“The waitress guffawed. ‘Right! And I’m Marilyn Monroe.’

““No, really we are. Haven’t you seen all the people walking by the front window going to and from the convention center with notebooks and backpacks that say “General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church”?”

““Hmm. Yeah, I guess I have.’ And then she called over all the other waitresses! We were surrounded by eight or ten naked women. ‘These guys are Presbyterian pastors,’ she told them.

““Ha! Good one!’ the other women scoffed. ‘No, they’re not. Gimme a break.’

““No, I think they really are,’ our waitress insisted.

“‘Prove it,’ said one of the new arrivals, looking at us.

“So we started searching our wallets for any credentials. Turns out that neither of us happened to have anything on us that said we were ministers, not even business cards. I always have a business card, but I’d given out my last one this afternoon.

“So one of the waitresses said, ‘Okay, then. Name the Ten Commandments.’

“So we started to list them”—Greg was laughing so hard at this point I was half-afraid he was going to hurt himself—“but we—but we”—it was hiccups interrupting him now—“we—we could only come up with nine!”

Greg doubled over into paroxysms of laughter once again. I had to wait so long this time I almost fell asleep sitting up on my bed.

I’d had, after all, my own long, if exhilarating, night . . .

Finally recovering his breath, Greg continued. “But we stayed and talked with these women. We asked them where they had grown up, how many siblings they had, if they had kids, what they did for fun, that sort of thing. It was fascinating.”

I thought back on my own evening. The conversations I’d had with my new friend out in the beautiful warm night air of June as we walked along the promenade of the Ohio River probably weren’t all that different from the conversations between the pastors and the women in the bar.

More soberly now, Greg looked down at his hands as he spoke. “Gosh. They could have been our daughters . . . We listened to them talk about the challenges they’ve faced in their young lives, the hopes they have for their futures, or at least their kids’ futures . . . We ended up chatting for two hours.”

He took a deep breath, let it out, and looked up at my face. There was concern and compassion on his. “You could tell they weren’t used to that,” he said.

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These young waitresses were used to exploitation and judgment, but these pastors treated them like human beings, like children of God.

Which they are.

High School Class Reunions
by Bill Chadwick

I was one of those now increasingly rare members of the clergy who went straight from high school to college to seminary. (I don't recommend it, but I did it.) So I was only twenty-four years old when I was ordained, and by my ten-year high school reunion I had already been serving as a pastor for three years.

Our high school class was very large and most of us hadn't seen one another since graduation. Of course, one of the first questions asked was, "What kind of work are you in?"

"I'm a pastor," I said, to the first person who asked it of me. My questioner threw her head back and cackled. "Ha ha ha ha! Oh, Bill, you always were so funny! No, seriously, what do you do?"

"Um." My brow furrowed; my eyes looked left, down, up, right . . . "Um, I'm . . . a pastor." I nodded to give further affirmation to the words.

Now *her* brow furrowed, and, cocking her head, she said, "Seriously?"

I nodded again.

She muttered under her breath, "Huh. Didn't see that coming." She tried once again: "You're not pulling my leg?"

Over the next few hours, that scene was repeated seven or eight times. I was entirely surprised and perplexed. Recently, one of my high school friends confirmed that had there been such a category at graduation, I would have been unanimously voted “Most likely *not* to become a pastor.”

What did my classmates’ reactions say about me? Or what did it say about their stereotype of pastors?

Granted, I wasn’t the most blatantly *pious* kid in high school, spouting Bible verses or grabbing fellow students by the lapel and asking fiercely, “Are you saved?” (One of my pastor friends always answers that question with an enthusiastic, “Hell, yes!”) But neither was I holding up convenience stories or selling drugs or organizing keggers down by the river at which we built a blazing bonfire and sacrificed woodchucks to Satan.

Why were people *so* surprised at my vocational choice? And should I be offended or take it as a compliment?

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In another ten years, our class’s twenty-year reunion, my childhood friend Dick and I were surveying the dance floor from the rear of the room, leaning on a railing next to each other, looking out thoughtfully at the few folks still in a dancing mood well after midnight. We talked little.

Dick and I had known each other since third grade, not the closest of friends but certainly always friendly. We had been in a few of the same classes, had both worked on my dad’s farm, and attended Sunday School together all during our growing-up years.

I don’t remember if I had seen him at all since high school, so it was fun to catch up with him at this reunion. Earlier in the evening I had learned that his mom, who had been widowed that first year we met (third grade!), was widowed again, but doing well. And Dick himself was doing really well, married, with a twelve-year-old son, a lucrative job that he liked, and a marvelous head of hair. In fact, he was even more handsome than he’d been in high school. Looked as if he had just stepped off the cover of *GQ*.

Neither of us had brought our spouses along—fifty bucks a head, and what’s more boring than going to your spouse’s reunion?—so now we stood there in a comfortable silence, arms crossed on the railing, each thinking our private thoughts, until Dick started to mutter, without looking at me. I could only just make out what he was saying over the music.

“Bill Chadwick,” he said softly.

I turned to face him, though he continued to stare straight ahead. “You were always so smart, all through school. You could have been anything . . . *anything*. And you became . . . a minister . . .”

The incredulity and disgust in his tone made clear the extent to which he felt I had wasted my gifts.

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Dial ahead another five years: Dick was there again, looking delighted to spot me as I entered the ballroom. He hadn’t lost a single hair off his head. A few on the temple were gray, but that only served to make him look even *more* handsome and distinguished. (Good thing I’m not one of those shallow people who cares about looks.)

But not all was well. Dick hurried over, a huge smile on his face and arms spread wide for a big hug. (Five years earlier, I remembered, it had definitely been a handshake.) He eagerly pumped me for information on my family and what was going on in my life. He was excited to hear that I had recently moved to a new congregation, and probed for detailed information about the church. Clearly he was sincerely curious, and I was puzzled. Neither of us mentioned his quiet mutterings of five years before.

Finally, he let me turn the tables and ask him about *his* life. “Bill,” he said, “it’s been pretty rough. Went through a divorce. Really horrible, especially for my son . . .”

Ah . . . so *that’s* why my vocational choice no longer filled him with contempt and dismay. He had been confronted with some big issues in life and

was hungrier for deeper meaning than he had been five years earlier, when life was rolling smoothly along.

We've kept in touch, and a few years ago he asked me to officiate at his mom's funeral, knowing I had something important to say about the meaning of life. And death.

I look forward to seeing him at the next reunion.