

ALSO BY NADIA BOLZ-WEBER:

*Salvation on the Small Screen?:
24 Hours of Christian Television
Accidental Saints
Shameless*

PASTRIX



*The Cranky, Beautiful Faith
of a Sinner & Saint*

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pastrix (pas • triks) noun

- 1). A term of insult used by unimaginative sections of the church to define female pastors.
- 2). Female ecclesiastical superhero: Trinity from *The Matrix* in a clerical collar.
“What on earth was that noise?”
“A pastrix just drop-kicked a demon into the seventh circle of hell!”
- 3). Cranky, beautiful faith of a Sinner & Saint.

—*NewWineskinsDictionary.com*

✠ CHAPTER 5 ✠

Thanks, ELCA!

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard...And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us."

—*Matthew 20:1, 6–7a*

On the first date with my husband, I asked if he was a unicorn. It felt like an honest question.

By the time I met Matthew, it had been a decade since I'd left the church of my youth, during which time I became increasingly aware of injustice and poverty and the basic horrors of society, which I felt could only be ignored by the most heartless of people. I had never heard anything about caring for the poor in the church of my childhood. We were more of a

"just over in the glory land" kind of crowd who set our sights on heaven above.

I thought I had moved as far from the fundamentalism of my childhood as possible. But at the time I didn't know that it would take more to escape black-and-white thinking than just no longer attending your parents' church. The church had provided me a sorting system, which was now ingrained. It had containers into which every person and idea and event was to be placed. These were sometimes labeled "saved" and "not saved" (those who will join us in the glory land and those who will not) or perhaps "us" and "not us" (same thing) or simply just "good" and "bad" (again, same thing). As a teenager, I began to question the Great Christian Sorting System. My gay friends in high school were kind and funny and loved me, so I suspected that my church had placed them in the wrong category. And dancing, it turns out, was fun. Swimming in the same pool with boys was normal (and fun), and in the end, people who weren't Christians, to me, just felt easier to be around. Injustices in the world needed to be addressed and not ignored. Christians weren't good; people who fought for peace and justice were good. I had been lied to, and in my anger at being lied to about the containers, I left the church. But it turns out, I hadn't actually escaped the sorting system. I had just changed the labels.

I began to realize this when, in January 1995, I met Matthew, a tall, really cute Lutheran seminary student. We met playing a game of pickup volleyball. (Volleyball courts, after all, are the sacred breeding grounds of tall people.)

I had been sober for four years and was still hanging out with

God's aunt at the time I went out with Matthew. I was also in therapy with a middle-aged therapist who wore flowing clothes and sang in some sort of choir. She was smart and seemed to be genuinely optimistic about me in a way that made me question her judgment while also being desperately grateful to her. I nervously mentioned one day in the spring of 1995 that I had met a really cute guy, but that he was...um...nice. This obviously was a problem (a previous boyfriend had spent six years in San Quentin for armed robbery), so "nice" had never been a compelling characteristic to me. "Why don't you just try it?" she offered. Best seventy-five dollars I ever spent, that hour of therapy.

On our first date, Matthew and I sat across the booth from each other at el Taco de Mexico, one of the only places in Denver where you can get brain tostadas and tongue tacos. Over two plates of less adventurous chile relleno burritos, Matthew asked me about my interests. We spoke of social issues: racism, homelessness, and women's rights, and we saw eye to eye on everything. Then he said, "Well, my heart for social justice is rooted in my Christian faith."

Um, what? I just stared at him, saying nothing. He went on to tell me that he was a Lutheran seminary student at Iliff School of Theology, and that he was in the peace and social justice-focused master of divinity program; he was in school to be a Lutheran pastor. Oh, yeah, and he was from Texas. Like I said, Matthew was a unicorn; a mythical combination of creatures that doesn't exist in reality.

But I soon learned that there was actually a whole world of Christians who take Matthew 25 seriously, who believe that

when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the sick, we do so to Jesus' own self. They weren't magical fantasy creatures, they were just a kind of Christian I had never heard of. I thought that was interesting and quaint, but still, not for me. My own internal sorting system wouldn't allow for it; if I started to put some Christians in the "good" container, where would it end? Still, the date with the Lutheran unicorn went well enough that six months later we were living together in Oakland, where we had moved so Matthew could finish his Lutheran seminary training. While in California, I spent several months trying like hell to be a Unitarian. Quakerism didn't work for me, Wicca was great, but I always felt like I was just visiting. So I hoped Unitarianism would be just right. Unitarians are such smart, good people. They seem so hopeful. They vote Democrat and recycle and love women and they let you believe anything you want to, and I wanted to be one of them badly. But I couldn't pull it off. Four years of sobriety hadn't come to me as a result of hopefulness and positive thinking. It was grace. Unitarians just don't talk much about our need for God's grace. They have a higher opinion of human beings than I have ever felt comfortable claiming, as someone who both reads the paper and knows the condition of my own heart. Having had the experience of getting sober and feeling like God interrupted my bullshit life, I couldn't be comforted by my own divinity or awesomeness, although I'd love it if I could. In the end, as much as I desperately wanted to be Unitarian, I couldn't, because what I needed was a specific divine source of reconciliation and wholeness, a source that is connected to me in love, but does not come from inside of me.

One morning, I sat in our tiny apartment kitchen lamenting over a bowl of oatmeal how un-Unitarian I was, when Matthew said, "Just come with me to St. Paul's on Sunday. It doesn't suck, I promise. Plus, you'll love Pastor Ross; he's gay." I relented, but only because the pastor was gay, and I hoped that meant some flamboyance and dramatics.

As Matthew drove us the following Sunday to St. Paul Lutheran Church in Oakland, I asked him a slew of slightly anxious questions like, "Can I sit on the aisle in case I need to escape?" By the time we arrived I had calmed down and actually convinced myself that it was going to be just like Culture Club meets the 700 Club. But it was just a church. And yet it wasn't at all just a church. There were no dramatics or drag. Just a whole lot of people who didn't seem to really match each other: gay, straight, kids, elderly folks in wheelchairs, white, black. The building was old and respectable, with red carpeting and dark wood. I sat on the end of an old pew and took in the beautiful stained glass.

I had never experienced liturgy before. But here the congregation said things together during the service. And they did stuff: stood, sat, knelt, crossed themselves, went up to the altar for communion, like choreographed sacredness.

In the car on the way home I asked Matthew, "So if I go back, and I'm not saying I will, but if I do, will they do those same things and say those same things again next week?" He grinned. "Yes, Nadia. That's what we call 'liturgy.' People have been doing those things and saying those things for a couple millennia, and I'm pretty sure...next week, too."

It was in those first couple months that I fell in love with

liturgy, the ancient pattern of worship shared mainly in the Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox, and Episcopal churches. It felt like a gift that had been caretaken by generations of the faithful and handed to us to live out and caretake and hand off. Like a stream that has flowed long before us and will continue long after us. A stream that we get to swim in, so that we, like those who came before us, can be immersed in language of truth and promise and grace. Something about the liturgy was simultaneously destabilizing and centering; my individualism subverted by being joined to other people through God to find who I was. Somehow it happened through God. One specific, divine force.

I didn't really know the hymns though. And several of them just seemed unfortunate. Four months later, on the Sunday Matthew and I announced our engagement, I stood during the closing hymn with everyone else even though I wasn't singing. As the crucifer (the person in the procession and recession who holds the crucifix) passed me, I saw behind him Pastor Ross, who started to grin. As he approached me, he quickly leaned over, bright eyed, and whispered, "Now, Nadia, pastor's wives are expected to sing *all* the verses of the hymn." He winked and kept walking.

One Sunday, Pastor Ross announced that he would be teaching an adult confirmation class, since it ends up that there were a lot of people like me who loved St. Paul's and didn't know a single thing about Lutheranism. He said that there would be information available in the narthex. I leaned over to Matthew and whispered, "The Narthex? Isn't that a Dr. Seuss character that speaks for the trees??"

"It's a lobby," he smirked. "And just the fact that you just said that makes me think maybe you should go to the class."

It was disorienting to soon find myself voluntarily spending my Wednesday nights in the basement of a church that was filled with churchgoers and not recovering alcoholics. The first day of class, "grace" was written on the chalkboard in the classroom. Pastor Ross is old school; no dry erase for him. To this day, the man types all his sermons on a typewriter. He has no computer. When I came to St. Paul's because I liked the idea that their pastor was gay, I had no idea he would end up being so old-fashioned.

He pointed to the word "grace" on the board. "Everything I'm going to tell you goes back to this," he claimed. I simultaneously doubted and hoped that was true. Most of what I had been taught by Christian clergy was that I was created by God, but was bad because of something some chick did in the Garden of Eden, and that I should try really hard to be good so that God, who is an angry bastard, won't punish me. Grace had nothing to do with it.

I hadn't learned about grace from the church. But I did learn about it from sober drunks who managed to stop drinking by giving their will over to the care of God and who then tried like hell to live a life according to spiritual principles. What the drunks taught me was that there was a power greater than myself who could be a source of restoration, and that higher power, it ends up, is not me.

A lot had happened to me in church basements. I'd had my first kiss, had been taught to fear an angry God, learned to

trust a higher power, and now had my life changed again. In short, here's what Pastor Ross taught me:

- God's grace is a gift that is freely given to us. We don't earn a thing when it comes to God's love, and we only try to live in response to the gift.
- No one is climbing the spiritual ladder. We don't continually improve until we are so spiritual we no longer need God. We die and are made new, but that's different from spiritual self-improvement.
- We are simultaneously sinner and saint, 100 percent of both, all the time.
- The Bible is not God. The Bible is simply the cradle that holds Christ. Anything in the Bible that does not hold up to the Gospel of Jesus Christ simply does not have the same authority.
- The movement in our relationship to God is always from God to us. Always. We can't, through our piety or goodness, move closer to God. God is always coming near to us. Most especially in the Eucharist and in the stranger.

(Write out these bullet points, memorize them, and you could save a lot of money not going to Lutheran seminary.)

I have been a Lutheran since then because the Lutheran church is the only place that has given me language for what I have experienced to be true in my life, which is why I now call Pastor Ross Merkle the Vampire Who Turned Me.

I need to clarify something, however. God's grace is not defined

as God being forgiving to us even though we sin. Grace is when God is a source of wholeness, which makes up for my failings. My failings hurt me and others and even the planet, and God's grace to me is that my brokenness is not the final word. My selfishness is not the end-all...instead, it's that God makes beautiful things out of even my own shit. Grace isn't about God creating humans as flawed beings and then acting all hurt when we inevitably fail and then stepping in like the hero to grant us grace—like saying, "Oh, it's OK, I'll be a good guy and forgive you." It's God saying, "I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word. I am a God who makes all things new."

So, soon after having been bitten by the Lutheran vampire, my Lutheran unicorn fiancé and I invited another couple from his seminary over for dinner and were talking about how I was loving St. Paul's and Pastor Ross and learning about Lutheran theology from such a great guy. I served them up another helping of cheese enchiladas and we laughed about Ross's inability to use email.

"What does his partner, Bob, do?" I asked.

In unison, all three replied, "Schoolteacher!" and laughed. It's a well-known stereotype that pastors' wives are always schoolteachers.

"He's such a traditional, orthodox Lutheran pastor," AmyJo offered, "which is why it was such bullshit what happened to him."

They informed me that two years earlier, Ross had been brought up on charges and endured an ecclesial trial, the result of which was his being removed from the official clergy roster

of the ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (although his congregation chose to ignore this and continued to employ him as their pastor). Ross had not embezzled money or had an affair with his secretary. Ross's infraction was that he was in a lifelong, committed, monogamous partnership with Bob the schoolteacher. At the time, the official policy of the ELCA stated that ordained clergy were expected to be celibate in their singleness or faithful in their marriage. Ross and Bob could not be legally married, therefore Ross was in violation.

"Are you serious?" I asked. I looked at them all, waiting for a defense that would matter. "I thought I had left that kind of crap behind with altar calls and misogyny." For the rest of the night I fumed like a betrayed eighth grader.

The confirmation classes I had taken, Ross Merkle's gracious acceptance of me, and my hearing the Gospel and receiving the Eucharist at St. Paul's all felt like God again came down, tapped me on the shoulder, and said, "Pay attention, this is for you." It felt like the kingdom of heaven, and I had fallen in love with the whole Lutheran thing. But now suddenly it felt like those five minutes of a movie where the couple is gloriously ignorant of each other's shortcomings and are vapidly skipping hand-in-hand through a field of wildflowers. You know as the viewer that as soon as the montage ends, some kind of awful is going to happen. The Lutheran church was so different from the conservative Christianity of my youth and I was happy, and then the damned montage ended and I had to put the Lutherans in the same category as the Church of Christ. The one labeled "bad."

"It feels like the rug of the hope that the church might

actually be something beautiful and redemptive was pulled out from under me," I told Pastor Ross during a meeting in his office. I expected some kind of shared outrage from him. But in his humble wisdom, Pastor Ross suggested to me that God is still at work redeeming us and making all things new even in the midst of broken people and broken systems and that, despite any idealism otherwise, it had always been that way. He believed so much in the grace that the Lutheran church taught that he refused to let the failings of that same church sell their own teachings short. I found that inspiring and impossible, so I didn't reject the ELCA. But I was still angry.

"There's not enough wrong with it to leave and there's just enough wrong with it to stay," Matthew later told me. "Fight to change it."

Thirteen years later, after I had married Matthew, had two children, gone to college, gone to seminary, gotten ordained, and started a church, House for All Sinners and Saints, I sat on my bed and watched a video stream of the 2009 church-wide assembly of the ELCA (the denomination's legislative body) as they prayerfully voted to change their policy around sexual orientation. Congregations who chose to could now call as their pastor a clergy person in a lifelong, committed, same-sex relationship.

I immediately called my parishioner Stuart who had become a leader at church soon after arriving with his boyfriend, Jim. "Thanks, ELCA!" he yelled in his most drag-queeny voice, and I cracked up.

Thanks, ELCA! was an inside joke at our church. House for All Sinners and Saints had quickly become well known

in the Lutheran world, both by those who loved us and those who hated us. Those who loved us were inspired by our liturgical creativity and freedom, and those who hated us were offended by my gender (thus the term "pastrix") and by our love of the gays. And both groups liked to blog about it all. I had recently shared with my parishioners one such blog post in which someone had written: *"I can't believe the ELCA would waste money on this 'church.' Their openness to homosexuality shows that House for All Sinners and Saints has obviously thrown the Bible out the window."*

"We should totally stage a photo of HFASS with money raining down and a big sign that says, 'Thanks, ELCA!'" I had said in response to the blog post.

Stuart, who was not named the House for All Sinners and Saints' Minister of Fabulousness for nothing, went a gay step further. "No," he insisted. "Everyone should be dancing and holding flutes of champagne while Pastor Nadia throws a Bible out the window and money rains down from the ceiling as a buff male dancer in a gold lamé Speedo holds a sign that says, 'Thanks, ELCA!'" And another inside joke was born.

Many of the folks at House for All had been hurt by the church in one way or another. Several, like Stuart himself, had been victims of so-called ex-gay reparative therapy at the hands of Christians, some had been told they were not up to snuff in the eyes of God, and, needless to say, the vast majority of the folks at House for All were not regularly attending a church when they joined us. In other words, they were just like me in the spring of 1996 when I first walked into St. Paul's in Oakland.

It was important to me that the House for All Sinners and Saints be a place where no one had to check at the door their personalities or the parts of our stories that seemed “unchristian.” I wanted a place where something other than how we responded to rules was at the center of our life together. Yet, in the end, despite how much I love HFASS, I am still not an idealist, not when it comes to our human projects. Every human community will disappoint us, regardless of how well-intentioned or inclusive. But I *am* totally idealistic about God’s redeeming work in my life and in the world.

As a matter of fact, at our quarterly “Welcome to HFASS” events, we ask the question *What drew you to HFASS?* They love the singing, people often say, and the community, and the lack of praise bands, and the fact that they feel like they can comfortably be themselves. They love that we laugh a lot and have drag queens and that it’s a place where difficult truths can be spoken and everyone is welcome, and where we pray for each other.

I am always the last to speak at these events. I tell them that I love hearing all of that and that I, too, love being in a spiritual community where I don’t have to add to or take away from my own story to be accepted. But I have learned something by belonging to two polar-opposite communities—Albion Babylon and the Church of Christ—and I wanted them to hear me: This community will disappoint them. It’s a matter of when, not if. We will let them down or I’ll say something stupid and hurt their feelings. I then invite them on this side of their inevitable disappointment to decide if they’ll stick around after it happens. If they choose to leave when we don’t meet

their expectations, they won’t get to see how the grace of God can come in and fill the holes left by our community’s failure, and that’s just too beautiful and too real to miss.

Welcome to House for All Sinners and Saints. We will disappoint you.

A few months after the ELCA policy change, an email from the Lutheran bishop in Northern California arrived in my inbox.

Pastor Nadia,

We are currently planning a festival Eucharist and rite of recognition here in San Francisco for six GLBTQ [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer] clergy to be officially brought onto the ELCA clergy roster. At that time, Pastor Ross Merkle of St. Paul Lutheran will be reinstated onto the clergy roster. They have asked that you be the preacher for the event. Would you preach for us?

My reply: “All day long.”

But then they sent me the text from which I was to preach, and my heart sank. It was a Kingdom of God parable from Matthew’s Gospel. The Kingdom of God is a tricky concept, and I was always taught it referred to our heavenly reward for being good, which, now that I actually read the Bible for myself, makes very little sense. Others say that the Kingdom of God is another way of talking about the church, and still others say that it’s the dream God has for the wholeness of the world, a dream being made true little by little among us right here, right now. My answer? All of the above.

What happens in the Kingdom of God parable I was given is that a landowner goes out and hires laborers in the morning and agrees to pay them the daily wage. But then every few hours he goes and finds more workers and brings them in. In the afternoon he goes again to the marketplace and sees folks standing around and is like, "Why aren't you working?" and they say, "Because no one would hire us," and he sends them into his vineyard to work the last two hours of the day. When the work is done, he pays everyone the same thing, which pisses off the upstanding early risers who worked all day in the scorching heat because he has made the slept-till-noon new hires equal to them. The landowner is like, "Seriously? You're angry because I am generous?" and then the final line of the parable is "The last shall be first and the first shall be last." This is exactly, when it comes down to it, why most people do not believe in grace. It is fucking offensive.

But the job of a preacher is to find some kind of good news for people. And that good news really should be about who God is and how God works and what God has done and what God will do. (What passes for preaching in many cases is more *here's the problem, and here's what you can do about it*, which I myself have never once heard as being "good news.") So here's why my heart sank when I received the text for the Eucharist: I worried that it might have been chosen in the hope that I would preach a different kind of good news, namely a sermon that said, "All those who are pissed that God is generous to GLBTQ folks can suck it. We've been last, but now we get to be first! [fist pump]"

Yet that's the problem with the whole concept of grace that the Lutherans themselves taught me. It can both sting and

comfort. My own fundamentalist wiring will always lead me to want two sets of labeled containers—in this case, Bad: the conservative people who hate the gays and Good: the liberal people who love the gays. I might always put people and things in those containers, but the problem comes when I start believing that God uses the same sorting system.

Matthew once said to me, after one of my more finely worded rants about stupid people who have the wrong opinions, "Nadia, the thing that sucks is that every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it." Damn.

I want the kingdom of God, and myself, and the ELCA, to be more impressive, more...spiritual. To look like I think it should. But I have learned that like this parable the kingdom of God is more like a workplace—filled with type A personalities, whose sense of entitlement would rival Paris Hilton's, alongside slackers, who take too many smoke breaks and spend their money on scratch tickets.

But here's one of the things that sealed the deal for me with Lutheranism and set the tone for the kind of pastor I would try to be: What makes this the kingdom of God is not the quality of the people in it. What makes Lutherans blessed is not, as I once thought, that they're somehow different from the people in the Church of Christ, where I was raised. Rather, what makes us *all* blessed is that, like the landowner in the parable, God comes and gets us, taps us on the shoulder, and says, "Pay attention, this is for you." Dumb as we are, smart and faithful as we are, just as we are. Which is just what I preached that day.

As I stood in the imposing pulpit of St. Mark's Lutheran

Church in San Francisco, I looked out into the faces of those who had been unfairly denied entrance into the leadership of the church. I looked out into the faces of Stuart and Jim, who had come from Denver to witness the celebration (and who, moments earlier, when standing outside with over a hundred clergy ready to process in full vestments, had looked at me and laughed, saying, "This looks like such a big deal, and you're the preacher?"). I looked at sweet Ross Merkle, who winked at me.

I swallowed and began to preach. I said that the text for the day is not the parable of the workers. It's the parable of the landowner. What makes this the kingdom of God is not the worthiness or piety or social justicey-ness or the hard work of the laborers...none of that matters. It's the fact that the trumpy landowner couldn't manage to keep out of the marketplace. He goes back and back and back, interrupting lives... coming to get his people. Grace tapping us on the shoulder.

And so, I reminded those seven pastors specifically, including the man who introduced me to grace, that the kingdom of God was just like that exact moment in which sinners/saints are reconciled to God and to one another. The kingdom of God is like that very moment when God was making all things new. In the end, their calling, and their value in the kingdom of God, comes not from the approval of a denomination or of the other workers, but in their having been come-and-gotten by God. It is the pure and unfathomable mercy of God that defines them and that says, "Pay attention, this is for you."

✠ CHAPTER 6 ✠

Hurricanes and Humiliation

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

—1 John 3:17-18

Driving back from Lowry Air Force Base on a fall day in 2005 (when I was just starting seminary and our kids, Harper and Judah, were five and seven), I was giddy with self-congratulations. I had rescued a pregnant, disadvantaged, teenaged Black girl (and her father)—victims of a natural disaster—and I was about to give them a new life. This was a white privileged liberal's dream, and I was riding high on it, when suddenly a *thunk*, the likes of which no car owner ever wants to hear, came out of my Honda like a bitch slap.