

Trusting God With Your Divine Call—Even When People Throw Stones at You

When I married Ross, I became Athena Dean Holtz, and a pastor's wife, entering a life of living in the proverbial ministry fishbowl.

While I said a wholehearted Yes to spending the rest of my life with this man, I had no idea what it meant to be a pastor's wife. I knew it would be refining, but I really did not know what to expect.

"Sooo ... what's it really like?" a friend cocked her head sideways and asked, "Well ...? " I answered, not really sure how to respond. I am honored and humbled that God would give me this pastor-husband to love. Ross is a man whose heart is to proclaim God's faithfulness. His calling is vital, demanding and rewarding, all at the same time. I do not take lightly the privilege of being his friend, confidante, fellow Jesus-follower and lover.

From the moment we began to spend time together, believing God had brought us together with marriage as the goal, there were some highly charged reactions from some individuals we both thought were our friends. While Ross began grieving in June 2013 when Cathy's diagnosis of cancer first came, there were still some in the congregation who felt he was too easily replacing his wife of 49 years.

I do understand. Many who loved their pastor were very protective of him. Understandably, emotions ran high. It wasn't long before we had people turning against us ... some of whom had trusted Ross as their pastor for decades. It didn't seem to matter that the entire family on both sides was supportive, or that his late wife had encouraged him to

remarry and put me on top of the list as potential spouses.

It was difficult, but ultimately rewarding, to watch him suffer betrayal and scorn from those he thought were his friends over his decision to marry me. I watched him grieve the losses and grow stronger. None of the people who left cited any sin issue. They just didn't like it, thought it disrespected Cathy and didn't feel we were waiting long enough by getting married nine months after her death. Even though Cathy told him if he liked being married, then he needed to remarry and quickly, and gave him "the list." Even with all the vocal blessing of his family and being chosen for him specifically by Cathy, there were hard feelings. We lost three of the top five givers to the church, and a whole gaggle of older single women who may have been angry they didn't have a chance with him.

Moving into the role of pastor's wife has required me to forgive, again and again, those who opposed my husband in one way or another regarding his decision to marry me. I know Jesus taught we must forgive 70 times seven. We all struggle with forgiving those who hurt us or those we love. As a regular churchgoer, it would be much easier to nurse a grudge and get away with it. But being the pastor's wife puts me in that fishbowl where everything I do and say is magnified, critiqued and most times, judged. I have no wiggle room ... I must allow God to refine me through every challenge, every disappointment, every struggle, every betrayal.

James 3:1 talks about leaders and teachers being called to a higher standard. I believe that filters down to the pastor's wife. I joyfully accept that requirement, because I want to see God do everything He wants to do through both of us, and through the ministry He has established at The Summit.

So, what's it really like?

First, it's a blessing to be married to someone who is the

same person on stage as he is at home. That makes our relationship authentic, and that is important to me. At the same time, it has instilled in me a new level of the fear of the Lord. I realize my actions, emotions, decisions and attitudes, good or bad, can affect a man who shepherds an entire congregation of believers. That's an intense responsibility that I'm sure I haven't quite grasped in full.

I do struggle a bit with being in such a high-profile position during intimate times of worship. I often stand and raise my hands in surrender to Him ... and weep when something in a worship song or sermon touches my heart with gratefulness or conviction of sin. One time the enemy whispered, "If they see you crying, they'll wonder what's wrong." I didn't listen then to this attempt to quench the moving of the Spirit in my life, and I won't in the future. It's not hard for tears to flow when I'm worshipping. I've pretty much embraced the fact that some folks may misunderstand.

This pastor's wife gig seems to be a test of my willingness to surrender in new ways.

Since I have a full-time commitment as a business owner, carving out time for us to spend together without one or the other of us working is quite an accomplishment. I have finally arranged my schedule to take Mondays off to spend that day with Ross. I typically want it to be downtime for him, so we do something restful and recreational. It's a Sabbath of sorts so his batteries are recharged.

Sometimes, my well-laid plans just don't happen. Someone lands in the hospital, a crisis comes up, we sense the need we need to visit someone who's homebound. Some evenings, hospital visits and other pastoral responsibilities take Ross's time. I could pout and whine, but instead, I have the opportunity to rejoice always and join him in the hospital visit, or stay home and pray for the situation at hand.

So, what's it really like? It's just like any other marriage: You love one another, you nurture one another, you look for ways to encourage one another and you lay down your lives for one another. Since it's not yet been three years since our wedding, it's hard to imagine neglecting one another or growing apart. Committing to building our relationship with God at the center makes all the difference.

I'm sure as we go along, I'll make mistakes and not meet people's expectations of what they think a pastor's wife should be. So, in advance, I continue to ask God to keep me sensitive to Him, open and authentic with my husband and our church family and committed to His will in every area of my life.

*Excerpt from Full Circle: Coming Home to the Faithfulness of God by **Athena Dean Holtz**. Holtz has been at the forefront of Christian custom publishing for the last 30 years. The co-founder of WinePress Publishing, she now leads Redemption Press. Author of three previous books and a highly-rated personal blog, she serves as president of the Northwest Christian Writer's Association, is a president's club member of the Christian Women in Media Association, and a member of the Advanced Writer & Speaker Association. She serves as host and interviewer on Always Faithful Radio, KCIS, Seattle. Married to Ross Holtz, pastor of The Summit, Athena enjoys her grandchildren and time spent sailing. The couple makes their home in Enumclaw, Washington.*