

Of Pasta, Pirates, and People Sheep

John 21:15-19

CWZepp, BMC Worship at Annual Conference, June 30, 2017

(Begin wearing a colander, a rainbow wig, and a pirate eye-patch).

Soooo... how did *this* happen?

How did a 38 year old straight white guy end up preaching at the BMC worship service at Annual Conference, and doing so looking like this?

Well, truth be told, I have quite a long history of wearing alternative headgear. Those who have known me since college may well remember my infamous – but mercifully short – beret phase. Then there was the much longer and slightly more respectable bandana wearing phase.



But this particular ensemble represents more than a phase in the life of one seeking to act out a distinctive identity. These symbols are markers of the convergence of faith, fate, and a fight that I did not want in my life. And today, I want to share with you some of my story, and that convergence that has come to define much of my life and ministry these days.

(And I do have to admit that it's kinda fun to be standing in front of an Annual Conference event wearing a colander! 😊)

So let's start from the top down. Some of you may recognize the colander as the religious headwear of a Pastafarian – a member of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I have long been an admirer of the Flying Spaghetti Monster – ever since I was first introduced to His Noodle Goodness back in 2005, not long after Bobby Henderson, a concerned citizen in Kansas, published an open letter to his state Board of Education requesting that his beliefs be given time in the curriculum of public school science classes. This, of course, was a very reasonable request, seeing as how they had just decided to allow the teaching of intelligent design alongside evolution as a viable scientific theory in Kansas. I was in seminary at the time, and Mr. Henderson's letter opened a whole new universe that I am still just beginning to explore.

But though the Flying Spaghetti Monster entered the mainstream back in 2005, I was only a casual admirer for nearly a decade. I thought seriously about joining up officially back in 2006, when my 45 minute ordination interview in the Atlantic Northeast District led to me receiving a rejection letter from them after nearly 10 years of licensed ministry. It was not named explicitly, but I believe that the real reason for that rejection letter was my refusal to condemn Muslims – and others who do not profess belief in Jesus – to the fires of hell. Apparently, that is a significant part of what it means to be ordained. But since the ANE District begrudgingly granted me ordination on appeal later that year, and I left to accept a call at the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren, I remained only a marginal Pastafarian. True, I have included the Flying Spaghetti Monster on my staff bio at the Bridgewater COB since being called as one of

their pastors in 2006. And yes, I have named Pastafarianism in my Facebook details ever since I've had a page. But who really reads those anyway? Until last year, my interest in the Flying Spaghetti Monster was really just that – an interest – a hobby that I pursued in my free time. And with two kids running around, I didn't really have much of that to spare.

But all that changed last year on St. Patrick's Day, when I finally broke down, took the leap of faith, and paid my \$25 to accept the call as an ordained Pastafarian minister. I assure you – this was not because of my holiday celebrations. In fact, I really have to thank the Shenandoah District, because without their "encouragement" and their action to defrock me a few months earlier, I don't think I ever would have had the courage to make such a bold move. But now, I am a proud, card-carrying member of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, with an ordination certificate framed and hanging on the wall of my office. And for just \$15 more, I was given a very nice card to carry in my wallet, so that if anyone questions my ministerial credentials, I can just pull it out and show them that I AM official.

But enough about Pastafarianism. If you'd like to know more, or if you'd like to explore ministry in the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, you can visit the official website at www.venganza.org. You, too, could be touched by His Noodly Appendage. [This *has* been a commercial message brought to you by the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.] (*Remove colander*).

Now at this point, you may be asking yourself – what transgression could have possibly led to me being defrocked by my original ordaining body – the Church of the Brethren. (Unless of course, fashion choices are considered a matter of ministerial misconduct in the Shenandoah District.) Well, that's where the rainbows come in. Many, perhaps most of you know that I have long been an advocate and ally of the LGBTQ community. When I was a student in seminary, I created an independent study course with the purpose of practically exploring how to preach about controversial topics. My chosen controversial topic was issues of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. I know it might come as a surprise to many of you, but talking about sexuality and gender in the church is rather controversial. And the church – well let's just say we aren't exactly known for being gay-friendly. But having come to believe through study, experience, and discernment that our faith in Jesus Christ demands that we open ourselves and our fellowship to all who earnestly seek to follow Jesus and live into the abundant life to which he invites us, I wanted to work at changing the way the church relates to queer folks.

So having been pastoring, teaching, and preaching on the need for the church to be welcoming and inclusive of the LGBTQ community for nearly 15 years, when I was asked to officiate at the wedding of two women in early 2015, I knew that my faith and the integrity of my ministerial life demanded that I say yes. My only regret in doing so was that I needed to "count the cost" before agreeing to officiate for the marriage of someone who looked to me as a pastor.

In counting that cost, I was aware that officiating for this same-gender wedding would likely bring me into conflict with the authority structures of the Church of the Brethren. But I was also aware of the history and tradition of our denomination supporting conscientious action. I had learned this early on in my ministry from my first mentor, who spent time in prison and had to carry the label of "felon" most of his life because he could not conscientiously accept military service after being drafted during the Korean War. And I had learned in Sunday School that

our founding narrative tells of 8 individuals who, after a long process of study and discernment, came to the conclusion that their faith demanded that they take action against the laws of both church and state, because they believed it to be the mind and the call of Christ to be rebaptized. Since then, the Brethren have advocated no creed but the New Testament, and no praxis but to seek and follow Christ. We have practiced “no force in religion,” and repeatedly promoted and practiced forbearance in matters of disagreement, affirming this understanding at Annual Conference as recently as 2008¹.

So I took heart in our 1969 paper on civil disobedience that concluded, “*Above all, Christian persons and groups are called to be obedient and faithful to Christ's will and way. Even though such obedience brings them into conflict with a law and the state, their first and highest obedience is to God.*”² And so I hoped that, while troubling to many in our fellowship, my conscientious discernment, in partnership with my congregation that I serve in Bridgewater, would be respected, even if not appreciated.

Boy, was that hope in vain.

And so it is that I have become embroiled in the midst of an ecclesial storm, where the totality of my ministry has been largely reduced to a single issue – my support of gay people. Fortunately, since the Shenandoah District terminated my ordination in December 2015, my congregation has continued to employ me and look to me as one of its pastors. And the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster was also there for me, ensuring that my ministerial training, experience, and passion will not be wasted or go unrecognized. (*Remove rainbow wig*).

Which brings me lastly to the eye patch. You might not know it, but pirates are widely believed to have been the first Pastafarians. That’s why most Pastafarian ministers, and even many members, will dress and speak like pirates, especially for official occasions like weddings, evangelizing, or casting out false prophets. But I didn’t have room in my carry-on for my full pirate regalia, and my pirate-speak is a bit rusty. So I just went with the patch, trusting in the mercy of His Noodly Goodness to forgive my indiscretion.

But aside from Pastafarian affinities, I have recently come to have a deep appreciation for pirates. This is largely thanks to a book that was recommended by a friend and mentor of mine. It’s title is *Mutiny! why we love pirates and how they can save us*³. It was written by Kester Brewin, a British math teacher with a passion for theology. I truly wish that I had the time to give this book a full treatment – it is truly a most excellent and thought provoking read (I mean, who knows pirates and theology better than British math teachers!?). But with the exception of one idea that I wish to explore briefly with you, I will have to be content with this plug and my hearty recommendation.

I am most indebted to Brewin for introducing me to the idea of piracy as “unblocking the Commons.” From an economic point of view, this idea refers to the enclosing of village common lands and the privatization of their profits by a landed elite in medieval Britain, and the subsequent resistance that arose from the common people in response. The stereotypical maritime image we have of pirates, then, comes from the similar resistance to the privatization

¹ Resolution “*Urging Forbearance.*” <http://www.brethren.org/ac/statements/2008resolutionforbearance.html>

² “*Obedience to God and Civil Disobedience.*” <http://www.brethren.org/ac/statements/1969civildisobedience.html>

³ Kester Brewin. *Mutiny! why we love pirates and how they can save us.* Vaux Publishing, 2012.

and governmental control of profits that arose on the high seas of the Atlantic during the height of the “triangle of trade” in sugar and slaves in the early 18th century.

With this economic baseline, Brewin defines a pirate as “one who emerges to defend the commons wherever homes, cultures or economies become ‘blocked’ by the rich.”⁴ And then extending this idea metaphorically, Brewin explores the deeper question of why it is that pirates have come to speak so profoundly to our cultural soul. Or as he puts it, “How did these brutal and brave men, bloodied in battle, laughing in the face of the gallows, become suitable protagonists for a children’s birthday party?”⁵ (Or a VBS curriculum for that matter?!?) In answer, he writes:

Perhaps we allow our children to imitate these disreputable characters, and metaphorically take up our own cutlasses with smiles on our faces, because part of us knows that pirates offer something that speaks deeply to our human ache for justice...[and] freedom, of rebellion... [and] high-spirited liberty from all in our culture that would seek to tie us down [and] hold us back.... To put it another way, wherever we see piracy we are looking at a system in trouble.... True pirates...function not just as economic bandits, but also as *cultural heretics*. Their rebellion is not simply about fair trade, but unjust social structures. Where the young, the black, the gay, and the voiceless find their path blocked, pirates will emerge and raise merry hell – whether in parliaments or theatres...radio stations or...the printed page.”⁶

Or, I would add, even in the church. In fact, this is just what Brewin argues later in his book: “The early church can...be seen in pirate terms as a community of men and women who went ‘on the account.’ They declared mutiny against the religious powers that had enclosed them, and, using the teachings of their leader, departed from Jewish orthodoxy in the heretical waters of an inclusive Christianity based on ‘the commons.’”⁷

An inclusive Christianity based on ‘the commons.’

That is a compelling vision if I ever heard one.

One final word from Brewin: “The pirate’s vision is, in a way, very simple: they see where access to a commons has been blocked, and they work to unblock it.”⁸ (*Remove eye patch*).

Which brings me full circle. How *did* this happen? How did I wake up one day and realize that I’m a Pastafarian Pirate working to unblock the commons of the Christian church – for the LGBTQ community, and everyone else the church seeks to exclude from full communion?

Like Brewin’s pirate vision, the answer is simple, and it is found in the words of John’s gospel that were read today. Long ago, I committed my life to following Jesus. Since then, I continue to hear echoes of the question Jesus thrice asked of Peter – “Do you love me?” If and when I answer in the affirmative, I know what comes next – “Feed my sheep. Take care of my people.”

⁴ Brewin, 47.

⁵ Ibid, 5.

⁶ Ibid, 8-9.

⁷ Ibid, 125.

⁸ Ibid, 48.

I debated long with myself on whether or not to wear the headgear and try to bring some levity to the telling of my story. Not everyone appreciates my dark humor or gets my satirical approach to scripture or church life. But as Bobby Henderson writes on his pastafarian website, “Satire relies on truth to be effective. If it’s a joke, it’s a joke where to understand the punchline you must be conscious of underlying truth.”⁹

And in truth, I think we all know and understand that we have something much more substantial and life-giving than pasta to offer to hungry sheep / people. We have bread that nourishes when the journey is long, and wine from the common cup of the new covenant. We have living water for those who thirst for justice and freedom and loving kindness. And we have abundant life to offer to those whose lives have been blocked by the powers that be.

A few weeks ago, our Sr. Pastor, Jeff Carr, preached a sermon at the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren on the 23rd Psalm. And as is so often the case when I start out listening to a sermon thinking that I can’t possibly hear something new in such a familiar text, I found myself jarred by new light when Jeff confessed that as a child, he had heard the opening line of this beloved Psalm as “The Lord is the shepherd that I did not want.” And I was reminded of the words of Jesus after he told Peter to “Feed my sheep” for the third time: “*Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.*”¹⁰

I never wanted to be in this place. I never wanted to be the poster boy for a church fight – a hero to some and anathema to others. I never wanted the stress that the past two years have brought to me, my family, or my congregation. And I never wanted to have enemies within a church to which I have committed my life’s work.

But I do want to follow Jesus. And I have heard Jesus calling – asking if the love I profess for him extends to all those people sheep entrusted to my circle of care. There is really only one possible answer for me.

This journey hasn’t been easy and the cost of faithfulness has been high. Though I like to joke about my fate and my defrocking, the truth is that humor is largely a coping mechanism for me. Being defrocked has been traumatic for me – more so than I like to admit. Because I am profoundly aware of my privileged position, and know that the wounds and scars that I carry are only a fraction of those carried by my queer sisters and brothers who have been excluded from the commons and borne the brunt of the church’s animosity for far too long. And so to those of you in this room – I want to say for the record that it is an honor and a privilege to have joined your ranks and to suffer with you, even if I can still only imagine the depth of your wounds. And I hope that the sharing of my story today has honored and done some justice to your stories, and brought some hope in our mutual struggle to bring about the kind of church we long for. Despite the cost, despite the pain, and despite the incredible irony of it all – nevertheless, we shall persist, until such a time when the commons of Christ’s table is fully unblocked, and there is finally and truly no Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, straight nor gay, and we all can truly feast together as one in Christ Jesus... May it be so.

⁹ From the Questions and Answers portion of the official website of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. <https://www.venganza.org/about/>

¹⁰ John 21:18 (NRSV).