



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Program #5209

First broadcast December 30, 2008

WELCOME

Lydia Talbot: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lydia Talbot.

Daniel Pawlus: And I’m Daniel Pawlus. Our guest today is Julie Pennington-Russell, Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Decatur, Georgia. She’s going to talk to us about how to navigate the stormy seas of life we all face at one time or another.

Lydia Talbot: We also welcome back Otis Moss III, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. He’ll continue our series on the “Fruits of the Spirit,” reflecting today on “love.”

Daniel Pawlus: And, as always, we start with a story. There’s a young man in Chicago who embarked on an unusual journey, visiting 365 churches in 365 days. It was a pilgrimage that clearly affected David Heimann’s spiritual life. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

David Heimann: A pilgrim is someone who goes armed with nothing, is defenseless and is open to the experience. A pilgrim doesn’t come with a mission to proselytize or convert anyone. A pilgrim comes to respect and honor the sanctuary that they seek. In my case, I was visiting the sanctuary of the human heart. I actually woke up out of a dream one morning and the dream was to go day by day to a different church everyday around the world. I took it to my spiritual director. I said, “I’ve got a dream! I’ve got a dream!” And he said, “I want you to forget it because if you can forget your dream, it was just a fantasy. But if it’s something that keeps coming back to your heart, then it’s something from the Holy Spirit.” Cardinal George wrote me a letter of introduction, which I sent to other bishops throughout the world. Over two years of time I was able to get enough connections to be able to plan the trip and address that I’d be able to be safe in all of these countries.

January 1st, 2007. This is what it’s about: leaving everything behind. I’m not my job. I’m not my company. I’m not my car, my bank account.

I was with the Malkite Catholics in Israel. These are Arab speaking Palestinians and they’re Christian. And I said, “You know, I’m going back to the United States. What would you like me to tell American Catholics, especially the young people?” They said, “We would just be happy if you told them that we are here because we feel so forgotten.”

That was transformative to me to the nth degree because how often is it that we don't even recognize that they are other people in the world who are struggling, who are trying to survive and their greatest struggle is just for identity. The largest youth event in the world is something I got to experience and it's a pilgrimage to Lujan. This is in Argentina and every year around October 18, one million youth take a hike 30 miles into the countryside of Argentina to go visit a shrine. To experience the eagerness with which they want to share their faith is something that's just contagious. The faith is about passion. I think in America we've got loving God with our mind down very well, but the heart and the soul, other cultures teach us that more fully.

Everyday I would wake up and I would say this prayer: "Dear God, lead me where you need me to go and show me what you need me to see."

One of the major aspects of my life now is a responsibility to share these stories to other youth in America. In the age of globalization, to realize that our faith doesn't just end with worship on Sunday but connects us to our daily actions that impact the entire world.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: David Heimann works as a youth minister in Chicago. We're grateful to him for sharing his inspiring story. Now, let me tell you about our speaker.

Julie Pennington-Russell is one of a handful of women pastors in the Baptist denomination, and serves as Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia. She says the call to ministry is given by God to all of us: some are called to be leaders, but all are called to minister: to share our faith, to care, to proclaim, to practice justice and to bring about healing. This is Julie's second visit to "30 Good Minutes" and we are delighted to welcome her back. Welcome, Julie.

MESSAGE

Julie Pennington Russell: Lydia, thanks so much. It's really great to be here.

Our Scripture reading today comes from Mark's Gospel, beginning in verse 35 of chapter 4: "That day when evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let us go over to the other side.' Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along in the boat, just as he was. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, don't you care if we drown?' He got up, rebuked the wind, and said to the waves, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?' They were terrified, and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'"

A few years ago at our house our family was going through the typical school-morning routine: packing lunches, making breakfast, getting clothes on, and hair combed. Our daughter, Lucy, who was 7, asked if she might light a candle on the dining room table just to make breakfast a little more special. So my husband, Tim, supervised the lighting, and then went to check something on his computer while I stirred eggs on the stove. A

few minutes later our son, Taylor, who was 11, and the little neighbor girl whom we drove to school every morning, burst into the kitchen, crying and hollering, “Lucy’s on fire!”

Well, it was one of those surreal moments. Both Tim and I flew into the dining room, and sure enough, Lucy was running around in circles with the top of her head blazing like a tiki-torch. She’d leaned a little too close to the candle and her hair had ignited. I reached her first and immediately smothered her head with my robe, did a quick examination and saw that her skin hadn’t been burned, only her hair. So we relaxed and then breathed a big sigh of relief. She was OK.

But as you probably know there are few smells in the world more revolting than that of burning hair, and Taylor, who’s always has a keenly sensitive nose, became...well...sick, right then and there, the sight of which immediately prompted the little neighbor girl to become sick. It was just this chain reaction nightmare! So there I stood at 6:45 in the morning in my scorched bathrobe on that very messy floor, picking ash out of my daughter’s hair thinking to myself, “How did things go completely ballistic before seven a.m.?”

I have a feeling that whole scene isn’t too far removed from the way many of us feel these days on a regular basis as we ricochet through the pressure-filled, multi-tasking, media-saturated, time-crunched pinball machine that has become life in 21st century America. Lots of us, I think, feel as though our hair is on fire a good deal of the time.

In our text today from Mark’s Gospel, the disciples are experiencing a kind of “hair on fire” moment of their own as they cower in the bottom a little boat on the Sea of Galilee. Mark tells us that a great windstorm appears and the waves are breaking over the bow and the boat’s taking on water. They’re in real danger of going down.

I don’t know which picture you prefer to describe your life these days, a child running around the room with your hair on fire, or a swamped little boat taking on water in the middle of a furious sea. There’s plenty to be anxious about, isn’t there? Maybe you’re facing a big change in your life and you’re not sure how it’s going to turn out, and you’re nervous about that. Or maybe you’re waiting for some kind of news and there’s anxiety in the waiting. Maybe an illness has put a hand on your life or on the life of someone you love, and you’re as scared as you’ve ever been. Or maybe you’re just feeling overwhelmed and you’re not even sure you know why. You just are. Well, I have good news: These words today from Mark really are aimed at folks who are mostly feeling seasick and even a little afraid.

Christ and his disciples are in a boat and it looks like the boat is going down. The thing is, there is Jesus in the back sound asleep with his head on a pillow.

You know, I love how relentlessly honest the Bible is about us, about how truthful Scripture is about how it feels to live a real human life. For one thing, it tells the truth about how sometimes when you and I are scared and we actually do manage to cry out to

God for help, it doesn't always feel as though God responds, does it? At least not when we'd like, in the way that we'd like. Sometimes when the wind is howling and the waves are so high and we're desperate to know the Lord is working on our behalf—fighting for us, manning the oars, bailing the water—it may seem for all the world as though he's sound asleep. “Lord, don't you care?” Sometimes in your most desperate moments maybe it feels to you as though God is asleep.

But, oh, that's not the end of the story, is it? Not by a long shot! Mark tells us Jesus hears his terrified friends, gets up, reprimands the wind and says to the waves, “Peace! Be still!” And the Bible tells us the wind dies down and peace does come. His friends cry to him and he listens, and he moves and speaks to the storm and says, “Be still.”

Can the same thing happen inside of you and me? Like the storm, can our hearts also hear and be calmed, and somehow rest in his peace? I've seen it happen. I've known men and women in the darkest moments of their lives, whose families were in peril, whose children were being sucked down some dark hole, or folks who experienced devastating financial loss, but who in the middle of the crisis were heard to say, “God is carrying me. I can't explain it. I know it sounds crazy, but I have peace!”

I'm thinking today about a young friend of mine named Allison, a brilliant, beautiful young woman, the kind of person you just naturally seek out and love to be around. Allie was 19 years old and a student at the University of Texas when she learned that she had an extremely rare and terrible illness. The doctors were honest with Allie and told her that very few people with her condition live past their twenties. And sure enough, Allie died two years later at the age of 21, just a few months after her graduating from college.

But what I'll remember till my dying day is the way that Allie upon learning of her sickness proceeded to lean into her life with an irrepressible faith and joy and confidence that really astonished everybody around her. Allie claimed God's promise that in both life and death she belonged to the Lord, and this noticeable calm wrapped her up like a blanket. Not long before she died, Allie said to her father, “Dad, I can tell that everybody's scared and sad, but for me this illness has turned the sands of the hourglass into diamonds. Every one as it squeezes through is so precious to me! I know I'm in God's hands and I'm not afraid.”

Friends, show him the storm at the center of your life, ask him if he cares. And hear him say: “Peace, be still.” And then, you know what? Something in you can go to join him there in the back of the boat, in the middle of your storm and lay your head down on that pillow and sleep like a baby, and be at rest. Amen.

CONVERSATION

Daniel Pawlus: If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Julie Pennington-Russell, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Julie Pennington-Russell.

Julie, thanks so much for joining us today and sharing your message. One of the phrases that jumped out at me that I really like is when you talk about leaning into life, leaning into a faith life. Can you expand on that a little bit for us? I notice in your biographical information that you like to talk about your own faith journey in that way. What does that mean to you: leaning into your faith?

Julie Pennington-Russell: Well, for me it means that whenever things happen to us that we really would rather not face, we have a choice. And you can sit where you are, become scared and bitter and angry, maybe, or you can actually pitch yourself into God's arms, which for me that image of leaning your life into your faith, into God really, is what it's about.

Lydia Talbot: I love how you characterized Allison. She must have been such a beautiful young woman, inside and out, and leaning into her fate. It reminded me so much of my own niece, Kelsey, who died in a very similar way at age 22. When her mother asked her the purpose of her life, she said, "I think it's all about love." It sounds like your Allison. I can't say it better than that. But you talk about these "hair on fire" moments. As a mom I can identify with the story you told about your daughter, Lucy. But I guess I want to know, what do you say to people whose dialogue with God is ragingly angry, people who tend to blame God?

Julie Pennington-Russell: What I usually say to people is that I think God would much rather have us direct our rage, our anger toward God because God can take it, rather than have us turn our back and just sort of freeze into this stony silence with God. So I invite people to turn their anger into prayer. It's not as though God doesn't know how you feel anyway so why not verbalize it to God.

Daniel Pawlus: Does that speak to how we all can be ministers, as we talked about at the top of the program? Your feeling about how we're all called to a certain way wherever we're at in our faith journey?

Julie Pennington-Russell: Absolutely. I think sometimes the way we can be ministers with one another is that when someone is going through the kind of "hair on fire" moment or maybe a particularly angry moment with God, sometimes what it means to be a minister to that person is to encourage them to remember that with God hopelessness is always premature and to just encourage them to hang in there. Sometimes that's the way we come along side people.

Lydia Talbot: The flock at your church, your Baptist church in Decatur, Georgia, must just love you. You've been there just a year, haven't you?

Julie Pennington-Russell: A little over a year.

Lydia Talbot: Tell us about your church and the parishioners and what your mission is all about.

Julie Pennington-Russell: Well, it's funny. If someone had asked me where do you see yourself ending up, I'm not sure that being a pastor of First Baptist Church anywhere is something that I envisioned for myself. Because when you are a First, any kind of church—First Presbyterian, First Methodist—usually what means is that you've got years and years of “we've always done it that way before” and history and sacred cows. So I really never envisioned that I'd be part of that kind of church. But these folks have a gleam in their eyes. They're pretty light on their feet and out on a limb. I love that about them.

Daniel Pawlus: Is there a denominational difference in the Anabaptist tradition for the First Baptist church that you're at, versus a Southern Baptist church or something of that nature? Is there a distinction there?

Julie Pennington-Church: Well, of course, the Anabaptists are now in the Mennonite stream. But in the Baptist family there are many, many little fingers, little branches on that family tree. So Southern Baptist is one cooperative. Baptist American. I think there are 144!

Daniel Pawlus: Wow! The reason I ask is because we talk about you being unique as a woman in Baptist ministry and I wonder if you can share with us a little bit about why that is or how you found that experience to be thus far in your ministry?

Julie Pennington-Russell: Well, traditionally for Baptists in general, women pastors is a relatively new thing, although there were women pastors as long ago as 100 or so years. Within the branches of the Baptist family tree, some of those branches are a little more open to women. Some not so much. American Baptist is pretty open. Cooperative Baptist are open. Southern Baptist not so much. And then it's just sort of all over the map. It is a little rare.

Lydia Talbot: Take us back to your “out on a limb” congregation. I want to know what you mean by that. In sense of what? Outreach, mission, priorities? What is that about?

Julie Pennington-Russell: The way I characterize an “out on a limb” congregation is a congregation that cares what God wants for them more than anything else. Cares more about that than their reputation, cares about more it than their tradition or their history. It's a congregation that in every generation is willing to look and say, “In this time, in this place, who is God calling us to be and how can we get there double quick?”

Lydia Talbot: So, keep going! How does the church respond to that kind of challenge? What are you doing?

Julie Pennington-Russell: Right. Well, Decatur is really a very interesting little town. It's a city within the city of Atlanta and lots of young families with children, many of whom are kind of off the page with God. So First Decatur is really responding to that. So we really care about reaching these people and communicating God's love to them. We do a lot of things that are more externally focused than internally focused. That's very

important to us.

Lydia Talbot: How about justice and race?

Julie Pennington-Russell: Yes. Very important also to us. We're taking steps in that direction. This is a church that was begun in Atlanta just shortly after the Civil War. So we've got some steps to take, but again the folks in this congregation are saying that this is something God really means for us to do and to be.

Daniel Pawlus: It speaks to what you talked about in your message about being in a storm of finding God in the storm. Doesn't that require us to be open and ask for God to be able to come to us to show us the struggle that we have in that process, not only by ourselves but with in a faith community as well?

Julie Pennington-Russell: Absolutely. And see, it always begins with God. The good stuff we do never originates with us, it always is initiated by God and then we come and respond to what God is already doing in the world.

Lydia Talbot: I have to ask you, Julie, on a personal level, what are those "hair on fire" moments that you have faced yourself personally? Not your children, not your husband, but you, Julie, in your journey in ministry?

Julie Pennington-Russell: Well, I could tell some funny stories related to the gender thing and people not really understanding what a woman pastor is about. But, you know, if I'm going to be honest, the truth is some of the scariest, most anxiety producing moments for me just come from walking alongside people everyday who are in real pain. I mean there is a lot of pain in this world. Letting some of that get on you and in you, it's probably the hardest thing that I do. And the most joyful in the deepest places.

Lydia Talbot: Poetry is one of your companions in that kind of ministry, isn't it?

Julie Pennington-Russell: Yeah. I love poetry. I do.

Lydia Talbot: Billy Collins. Tell about the poetry of Billy Collins.

Julie Pennington-Russell: Well, he's just so real. I'm not a connoisseur of many kinds of poetry and, frankly, some poetry kind of leaves me puzzled a little bit. Billy Collins is so immediate. And, of course, the humor from him just opens people up. I read his poetry and think, oh my goodness, he's hanging out at my house! He knows me! And I love that.

Daniel Pawlus: You love what you do and the work that you're doing now, I know. And in your biography, you just enjoy spending time with your family, with your congregation, and enjoying all those things. And having traveled from Waco and in a whole different part of the country now, you said you're enjoying that a great deal as well.

Julie Pennington-Russell: Yes. Very much.

Lydia Talbot: In ten seconds, your future book. What is it?

Julie Pennington-Russell: Oh my goodness! That's the thing, I've been working on it for twenty years and I don't even have the title yet! So pray for me.

Lydia Talbot: What's the theme?

Julie Pennington-Russell: I think probably by now I've got enough vignettes about ministry and life, some "hair on fire moments," some meaningful moments. I think painting pictures of the road I've walked could be a lot of fun.

Daniel Pawlus: Thanks so much for joining us today, Julie. We appreciate it.

Julie Pennington-Russell: My pleasure. Thanks.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Daniel Pawlus: And now, we turn to our friend, Otis Moss III, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, with this reflection on "love" in our series on the "Fruits of the Spirit."

REFLECTION

Otis Moss III: Love is the most powerful force in the universe. There is an amazing story told by Rev. C. L. Franklin, the father of Aretha Franklin, of a son who was condemned to death. As a result, the judge says, "When the clock strikes twelve, you will die. We will hang you and all of those around in the community will see you die. The only way you will live is if there is some type of divine intervention and there is no sound from the bell tower." Twelve o'clock comes around and there is no sound! The people are wondering what is going on, when suddenly they realize that there is a body that falls from the bell tower. The son's mother was holding on to the clapper so that the bell would not ring. And this is the kind of love that God has for us, that God literally holds the bell clapper so that we would not be condemned but we would have an opportunity for one more day.

CLOSING

Daniel Pawlus: Thank you, Otis, and our thanks again to Julie Pennington-Russell, David Heimann, and you for being with us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Daniel Pawlus.

Lydia Talbot: And I'm Lydia Talbot. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and an extensive collection of other messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at "30 Good Minutes," may peace be with you in the week ahead.