

I'm indulging myself by talking about *What love about Blue Ocean as I retire, part 2 of 4*. But as I approach retirement in 6 weeks, I've had the luxury of easing up on future planning to focus instead on the blessing Blue Ocean has been to me as a pastor.

I've had 3 chapters in my pastoral career: 15 years as a pastor in an intense charismatic renewal community in Ann Arbor composed Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants of many stripes who maintained connection to their different churches; then over 20 years affiliated with an evangelical denomination with charismatic leanings that originated in the hippie Jesus movement; then 8 years here at Blue Ocean. First two chapters included many wonderful experiences, but I also carry painful memories and regrets as my faith perspectives have evolved. By far, my years at Blue Ocean have been the most rewarding years of my career and today I want focus on one feature of that: the sense of acceptance or safety I have known here. Some preliminaries on that word safety.

It's telling the phrase "safe space" has become fighting words for what David Gushee calls "authoritarian reactionary Christianity"—a movement that has infected a large swath of the contemporary landscape. It's telling because the core meaning of the Greek New Testament word, *sozo*, often translated "save" means "safety from harm."

Here's an entry from a NT Greek lexicon: *sōzō* (from *sōs*, "safe, rescued") – properly, *deliver* out of danger and *into safety*

The New Testament was written in Greek, even though it is a product of ancient Judaism, whose native tongue is Hebrew. But by the time of Jesus there were more Jewish people in the diaspora (various parts of the Roman Empire) than lived in the land of Israel. Up until 1947 when there was a massive discovery of Hebrew manuscripts near the Dead Sea, including large portions of the Hebrew Bible in ancient Hebrew. Until 1947 we only had fragments of ancient OT books in Hebrew. It was a massive discovery shedding brand new light on the ancient Judaism that produced Christianity.

The only early NT manuscripts we have are written in Greek. So why did the Jewish writers or compilers who produced the New Testament, choose the Greek term "sozo" (safety from harm) to refer to salvation? Because safety from harm *is the core meaning* of salvation in the sacred stories and writings of ancient Israel

The first book of the Bible, Genesis, presents the problem of human rivalry, leading to the major concern of Scripture, human violence. "God saw how violence had spread across the earth and his heart was filled with pain." The concept of salvation makes its grand entrance in the book of Exodus, where it is depicted as bringing the suffering, oppressed and enslaved Hebrews out of situation of grave danger, of crushing and unrelenting harm into a safe space—first the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula, with hopes of reaching a land flowing with milk and honey. So the imprint story of salvation is moving from a place of harm to a place of safety.

The Greek word “*sozo*” (safety from harm) appears 54 times in the gospels, and it applies to all sorts of things—physical, emotional, spiritual healings, safety from enemies, physical danger. God does *sozo*, Jesus does *sozo*, but one of the things that endears me to Jesus is he doesn’t say, “I saved you!” after performing a healing. More often than not, he says to the healed person, “Your faith has saved you.” If you meet with a therapist for a while and start to untangle your inner knots, you understand the therapist is not curing you, but is helping or coaching or guiding you to heal yourself. Recently, I developed an IT band injury and the doctor prescribed Physical Therapy, but I soon learned the job of the Physical Therapist is to assess my situation, offer me exercises to do and home, and monitor my progress. Their role is critical but as a catalyst—helping me heal my IT band injury.

SOZO—this NT Greek word meaning safety from harm is like that: it’s something God does, it’s something Jesus facilitates, and it’s something we participate in—creating places of safety from harm. So divine influence is a catalyst for *sozo*, but we are partners in creating safety from harm for ourselves and for others. Just to say it one more time: the work of saving from harm is a divine dance with humans whose communities are afflicted with the problems of rivalry, violence and all the oppression and harm it foments (now doing untold harm to the natural world and other living creatures) so we can struggle toward salvation, safety from harm.

The point of this recap is to say I know many of you—not all of us, of course, but many have come to Blue Ocean feeling battered and bruised and have gone through a process (often a gradual one) of learning to trust yourself and others in a faith community again. It’s a lot like recovering from a physical injury: it takes time and effort. They say physical pain and the pain of social rejection occur in the same part of the brain. I hope we are a portal in that storm but today in my self-indulgent retirement series I’m just talking about my personal experience as a pastor of Blue Ocean as a taste of safety from harm.

But first here’s a story from my varied pastoral career, apropos of nothing. Except this: for many of you, I’m retiring from pastoral ministry here at Blue Ocean, but for me, I’m retiring from a career as a pastor spanning decades. It’s just an odd little story from my early years as a pastor. It’s the early 1980’s. I’m barely 30. I’m a pastor in a setting with all male leadership, which inevitably reinforces the notion of “pastor as expert in life.” I don’t care how great the male leaders are, it is deeply dysfunctional, and I would say a dangerous model. But there I am. And a young man named Sam came to see me in my home office. And he wanted to ask my opinion about some matter as though I had some considerable expertise. Toxic masculinity and patriarchy create weird prestige hierarchies among leaders. It took Sam a while to frame the question and then it was time for me to weigh in with my expertise. I can remember feeling something akin to pleasure at being regarded as an expert where this slightly younger person than myself is coming for my opinion on this matter of much gravity. I might even have been smoking a pipe. But what I do remember vividly is the chair I was sitting in—a fake leather high-backed chair on a swivel pedestal that rocked, with arms of course. And when it was time for me to pontificate, I leaned back in the chair—and to my great surprise, I fell over backwards completely, flat on my back, with my legs sticking up in the air. Even though I was young and nimble, it’s actually quite awkward to extricate yourself from such a position on the floor. I flailed

there for a while. Times slows to a crawl in such moments. There's no way in such a moment to recover your unearned (and thus fragile) dignity unnoticed. But that was a moment of unveiling for me, because I saw the absolute pretense of the situation and crawled out of my chair laughing and remained sprawled on the floor laughing while Sam looked on in amazement. That's a precious memory of the early 1980s that I bring with me into retirement.

Now to my time at Blue Ocean and my experience of *sozo*. The first thing I noticed when we started in 2015—and it took some months to dawn on me...is that I felt oddly unencumbered, safe, from the pressure/harm of **religious scrutiny**. I don't mean criticism. In a healthy family or community, we need to speak honestly about "hey, when you did or said this or that, it hurt!" So, I don't mean safety from criticism. I mean I have experienced here at Blue Ocean, safety from the burden of a certain religious scrutiny that I had normalized to in the years leading up to Blue Ocean. We all know what it's like to be in the crosshairs of someone's scrutiny. Women and those who inhabit a minority status certainly do. My only experience of this has been as a pastor and I could have changed careers any time I wanted to. When a pastor senses scrutiny in a congregation—it can be a small but vocal segment of the congregation—you put *yourself* under scrutiny whenever you speak, at least I did. You get in the habit of anticipating all probable objections so you can meet or not activate those objections, that religiously reinforced fear. I'm weary just describing it. It's soul-wearying.

Did I mention when I lived in married student housing back in the day, we got one of those used sofa beds the UM Property Disposition. Furniture made for institutional wear and tear is SOLID. Moving it in was like moving a piano. Yes, lift with your legs and all, but the weight of the thing is transferred to your hands where you take hold of it. By the time I set it down in its new location, my hands were frozen in tight grip. It took what felt like 5 minutes for them to open.

It took about 5 months giving sermons at Blue Ocean, for me to relax from whatever those internal habits that I developed in response to religious scrutiny. I remember one Sunday; I was speaking out of my "anticipate-probable-objections-in-advance mode" when I looked around the room and words to this effect came into my mind – the effect was as refreshing as glass of cold lemonade on hot day: "You are not under scrutiny from these people. This is not dodge ball. This is not a fencing match. Stop swatting away objections that don't exist. You're boxing your own shadow. Just relax and get to your point. Save yourself some grief, friend."

Over these last eight years, I *have* saved myself a lot of grief. That for me feels like a massive dose of *sozo*, safety from harm. My faith in you has made me well!

That same sense of relief from a certain kind of pressure has characterized so many other experiences I've had as a pastor here. Like meeting newcomers to the church. I met with newcomers in every phase of my career, but especially in Chapter 2 it occasionally (but recurrently) felt like I was on the other side of a checklist, being politely grilled for correct answers. That hasn't happened in eight years. It's been delightful. Or my experience as a member of the church board has been

positive, constructive, mutually respectful over eight years. *That's a big deal.* I feel it in all the small groups and gatherings I've been part of.

Teachers know what a burden scrutiny from parents and even concerned citizens is. In recent years, educators have come under enormous scrutiny by pressure groups targeting educators with impossible to meet demands. Teachers, imagine that just evaporating from the equation overnight in your local school. It's still part of the national educational landscape but not in your local school. That's been my experience.

I don't think it's possible for you to appreciate fully what a gift it is to a pastor—at this point in history when there is so much turmoil and ferment—what a gift it is to a pastor to be one's evolved and evolving self with a congregation they respect and admire. I talk to members of the clergy all the time who can't even imagine what that would be like. I don't even venture to tell them what it's like; it would be cruel; it would be salt in their wounds. Every now and then I'll be talking to Emily on the phone, and she'll say, "We have a lovely community" and I'll say, "We do, we really do." So I'm hoping my year away will fly by fast, and I'll be back at Blue Ocean as a relaxed congregant enjoying the heck out of their church.