



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

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

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. Our guest today is The Rev. Otis Moss III, pastor of Chicago’s historic Trinity United Church of Christ. He’s going to talk to us about finding our way to God, by all means.

Daniel Pawlus: We also welcome back Jason Byassee, who reflects on a lesson his grandmother taught him about endurance.

Lydia Talbot: And we begin with the story of journalist and author, Robert McClory. He has great hope for the future of his church because of its commitment to the enduring truth of loving one’s neighbor. Robert has had a long, remarkable career, and has just released a new book called “As It Was in the Beginning.” Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Robert McClory: I think God speaks to us through the experiences of our lives. I was born and raised in Chicago on the west side. The priesthood had sort of an attractiveness because there really, for most of us growing up in those days, was no likelihood of going on to college. Priests were very well respected people and they were the leaders in the neighborhood. So it was a natural attraction for people like myself.

I had asked or requested that I go to a African American parish so my assignment was to the south side of Chicago to St. Sabina parish. In those days it was all white. The first black family had just moved in by the time I arrived. By 1970, the parish was 98 percent black. St. Sabina parish today is arguably the largest black Catholic parish in the country.

I was the priest who was in charge of the school at St. Sabina. I worked very closely with the principal of the school, Sr. Ciaran, and I found her to be an incredibly talented, gifted, well-organized and wonderful person. Over the period of those years, our relationship became firmer and firmer. And at a certain point I realized, and I think she realized, that we were not prepared to give up this relationship. Finally we decided that I would leave the priesthood.

We got married and settled down in a little tiny apartment off of Sheridan Road. Of course, I needed work so I went to Medill to get a Masters degree. Then I went and applied at the “Chicago Defender,” the black owned newspaper on the south side, and they hired me. I was down at city hall for press conferences with Mayor Daley. I got to know Jesse Jackson. We were like friends. Harold Washington and I were buds. It was just a marvelous experience. I also did a little teaching at Columbia College in Chicago and then at Northwestern School of Journalism. During that free-lance period, I was working for the “Chicago Reader.”

While working there, I acquired the idea that a story can be great if somehow or other it touches on one or more of the “great realities.” And all of the great realities have a negative pole and a positive pole: life and death, love and hate or apathy, success and failure. If your stories somehow get into one or more of those ideas, you get good stories. The book I just completed will be titled, “The Coming Democratization of the Catholic Church.” The world is so different than it was in 1950. We are moving into a new era and this should be an era of hope. I wrote that book basically because I know so many Catholics who are discouraged, distressed. They say there is no future. I’m saying, well, the organization as it is, is not going to survive, but the church is going to survive. So I’m full of hope.

INTRODUCTION

Daniel Pawlus: Robert McClory is the co-founder and associate editor of Call to Action News. For more information, you can visit our web site at 30goodminutes.org.

Now, let me tell you about today’s speaker. The Rev. Otis Moss has been pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago since the Fall of 2006. He came to Chicago from Augusta, Georgia, where he was pastor of the historic Tabernacle Baptist Church. He’s a graduate of Morehouse College, where he was Ford Foundation Scholar, and earned his divinity degree at Yale University. Otis’ passion for youth led him to create the Issachar Movement, designed to bridge the generation in our churches and train a new generation of church leaders. It’s a great pleasure to welcome Otis Moss III back to “30 Good Minutes.” Welcome, Otis.

MESSAGE

Otis Moss: Thank you.

In the Gospel of Mark there was a powerful story told of a paralytic. Four brothers, four men, bring a gentleman, who was paralyzed, to the feet of Jesus, but they cannot go through the front door. They literally have to tear the roof off. They are trying to make their way to Jesus by any means necessary.

I believe he’s one of the greatest cultural icons of the twentieth century, a person by the name of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, more popularly know as Malcolm X. Born in Omaha, Nebraska and died prematurely, assassinated, in the Aududon Ballroom of Harlem, New York. It was Malcolm X who stated that, “We are human beings and we declare our right to be human beings, and we will bring this into existence by any means necessary.”

It is the famed psychologist, Franz Fanon, the writer of “Wretched of the Earth,” who tells, just like Malcolm X, that the victimizer will always attempt to tell the victim what methodology they

should use in order to be liberated. Is this not the story of many people in the United States, who have been told by those who want to keep the status quo, that you need to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps? Well, not too long ago there were many people that didn't have boots or straps or even flip-flops to place upon their feet.

When we look at this particular text, we see a gentleman who was coming before God by any means necessary. When one looks at the Roman culture of the day, he was a gentleman who was considered to be of diminished capacity. They looked at his outward appearance and they made an inward assessment based upon the way we looked. He could not have the favor of God theologically. Because he did not have the favor of God theologically, and because of his diminished capacity, he did not, obviously, have any type of health care nor could he work. So all of this was working against him. Yet four men are willing to bring this one gentleman to Jesus.

Four men, four gentlemen, each person has a corner, in reference to carrying this man to Jesus. They are carrying his mat. What I like about these brothers is that they do not have an ego. As one person, Dr. Frank Madison Reed, states, ego means "edging God out." Each person has a corner. Somebody is working the north side, someone is working the south side, someone is working the east side, someone is working the west side. They were not caught up in "corner conflict." When the church begins to understand that everyone has a particular mission and a gift, work your particular corner whatever your church may be. If it's United Methodist, if it's Presbyterian, if it's Baptist, work your particular corner.

If you are a person of diminished capacity, do you really care where that person comes from? Whether they are UCC, UMC, PNBC? Whether they are from AT&T or if they have ADD, you really don't care. You just want that person to bring you into the presence of God. But the peculiar thing about this text in Mark is that these gentlemen who are bringing this man to Jesus cannot get in through the front door because all of the church people are in the way and they're refusing to move from their seats. They are so creative that they are willing to go up on the roof and literally tear the roof off. I'd like to say that many people do not recognize or come into contact with God through front door ministries. Some people come through the back door, some come through the window, some literally come through the roof. Sometimes we idolize our methodology but forget about the message.

Let me see if I can break it down so everybody understands what I'm trying to say. Not too long ago people used to listen to music on a 78. There are some people out there who listened to music, who remember it on a 45. Some on a 33. And there are some people with 8-track tapes. You still have them in your basement. Then there are some with an LP. There are a few with cassettes. You remember now we have CDs, DVDs, and MP3s. The beautiful thing about all of these different methods, the wonderful thing about all of these different methods, is that I can play the song "Amazing Grace" on a 78, a 45, a 33, an 8-track, an LP, a CD, a cassette, a DVD or an MP3! It's the same song but a different method of delivery. Part of our problem is that we have 8-track churches in a CD world and we're not willing to shift the methodology so a new generation can connect with God.

So we see in this text that this man is now at the feet of Jesus and he is about to be transformed as a result of this encounter because some people were willing to bring him to Christ by any means necessary. Now one of the powerful things in this text is when Jesus goes through the healing process of saying, “Yours sins are forgiven.” He then says, “Rise up and walk, and take up your mat and go on home.” What’s powerful in the text is that he does not just tell him get up and walk. He says “Get up and take your mat and go home.”

In other words, if you were to just get up and walk, if people were to see you, they would think you’ve always been someone who lived at your full human potential. But literally he says to take your mat—your stretcher—put it under your arm and walk home. When you connect with someone, someone will raise the question, “Why do you have that stretcher under you arm?” You can say back to that individual, “I bumped into a gentleman by the name of Jesus. I met him by any means necessary because I had to get to him. I bring my infirmities with me wherever I go so that I can share with people the power and the love of God.”

This is our call, that we are to bring people to Jesus, to God, by any means necessary. Whatever the methodology, make sure we have the same message.

CONVERSATION

Lydia Talbot: If you’d like a free printed or audio copy of the message you just heard from Otis Moss, 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 download the text anytime. Now let’s talk to Otis Moss. I just told you, when you came back here that you really do take the roof off!

Otis Moss: I appreciate that.

Lydia Talbot: And I know you do it from the pulpit at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.

Otis Moss: That’s very kind.

Lydia Talbot: What are you going through the roof about these days, Otis Moss III, to bring people to God?

Otis Moss: Well, one of the things is that we really have to break down some of the tradition that we are caught into, that keeps people outside of the church. Whether it is a particular liturgy, whether it is a particular doctrine, or even just particular cultural things that we don’t even realize that we do. For example, dress. I use the example many times that when we come to church we like to speak to people like this, “Hi. How are you doing?” But on the street when you talk with young people, let me show you. Can I do it with you?

Daniel Pawlus: Sure.

Otis Moss: Give me your hand. You do like this: “What’s going on, brother?” Now, the street demonstrates more love than the church, so we have to learn how to connect with people. If the street can demonstrate love, then we’ve got to do the same thing in the church.

Lydia Talbot: I've had the pleasure to see you in the pulpit at Trinity this year. I made a visit and it was an inspirational experience because the spirit just grows and grows in you in an extended format, longer than we have on the program here. I wanted to ask you, as I observed you, part of your message was personal accountability. Absolutely a challenge to your congregation to do the work that they need to do. There is a prosperity gospel out there as well in the African American churches. Is that a challenge in the work that you're doing, to try to convey the message that you want to get across?

Otis Moss: I think part of the problem, especially in America, is that we believe in free market religion or free market mentality and that has become the religion of sorts. That's why it's very easy to have this prosperity gospel because it fits very well into the mentality that America has. For example, we idolize the Donald Trumps; we idolize the Hiltons; we idolize the P. Diddys; and that becomes the religion. So here comes the church talking about love, justice, peace and compassion and it doesn't fit because I want my house now, I want a big car now. So we literally turn Jesus into a cosmic bell hop or an ATM machine. If you have the right PIN number you can receive the blessing that you want. The challenge for the church is to be able to be true to the Gospel and to let people know that it demands work. It demands that you live life a certain way, live a life of service. And most importantly, that service must be rooted in love because service without love literally becomes indentured servitude.

Lydia Talbot: OK. So the gospel of health, wealth and success is the real challenge for people of faith.

Otis Moss: Yes.

Lydia Talbot: So how are you explaining this to Makayla and to Elijah, your children.

Otis Moss: Well, they watch television but we limit that, so we have them watch PBS. I know you all know PBS!

Daniel Pawlus: Very well!

Otis Moss: It's very nice. But we have them watch programs and talk about those things. And, of course, the value system that we teach at home, a value system of service. There are certain things they want. "I want this. I want an X-Box!" Why do you want an X-Box? "Well, because my friends have an X-Box." Well, how about this. Why don't we look at doing something for people who don't have anything so that you can begin to understand that the life that we live is a life of service rooted in love. And those are the value systems that we want to pass down. I mean, if we get him an X-Box, he'll break it next week. But if you pass on the value system of love and service, that stays with him forever.

Lydia Talbot: Service to others is something that most people of faith learned in Sunday school. Who are some of your heroes, Otis?

Otis Moss: One of my biggest heroes is my wife.

Lydia Talbot: Monica.

Otis Moss: Monica. Yes. She is a powerful sister and I just thank God for her because the image that she puts forth, not only as a person of service, a person who loves God, but also committed to the community. My parents. My mother and my father who met in the Civil Rights movement.

Lydia Talbot: Your father, of course, preceded you on this program a couple of years ago.

Otis Moss: That's right. Absolutely. They have been models for me growing up because I did not understand, one, that there were all these denominational differences until I went to college because we always operated within an ecumenical community. So I just thought that if you went to church you were supposed to have AME, UCC, UMC at your church communicating, teaching, preaching, all of that. Then I get to college and all of a sudden people have these camps. I'm like, "This is an interesting thing!" I didn't grow up with that. So that was a powerful lesson that they taught to me, in many ways on a subconscious level, that they never said that this is the way we operate.

Lydia Talbot: And so this service to others kept evolving through college and from Morehouse to Yale and so on and so forth.

Otis Moss: Oh yes. It just kept moving on.

Daniel Pawlus: That service requires a lot of energy from you, doesn't it? I want to ask you, how do you sustain yourself on all this, Otis? You're a man on the move. You're in a very, very active church with a lot going on. What are you doing to help contribute to your endurance to be able to make it through all of this.

Otis Moss: Nurturing my own spirit. One of the things that I do is I keep a journal. I'm very religious about keeping a journal. Not just here are the day's events, but it's a prayer journal, a preaching journal, a reflective journal. I really borrowed the idea from Howard Thurman who is one of my favorite writers and preachers. He was a teacher of Dr. King. Writing meditations. I write out the prayers that I actually pray at church. When people say I want you to pray for me, they are in the journal that I'm praying for so-and-so who's going into the hospital. But also reflecting on what is happening, not only in my life but in the world.

Lydia Talbot: What did you write yesterday?

Otis Moss: Yesterday I specifically was praying for someone who is going into the hospital this Thursday, a sister by the name of Wanda, and so I've been lifting her up. I wrote a prayer about how we are out of balance with God and that when we are out of balance and not in harmony with God, it causes us to play the wrong chords and God doesn't like the sound!

Lydia Talbot: Journaling. How did you learn that?

Otis Moss: It was really through Howard Thurman and reading also. I love Alice Walker and Alice Walker is big on journaling.

Lydia Talbot: “Down a lonesome road...”

Otis Moss: Oh, absolutely. “Meridian,” “The Color Purple,” “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.” I mean Alice Walker is very powerful and through her I’m lead to Zora Neale Hurston who has really become kind of a literary cultural mentor for me. I just think that Zora Neale Hurston is the end all, to be all, in many ways in terms of a writer. So that became one way. Then, of course, I’ve been an athlete. I was an athlete in college and so always making sure that I take care of myself. Then time with my family. Making it very clear to the congregation how important and what a blessing Monica, Makayla and Elijah are in my life and they nurture me.

Lydia Talbot: You say you were an athlete in college. You were an All-American track star. Let’s be honest! On that field at Morehouse College, at the same time you were a Ford Foundation Scholar and all the rest, what was it then about endurance—a term that we usually think of in terms of athletics—and that experience that helped you figure out what it had to do with faith.

Otis Moss: Well, one of the things that I love about track is that it has a lot of personal accountability, responsibility connected to it. But it also has a unique community component because I was doing relays, too. So in order to stay in step with everyone else, you had to make sure that you worked out as hard as everyone else. Now, when one translates that to our faith, in faith there is as much that you are going to get out of it as you put in. If you want to grow in a deeper relationship with God, it’s not just through osmosis. You have to do the work. But at the same time we’re also a part of a team and there are people, when we can’t go any farther, that we can pass things off to them, that they support us, they cheer us on, they encourage us, they pray with us. So balancing the component religiously, understanding that we are individuals, that we grow individually. There is a personal dimension, but there is also a public dimension to our relationship with God. Any time we divorce the personal from the public, we end up doing violence to our faith. In other words, we don’t have the cross. We just have a vertical stick where we’re just looking up to God. It is the horizontal that allows us to have the cross reaching out to others. So that becomes the piece that I learned from athletics, in terms of my faith.

Lydia Talbot: Reaching out to others, community building. You’ve got to take us inside Trinity United Church of Christ. Walk us in.

Daniel Pawlus: I was going to ask you about the Issachar Movement as well. We haven’t really talked about that reaching out for others.

Otis Moss: Trinity, I like to say, is a village and in this village we all recognize and operate as a family. Now the powerful thing about family is that not everybody always gets along. But yet, the ethic is we’re family. I always use the analogy of Thanksgiving is really the way the church is. We all come together to eat. Sometimes there are sibling squabbles: “I don’t want to sit next to you! I don’t want you to come to the Thanksgiving dinner.” But the reality is, one, it’s not your house and you did not provide the food, you are just privileged to be able to sit at Big Mama’s table. And literally, when we come into the worship experience, we’re sitting at Big Mama’s table or sitting at Big Daddy’s table. It is God’s house and so we have the privilege to sit

next to each other, to work together, to struggle together, to fight together, and still remain family. And that's the powerful thing, that no matter what happens we are still part of the same family.

Daniel Pawlus: There was a conscious welcoming, a hospitality when I attended services with my wife and friend. Everything stopped and there was an extended period of welcome.

Lydia Talbot: It's seven days of the week at Trinity, isn't it? Tick off. We have about 30 seconds, but tick off what's happening.

Otis Moss: In 30 seconds what's happening! Everything from our prison ministry and the Safer Foundation, to our women's ministries, to our youth ministries, to our senior ministries. We have our community higher education corporation, our health corporation. We have a hospice that is running. We also have a national magazine called "The Trumpet" that is circulating throughout the United States. There is so much that happens. But really the engine that drives it—and Dr. Wright was such an incredible visionary—and really the heart is worship and our relationship with Christ.

Daniel Pawlus: Otis, thanks so much for being with us today. We appreciate it.

Otis Moss: Thank you. It's always a delight.

INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

Daniel Pawlus: And now our friend, Jason Byassee, Associate Editor of the Christian Century, has this "final thought" on endurance.

REFLECTION

Jason Byassee: My grandmother was an ever-day-mass Catholic. I say this with admiration now, but as a kid it was simply annoying. We'd all be driving to the beach or somewhere else fun, and she'd stop and say, "It's Sunday, I need to go to church." And wherever we were on the planet, we'd have to find her a Catholic parish. For a kid with the sand and the surf on his mind, this was infuriating!

I've come to see my grandmother's mass attendance as the particular grace of endurance. I'm sure my grandmother didn't much feel like going to mass all those times either. She liked to relax on vacation as much as anyone else. But her faith obliged her to be present on Sundays and holy days, so she went, cheerfully. For she believed every time she did Jesus would meet her there and they would rejoice together. That's endurance.

CLOSING REMARKS

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Jason. And our thanks again to Otis Moss, Robert McClory, and you for joining us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Lydia Talbot.

Daniel Pawlus: And I'm Daniel Pawlus. Before we go, I encourage you again to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and a wonderful

collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may your faith be strong in the week ahead and may your heart be open to God.