

Where Our Deep Sadness Meets the World's Deep Need

by Deanna Thompson CC July 13/22 and Martin B. Copenhaver Oct. 1/22

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 by Patty Friesen Nov. 6/22

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 is a thanksgiving for the church's calling in God's hands—in what God has done, is doing, and will do. God chooses the church through the words “God chose you” and through the description of the church as “beloved” (see 1 Thess. 1:4). God strengthens as well as comforts hearts (2:17) The heart in ancient times referred to the inner convictions of a person. This is the strength of heart for which the writer prayed and one that is sorely needed in our times as we find our calling in the world as individuals and as a church.

In conversations about calling - what we are supposed to do with our lives, Christians often refer to Frederick Buechner's observation: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” This has been a sweet spot for many of us who have come to see our calling as the place where our passions, our joy, and our gifts are put to work in service of the needs of the world.

Frederick Buechner who died this year was arguably the foremost spiritual writer of his generation. His writing career spanned six decades, during which he wrote more than 30 books. One of his books (Lion Country) was nominated for the National Book Award and another (Godric) was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. During the 1980s and 1990s, he was quoted from North American pulpits more often than anyone alive at the time. He was the rare author who appealed to both mainline Protestants and evangelicals.

After a successful first novel and the disappointing reception of his second novel, Buechner moved to Manhattan, New York to focus on his career as a writer. It was there that his life took an unexpected turn. Buechner had been baptized in his grandmother's church as a boy and had hardly set foot in a church after that, but he began to worship at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. One Sunday after Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1947, the minister preached a sermon that Jesus is a king because he is "crowned in the heart of the people who believe in him" and that coronation takes place "among confession, and tears, and great laughter."

Buechner recalled, "At the phrase great laughter, for reasons that I have never satisfactorily understood, tears leapt from my eyes as though I had been struck across the face. It was not so much that a door opened as that I suddenly found that a door had been open all along, which I had only just then stumbled upon."

A few days later, Buechner visited the pastor in his office and shared his experience. He wondered if he should respond to God's call by attending seminary. At first, the pastor was not encouraging, saying that it would be a shame to trade a good novelist for a mediocre preacher! As the conversation proceeded, however, the pastor conceded that the stunned and searching young man in his office might be onto something. He drove Buechner uptown to Union Theological Seminary, where Buechner enrolled.

Upon graduation, Buechner was ordained a Presbyterian minister and became chaplain and chair of the newly formed religion department at the Phillips Exeter Academy. The Exeter students were privileged adolescent boys, jaded and world-weary, which meant they were "negative, against, just about everything." This was the

congregation Buechner addressed at chapel services. The fact that chapel was compulsory only compounded the challenge. Buechner was determined, however, to gain a hearing for the Christian story. He later wrote, "My job, as I saw it, was to present the faith as appealingly, honestly, relevantly and skillfully as I could."

From that challenge of presenting an honest faith to adolescent skeptics, Buechner moved into years of congregational ministry, preaching and writing. He always encouraged his readers and listeners to find God in surprising places.

In midlife, Buechner turned to memoir writing about his life, albeit reluctantly. He was led to memoir through confronting his own sadness and grief. When one of his daughters suffered from anorexia, he entered therapy and through that process began to examine his life more intentionally. Some of Buechner's best writing is found in his memoirs. They are unflinchingly honest, particularly in his accounts of the painful aspects of his life, but never without hope. Buechner never stopped searching his own life for clues to the presence of God. This quest became one of his overarching themes: "Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments and life itself is grace."

In retirement, Fred did not worship in a church regularly, saying, "Most often when I go to church, I am bored out of my wits." He told the congregations he would visit: "The best thing that could happen to your church is for it to burn to the ground and for your fax and email machines to be burned up, and for your minister to be run over by

a truck so that you have nothing left except each other and God. And then I say if you want to know what the original church was like, go to an AA meeting.”

Not all of his assessments of church life were as grim. After a friend’s ordination, he wrote, “I found the worship service moving and illuminating and true in ways I would never have guessed—the sense I had throughout that every step along the way something profoundly real was happening. It was very concrete, very human, very much of this world, but I kept sensing too that somewhere in the thick of it the kingdom itself was glimmering through.” The author who was always encouraging his readers to look for God in surprising places in this instance was surprised to sense God’s presence in worship.

In a public recognition of his accomplishment, Buechner said: I will be 80 on my next birthday, and as you approach that extraordinary age you can’t help but think about the end of your life, obviously, and what, if anything, happens next. Of all that you lose, all that you have lost already, in the way of people you have loved, places, things. But that’s not the end of it, I do believe. “What’s lost is nothing to what’s found. And all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.” Buechner grew to understand that calling is not only where our deep gladness meets the world but where our deep sadness meets it as well.

Now Kate Bowler is who I quote most from the pulpit. As Kate Bowler says, “Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.” Bowler who wrote *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved*, taught us conversations about how vocation must also make space for the deep sadness that fill our lives. Our grief intersects with the world’s grief. Sometimes calling springs not from joy but from trauma and grief. We don’t talk of

calling in terms of sadness, perhaps because we often lack the language to talk about what we've been through.

Bowler is a historian who teaches at Duke Divinity School. She has focused her studies on the prosperity gospel. Her receiving a diagnosis of stage IV colon cancer at age 35 makes for a case study far too close for comfort. She writes: "In the Christian world where prosperity is the gospel and in which healing is a divine right, illness is seen a symptom of unconfessed sin—a symptom of a lack of forgiveness, unfaithfulness, unexamined attitudes, or careless words. A suffering believer is a puzzle to be solved. What had caused this understanding of illness?"

Bowler had been the suffering believer before, having experienced temporary disability and infertility during her doctoral work. Although she attended a prosperity gospel church primarily as a researcher, she was prayed for by the members of the community when she showed up for worship with arms too weak to hold a hymnal. Even as she tried to solve the puzzle of prosperity Christianity, prosperity Christians were trying to solve her. Some of the well-meaning interpretations are even her own, shaped as she is by the same religious culture.

A friend who read and raved over Bowler's book confessed that it's really wrecked her encouragement game: all the earnest optimism she used to dole out over breakfasts with friends is suddenly revealed to have the nutritive value of a smear of grape jelly. What does faith look like to one who can't be fooled by empty calories? As Christians, we need to stop giving pat answers that shut down people's honest struggles with illness and job loss and marital struggles and all the other difficulties of life.

Bowler doesn't give easy answers, but she reveals great faithfulness in the valley of the shadow of death. Indeed, it is precisely because she doesn't give easy answers that her resilience, courage, and unstinting honesty are so revelatory. The honesty is perhaps the most critical. Bowler confesses that her diagnosis has left her not only frantic with grief over all that shall not be but also filled with rage.

So filled with rage, in fact, that in between immunotherapy drug treatments, she takes up cursing—about everything from cancer to cold coffee. The church's failure to make space for grief and uncertainty infuriates Bowler. "Everyone is trying to Easter the crap out of my Lent," she laments to friends. It never works to skip Good Friday. Even Jesus couldn't successfully pass on the cup of suffering.

When we name the fact that our lives often encompass sadness and rage as well as gladness, we open up space for expanded visions of calling that relate even more profoundly to the world's deep need. People want to hear authenticity and confessions of doubt as well as belief. People want to hear realness in personal experience and our common struggles as humans – not glossed over promises of pie in the sky in the sweet by and by. We find vulnerability and authenticity in Frederick Buechner and Kate Bowler and Brene Brown. They give us language for our joys and our sorrow. May their work continue to bless and guide us. Let us pray...

Understanding Compassionate God – we come with our faith and our doubts, with our hopes and our questions, with our joys and our sorrows. If you can create any opportunities to connect or purposes for anything we go through, please do and help us find meaning for our lives. Amen.