



THE REV. PATRICK W. BELL - PERSONAL STORY

My story begins on the northern tier of the beautiful Palouse country, being born into a farm family as a member of the sixth generation of our family in southern Spokane County, Washington. I count myself blessed to have grown up alongside my older sister and brother in a very supportive, hard working family who loved us and nurtured us into a love of people and land. It was such a joy for me to begin working in the fields at the age of nine as three generations of our family labored together. If I were to be asked of that which fills me most with pride in my lifetime, I would easily respond it is being a “farm boy”.

My parents were not active in church during our early years, largely because of the demands of farm life. That changed as I was in my late grade school years. My mother had joined the Episcopal Church in her teens, so we began attending in Spokane, Washington. I loved what I experienced there, and became quite active through high school and early college, as I chose to attend Whitworth University in Spokane.

While in college, I had something of a crisis in faith. I became disillusioned with the church, and in a more idealistic mindset, looked elsewhere for a church. I found that rather accidentally as a result of a developing relationship with the woman I would come to marry, and eventually I was ordained in that evangelical, conservative Christian group. I did go on to attend seminary, and returned to several positions within that Pentecostal denomination, including teaching at their west coast College. After ten years, I came to realize I was not a fundamentalist, and left, returning to the church of my youth.

For eight years, I worked in private industry, joining a friend of mine in owning and operating a couple of local companies in the wood by-product markets, building our companies from very small endeavors to multi-million dollar concerns. I was very involved then in the Episcopal Church, entering into discernment for the priesthood. I was supported by the Diocese of Spokane to return to seminary and was ordained, taking my first call with St. Matthew’s in Ontario, Oregon. I loved my time there and in the Diocese. Subsequently, I was called to the locale where I grew up, and am now serving the vibrant congregation of St. Luke’s in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.

Along this journey I have been blessed with three wonderful children, all adults, and eight grandchildren, who remain in the Ontario area. After experiencing a divorce, I am delighted to have fallen in love with my dearest friend and confidant, with whom I have been married for thirteen years. My life is enhanced with a variety of personal interests, including bicycling, motorcycles, hiking, and model railroading. We have a very active social life, enjoying a wide circle of friends from around our community.

1. Based on your reading of our diocesan profile and any other knowledge you have, what do you see as your greatest challenge as the bishop of the Diocese of Eastern Oregon? And what excites you most about becoming our bishop?

The challenge I see is not so much one unique to me but to whomever will be called into leadership, and that is one of communication and the engagement of the most people in that process. With the geographic spread of the Diocese, along with the spirited diversity of congregations, the pressing issue in my perception is how best to provide as many means as possible of bringing together not only the leadership of the Diocese but all membership in the engagement of information around formation, mission, social issues, education, etc. But just finding the best mediums for communication, be it periodic electronic newsletters, blogs, or other social media is only part of the challenge; the greater obstacle is engaging people with the sense of need for and use of such opportunities.

So what does excite me the most by this opportunity? I would so welcome joining the Diocese in supporting the good work in progress around the practice of the baptismal covenant, especially in the work of respecting the dignity of every person. And I would be eager to partner with you in further discovering together how we continue to bring the message of Jesus' reconciling love and presence forward into the center of the various communities in Eastern Oregon. As I was taught so well while in your Diocese, there is much opportunity to move the life and the message of the church out into the diverse population there.

2. Please describe your process of discernment to this call. Share what was most helpful thus far. What surprises have you encountered? How will this process continue for you?

I became aware last spring that Eastern Oregon would be entering into this process and, at that time, began to entertain the question in my own heart as to whether or not I would be open to engaging in the discernment. I must admit I was ambivalent. My heart is quite frankly still in Eastern Oregon, as I deeply fell in love with the people and the land, and with the ministry so well shared there. But at the same time I have been through this process there before, and I questioned putting the Diocese through that again, especially with any uncomfortable memories that would create. So I did engage several friends and colleagues whom I trust to discuss and pray over what direction I would take. And I made the decision that I would not offer my own nomination, but would be open should someone else do so.

The listening with others to what the Spirit seemed to be saying has been, as it always proves itself to be, the most helpful component of this process. That includes the hearing of both what you do not want to hear, as well as what you hope to hear.

What has surprised me is that as the time frame clicked along toward an ending date of time allowed for nominations, I had accepted the reality I would not be involved. And then I was unexpectedly asked, and here I am.

I trust the process, which will either lead me back to Eastern Oregon, or will open new possibilities.

3. What experiences have been most satisfying and most challenging in your personal life and ministry?

I want to be very candid in speaking to this question regarding my personal life. There have been three events in the last fifteen years which have been the most challenging, but at the same time have provided me the greatest opportunity for personal growth and real satisfaction. The three are my divorce fifteen years ago from my first wife, my active alcoholism eight years ago, and my journey with prostate cancer to recovery in the last year. What I have discovered in the conflict and pain and restoration of these moments is an enlarged capacity for the gifts and blessings of life. I have been thrust more deeply by these into the heart of God. These experiences have so enlarged my personal life, and my ministry, that while I would never have thought I would be thankful for such tears in the fabric of my life journey, I cannot now fathom my life without the compassion, awareness and effectiveness they have provided me.

As to ministry, without a doubt the most satisfying has been the process of congregational development in which our congregation has been engaged over the last seven years. To watch a group of people become so engaged with one another around a common purpose, to see them wrestle with and genuinely welcome change, to see them literally transformed as a welcoming and practicing community of faith is the most amazing work of the Spirit I have been privileged to see. The challenge is how we keep that growing.

4. Describe your worship style. How do you envision yourself as a Shepherd to parishes of vastly different sizes and congregational vitality in the context of diocesan community?

As I state in the Transition Ministry Profile, I see my style as relaxed, and, I would add, quite intentionally present. I am most open to fitting the liturgy and my officiating to the context of where and how people are gathering. For example, if I am with a group of senior high students at Cove my style and delivery will be different than if I am at the early morning service at my current Parish. I have had midweek services with one person attending, and Easter services with three hundred. Flexibility in making the Eucharist "fit" in each context is essential, and I am quite used to that practice.

I have been privileged to work in Eastern Oregon and know of the diverse context, and especially had the wonderful experience of serving seven congregations in the Seven Rivers Cluster over several years which required one to be adaptable, unhurried, accepting and willing to allow for all kinds of contingencies.

Allow me to say a word about your term, Shepherd. That seems so appropriate, especially for Eastern Oregon. Given the opportunity, that is the kind of role I would gratefully share with those in leadership in the Diocese. I am fully committed to collaborative and mutual ministry with all the baptized. And with that I think it is so important for a Bishop to be fully present to and with those in the Diocese.

What is one book (*other than the Bible*) that has greatly influenced your life? How and why?

I need not second guess that The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning, by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, continues to be the most impacting book on my life. My introduction to this book was one of those kairos moments.

I had just entered recovery and was struggling with a sense of failure, of weakness, and of identity. The central theme of this book is about paradox, and how it is that we can discover truth in the apparent contradictions of life. In many ways the central theme parallels the learning stated in 2 Corinthians 12:10, wherein we discover that when we are weak, yet we become strong. And in that weakness, the grace of God becomes so very real.

As the authors state in the introduction, "the spirituality of imperfection begins with the recognition that trying to be perfect is the most tragic human mistake." It certainly had been one of my greatest failings, that of attempting to be perfect, and to do all things perfectly. Such an effort resulted in frustration, failure to take risks, and unhealthy expectations.

To come to realize I am on a grace-filled journey toward meaning that is based on progress, not perfection (as Bill Wilson penned it), has been absolutely revolutionary for me, and, in the process, for those in the journey with me. How I approach my life, my vocation, and my faith has been enriched, and I am now able to more fully embrace the wonder, the joy, the possibilities, and the questions of life. And especially of a life deeply engaged with the Sacred.

Where do you see spiritual hunger and how do you address it?

Some years ago, as we at St. Luke's were beginning our long term congregational development effort, I came to the decision to lead our Parish in a focus on reaching more senior adults, age 55 plus. There were several factors leading to that decision, but central to it was the evidence from research and from personal experience that there is a significant spiritual hunger in the baby boomer generation.

In order to invite those in that age cohort who were longing either for a deeper connection with God, or at least some means of enriching their spiritual life, or to engage the search for meaning in their lives, we began to highlight what we felt we had to offer them by shifting our focus. We offer to them a safe environment where the questions were more valued than the answers. A key part of our emphasis on hospitality is to invite people to join us on a journey toward spiritual vitality which is unafraid to tackle the hard questions of life and faith.

And maybe even more importantly in this shift is our altering of the more traditional way in which faith communities usually incorporate new people. The model most of us in this age group have grown to expect is the process whereby we come to believe, then come to behave in certain ways, and in time come to belong to community. We have endorsed an essential reversal of that pattern. We invite people to belong, to truly be in community with us in the journey and search; we then strongly encourage people to engage, intentionally, in becoming practitioners of the teachings of Jesus; and finally we encourage them to embrace the beliefs that form and foster the process of being disciples of Jesus.

More could be said about how we, and I, are addressing this spiritual hunger, but let me conclude this by stating how amazingly rewarding this effort has been. Not only are we finding this successful with so many in the age cohort we identified, but I have been spending significant

amounts of time over the last year plus with younger adults in their twenties and thirties who are seeking us out because they are sensing a spiritual vitality and excitement in our community which attracts them.

To you, what is the most meaningful passage (*not verse*) in the OT? In the NT? Tell us why.

Isaiah 35 For many years this chapter has been my "go to" passage from the Hebrew Scriptures. The initial appeal was the powerful image of God's redemptive action in the midst of a faithful people. But it has become more concrete and personal for me over the years.

I gained a practical insight of this passage from my time in Malheur County. Having grown up amongst the rich forests and prevalent waterways of North Idaho, high desert terrain seemed void. Little did I realize the profound richness and beauty of that space until I began to look deeper into its mysteries. I learned awe in the midst of that country when I began to truly see how it was teeming with life, color and beauty all its own.

Parallel to that very physical experience, I began to learn the same was true within the life of the smaller churches within the Seven Rivers Cluster of churches scattered thought that area. As one spends time within the life of such communities and peers more deeply into the rich terrain of the people there, one finds such abundance of life, vitality, faithfulness and beauty resident within. I began to see that, and learned never to underestimate the potential of those communities. Instead, I came to highly value what gifts they offered

I began to see what this passage could teach me about abundance even in apparent scarcity.

In recent years this passage has become even more personal, as it guides my journey within my own interior landscape. I have come to trust in my contemplation and centering work that when the dry and barren places are met, if I but learn to wait on the Lord, the flowering of spiritual vitality and growth will return.

John 15: 12-17 I cannot now remember under what circumstances this passage began to become so formative and essential for me, but it was many years back in discussions with Rustin Kimsey. The central message of friendship and love with God and with one another has become so central for me that I have used it at both of my daughters' weddings and at my parents' funerals. I use it constantly in my pastoral counseling work.

The concept of being Jesus' *philos*, a friend or a beloved, simply captivates me. And this basis for my practice of the faith is then deeply informed by the Celtic notion of developing soul friends. Embedded within this notion for me are the concepts of mutuality, collaboration, partnership, and solidarity.

Love of friends seems such a distinctive and lasting model for the church. For me, it is the guiding principle. I joke with our congregation in Coeur d'Alene of the old adage that all preachers have but one sermon, expressed in a myriad of constructions. And this is mine. My core prayer always is that God will fill my heart with love for those I serve, and that, in doing so, I might be a model of love and spiritual friendship for others.

Describe a scenario that encompasses your understanding of small church needs where there is no priest in the community. Please address your own expectations for meeting canonical requirements for ordination and how you might guide the fulfillment of many of our parishes' needs for succession where they are unable to sustain traditional models.

I would suggest that my years in Eastern Oregon and especially working within the congregations of the Seven Rivers Cluster would answer your query, but let me offer one of more recent experience. When I came back to this area thirteen plus years ago we had two churches located in the Silver Valley just east of Coeur d'Alene. Both were very small congregations, and had been for years. One had been served by a locally ordained priest many years ago, but had no resident clergy recently; the other had a part time retired priest, but that relationship ended a few years back. Unfortunately, this Diocese has seemed over the last decade to move toward a very demanding and often restrictive process of formation for deacons, and almost totally toward seminary for priests. As a result, the impact on these churches has been dramatic. The former church has given up and closed. The latter church applied to have one of their members accepted as a postulant for local formation into the priesthood, but were denied because they were told the church was not viable. I am disappointed for both congregations. Our Parish is working to partner with this second congregation to see what mutual ministry might be engendered for us both.

The question certainly seems to be one of satisfying canonical requirements, which rightly seek to serve the church in providing quality and competent leadership, while at the same time being realistic to the needs and resources of faithful, vital smaller congregations. I tend to be a bit of a renegade on this issue, to be quite honest. I want to err on the side of supporting the worship, and ministry, of small congregations in communities where that witness has been historically present, and very much needed. So finding ways to support genuine sacramental, pastoral, and service oriented ministries within such faith communities must take priority, as over against trying to force such communities into a model which does not fit.

I still think the mutual ministry team models have something to offer us in rural Dioceses. I am not convinced much of what we did years ago, as in the Seven Rivers experience, growing out of the early efforts in Nevada and Northern Michigan, for example, is the best practice. But there is a basis there from which I think much can be built. If a local congregation needs a priestly ministry, or a preacher, or healer, or administrator, why cannot the larger immediate church, either regionally within or from the whole Diocese, provide the training, tutoring, or supervision for those roles? And why can we not empower persons with those callings and gifts within a congregation to begin acting in those roles even while the training and formation is ongoing? Why not agree as a Diocese that it is possible to fulfill the spirit of the canonical wisdom while supporting a local congregation to begin and continue faithfully in the ministries God has provided and called them to embrace?

There is such collective wisdom, skills and talents within a Diocese, especially one which has the history and unity as Eastern Oregon, which could be called upon to make it possible to empower local congregations to be the church in all its variety. One of the resources I have felt for years that we under utilize and fail to appreciate is the presence of so many quality, retired clergy and other professionals whom I would love to see invited into collaborative ministry for training and supervision. I have a Native friend, who is completing her doctorate at OSU, who tells me of the wonderful work being accomplished on the Warm Springs in pairing elders with young people to pass on the traditions. We could learn so much from them!

I hope I have answered this well enough to give you a sense of my passion in this area. I am quite frustrated in what is being done, or not, in my present Diocese, and I would be so thrilled to

be involved in a community wherein creative and fruitful ministry development was being engaged.