

True Pastoral Care

Ps 42; 2 Kings 5.1-15b; 1 Corinthians 9.24-27; Mark 1.40-45

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Epiphany 6 Year B, 2000

⁴⁰ And a leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." ⁴¹ Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean." ⁴² And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³ And he sternly charged him, and sent him away at once, ⁴⁴ and said to him, "See that you say nothing to any one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to the people." ⁴⁵ But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

At the university where I teach, one of the most popular areas of teaching is what is done by our Faculty of Pastoral Studies. Those who are in training for ordained ministry know how important pastoral care is. The Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church of the United States state that "Before ordination to the Diaconate" a candidate for holy orders must be examined in a variety of scholarly areas, including "Theory and practice of ministry," which they very likely understand to be pastoral care.

In fact, pastoral care really takes up most of priests' and deacons' time. Whether it be in the form of counseling someone who is struggling with addictions, or who has just lost a loved one (either to death or divorce), or who has lost a job and needs support and encouragement, pastoral care is a 24/7 job.

But, pastoral care is also something that is of interest to other ministers than just the ordained. Many today are preparing to exercise Christian ministry in hospitals, jails, schools, nursing homes, or other care centres, or in the areas of youth or seniors, without necessarily feeling that they need to be ordained to do these things. But, they do feel that they need to be trained in pastoral care, and specifically in the requirements of pastoral care in their areas of ministry.

Finally, good pastoral care is something that all of us want. I used to tell priests in training that I felt that they would be good priests if they were the kind of people that I would want at my bedside when I was dying. I still think that that is probably one of the best criteria, though it does mean that there would be a lot fewer priests around.

But what is pastoral care? What are all these people being trained to do? What is it that I am looking for when I talk about someone at my bedside when I'm dying?

Pastoral care certainly involves listening and hand-holding. I once had an ordinand sitting in my office who believed that pastoral care was the most central part of her training for ordained

ministry. When I asked her "why?", she paused and then said, "because after three years of school the most important thing I've learned is just to sit there and listen to the person".

Now, I have to admit that I was stunned. I do agree that listening is important, but after three years of theological education, including pastoral care, had led her to the conclusion that the most important thing she could do was to listen to the person. I would have hoped that at least she would have said that what her theological education helped her to do was to learn how to listen to people, but she didn't say that her theological education had taught her to listen well, just to listen.

Good pastoral care does involve a big component of listening, and a lot of that is hearing the person or persons you are seeking to help. But, there is much more. For a nurse or a doctor to provide care means more than just hearing what the problem is; it means doing something about the problem. For someone who is caught up in a cycle of abusing one child after another, it will take more than just listening to that person to help him, though listening well may be a start. Elisha's pastoral care of Naaman was not limited to just hearing that he had a problem and being empathetic; Elisha had to do something to make it real.

Pastoral care also involves encouragement. That is often the very thing that people need, since sometimes people are so desperate for an encouraging word that that's all good pastoral care takes: to give people the encouragement that a crowd at a race gives a runner. And that's true spiritually, too: Paul compares the life of the Christian minister to running a race. We all can be encouragers to our brothers and sisters who are running the race with us and cheer them on, bringing them a cup of water when they need it, cheering them on when they are about to faint. For those who are running the race and are getting tired, pastoral care might just be an encouraging word.

But, pastoral care is more than just encouragement, just as it is more than listening and hand-holding, a "that's OK; it won't be so bad". Maybe it will; maybe it won't, but some seem to think of pastoral care in the words of the old cowboy ballad: "where never is heard, a discouraging word". But, there is a place in pastoral care not just for encouragement but also for judgment. There is a time to tell an abuser, an adulterer, an addict, a liar, a scoundrel that what he is doing is wrong. There is, in other words, a time for judgment. Yes, you have to be able to listen well to hear when a person is an abuser, but you also need to know when to say something in judgment on that person and what to say.

That, too, is pastoral care because true pastoral care is not only about listening to people and holding their hand, nor is it just about encouragement or about judgment. True pastoral care is about telling the truth in love. This was Jesus' own approach to pastoral care, and thus I believe that it is God's authorized version of pastoral care.

Jesus did not so much listen to people as he read them. You remember that verse in John's Gospel where John says that many people entrusted themselves to Jesus but Jesus entrusted himself to no one because he knew what was in every person. This doesn't mean that Jesus knew that every person was bad and needs judgment; it does not mean that every person is good and simply needs encouragement to keep on the right road; it means that every person is different

and that you and I need to have God's wisdom to know who is who. And Jesus certainly didn't just listen to people: in fact, he spends most of his time talking to the needy.

In true pastoral care, listening is in fact crucial and the most important thing we can do, but it also means that listening is not first of all to the voice of the person to whom we are giving the care but to the voice of Jesus' father, just as Jesus did, in order to be able to read people correctly.

Our Gospel reading today gives us an excellent example of that "reading". I want to read to you the Gospel passage for today in a more accurate translation than the one you have:

Now a leper came to Jesus. The leper challenged Jesus saying: If you wanted to, you could heal me. Jesus felt profound pity for him; he stretched out his hand, touched (the leper) and said to him: "I do want to: be cleansed". Right away the leprosy left the man and he was clean. But, Jesus was greatly angered by the man and right away cast him out. He said to the man: "Take care that you say nothing about this to anyone, but just go and show yourself to the priest and offer (the sacrifices) for your cleansing that Moses (in the Law) commanded as a proof to all." Instead, however, the man went out and began to proclaim all the things and to spread the word all around, with the result that Jesus was not able to enter any city openly but had to hide out in the wilderness (away from people). Yet, even then, people still came to him.

Quite a different feel isn't it from the passage as read to you earlier? In this more accurate translation, we find a man who is in great need, a man despised by most and pitied by some. Whatever the perspective on him, as a leper he is clearly an outcast and in no position to ask anyone for anything. Yet, for some reason, perhaps because he has nothing to lose, he sees the possibility of escape from his condition and makes a break for it: he comes up to Jesus and challenges Jesus to heal him.

Note: the man's words to Jesus do not constitute a request, a plea. It is worded as a challenge. "If you're so good, let's see you do this?" It is comparable to the king of Syria's challenge to the king of Israel.

Now, what do you do if someone challenges you? If you don't accept the challenge, they'll call you a coward or someone whose talk is bigger than his action; if you do accept the challenge, you might fail or you might succeed. If Jesus doesn't accept the challenge, it would either be because he didn't want to heal the man (and thus didn't show compassion) or couldn't (and thus didn't have power). Jesus can't just walk away from the challenge.

We don't think about this anymore. We think it is absolutely normal for people to make their feelings known, and so we think that that is what this man is doing. But, it would have been highly unusual and extraordinarily dangerous in Jesus' day. You didn't go around challenging people who were superior to do something for you. You didn't challenge the king for more food: you would be killed; you didn't challenge a landowner to give you more land: you would be killed; you didn't challenge anyone who was superior. You only challenged equals.

But, rather than push the man aside, Jesus responded. Jesus accepted the challenge: yes, I do want to, and, yes, I am able to. The man was immediately cleansed, and God's honour was maintained.

But, Jesus didn't leave it there. He challenged back to the man, in the form of the command not to say anything. Jesus had risen to the challenge and healed the man; now, would the man rise to the challenge that Jesus presents to him?

But note: before Jesus even challenges the man, the text makes a very interesting, almost peculiar statement. It says that Jesus was profoundly angry with the man he had just healed and, using words that echo what Jesus does to the evil spirits, the text says that Jesus cast the man out. It is only then that the Jesus challenges the man back and says to him: don't tell anyone; just go and offer sacrifice.

For us, geared to thinking of pastoral care as being that which encourages and helps, the text should have just stopped with Jesus' healing of the man. We want it to stop there. We are troubled that the text has to go on and say more. So troubled are we that translators of the text try to fudge the text to tone it down, to tame it, because we don't like the implication that after experiencing the astounding grace of God not everyone becomes a good person, and some actually might become worse.

Become worse? Surely healing always makes a person better than he was? Well, not exactly. What does healing do? In our scientific culture, we think of healing as being a restoration of our body, or parts of our body, to their original state, so that they are able to do what they are supposed to do. Healing of a limp restores a person's legs to "normal" use; healing of a tumor removes the tumor; healing of the skin, as in the case of leprosy, restores the skin to its rightful state and purpose.

But, that is in our world. In Jesus' world what did they understand healing to do? They understood sickness as the symptom of a much deeper problem, a spiritual problem that God and the spiritual beings of the divine realm had control over. Sickness was essentially a symptom of having fallen away from the protective care of God and either you were being punished directly by God or were at the mercies of the spiritual beings that God would allow to torment you. You did not just heal a person's body. Healing did not just effect a change in your body; it effected a change in your body and more importantly in your relation with God, by restoring it to a right relation. This is why Jesus will say to the rabbis who question his healing of a paralytic: well, which is easier, to say you are healed or to say you are forgiven? The reason: because to say one, is to say the other. If you are healed, your sins are forgiven; if you are forgiven, your body will be healed.

Now, we don't see that connection, nor do we accept it, but vast numbers of people around the world today still do. In Africa, if you fall ill with a disease, it has less to do with germs or bodily breakdown than it does with having insulted someone's ancestors or having defied one of the rites of the village. And because we don't see this connection, we don't see why Jesus was angry with the man.

As long as the man was ill with leprosy, his leprosy was evidence to the people of a fundamental problem in his relation with God, but when that leprosy was removed, he was freed not only from the consequence of the problem but also from the problem itself. So, when the man is freed of the problem that has plagued him since his relationship with God went sour, he has the slate rubbed clean and can now go and do what he should have originally done. His character is, as it were, visible for the first time. And what does Jesus see? Someone who angers him, and whom he treats as he would treat one of the demons.

And, lo and behold, this is exactly how the man "thanks" Jesus. As soon as the man is freed, he goes out and does exactly the opposite of what Jesus has told him to do: rather than say nothing and go to the Temple and show the priest that he was cleansed, the man goes out and starts to tell everyone what has happened, and, as far as we know, he never bothered to go to the Temple. The result: Jesus can no longer go directly into the midst of the synagogues and talk to people and heal them, but has to hide out in the forests. This is important because Jesus wants to preach to as many people as possible and if rather than having a main spot to which people can come on Main Street, he has to go and hide out in the forests along the Raquette River, well, obviously its going to make it more difficult for the very people who need to hear him to find him and get to him: the blind, the lame, the possessed. The young and the tough will get there, but not those who have no one to help them.

When the leper was cleansed, Jesus read him and saw what he was going to do. That is why Jesus does not wait for the man to disobey; Jesus reads disobedience in the man and thus casts him out, as he would any demon whose job is to challenge Jesus but who will never be anything other than a challenger. Jesus knows, before the man does what he is going to do, what he is going to do. But, he only sees this once Jesus had removed the leprosy, and its cause, to see who the man was, not just what his sickness and sin had made him. It's not that Jesus can see the future. He will say at various points that no one knows the future. But, what he can see is people's character. He can see or know their character because Jesus, rather than listening first of all to people, listened first to God.

So, in conclusion, I would suggest to you that this Gospel gives us some important principles for those giving pastoral care. And for those receiving pastoral care, it tells you what you should expect from a true pastoral care, one that is more than empty promises.

First, pastoral care does begin with listening. But, while it is important to hear from someone where it hurts, what is most important is to listen to the Creator who made us and who knows us perfectly not only where it hurts, but why it hurts and what to do about it. It is only by listening to the Father carefully that you will be able to read people; if you rely on your own vision of people you will generally mis-judge them.

How do you learn how to hear the Father's voice? Well, that's the real challenge that we are left with from this morning's reading. It will have to start with developing listening skills: rather than talking all the time, you stop and you wait for God to speak, and He will. He loves you and He is personal. But, even if you insist on speaking all the time, you will still hear his voice if you want to, just as you can hear someone talking about you on the other side of the room over all the chatter at a cocktail party.

Second, pastoral care involves speaking, telling someone what to do about their need. This speaking must involve speaking the truth in love. This does not mean merely stroking; it does not simply mean what has come to be called "tough love". It does not mean being a meddlesome know-it-all: that's speaking your own words. True pastoral care involves speaking only the words that you have listened to and heard from the Father. To say more, is to speak your own words and, while they may please you, they will do nothing for the person in need. If the Father says nothing, you say nothing; if the Father speaks, you limit yourself to what the Father has said.

It is of course much easier not to speak. Speaking is dangerous: you might be wrong and then you and the one to whom you are giving care have to live with it. Or, you might be right, and the one who needs to hear you will hate you. In his oration at the death of Abraham Lincoln, the great American preacher Philips Brooks urged his hearers not to think that one man had killed Lincoln; rather, know that slavery had killed Lincoln, because he had had the courage to speak the truth about it.

Third, the goal of pastoral care is not healing, at least not healing as such. Our ministry is not to be taken up with delaying inevitable aging and death, or with wondering why someone has succumbed to a very natural death in this world. True pastoral care has one goal: to maintain the glory and the honour of God's name, in and among those we encounter, and in the face of all challenges to that honour. Healing from God today has one goal: to show that the living God is not powerless or lacking in compassion, but that He is real, that He is loving, and that He is powerful to make that loving real. The goal of true pastoral care for all those who care and who are cared for is to be able to say with the Gentile leper healed by Elisha, a man who submitted himself under the mighty hand of God, though he had no religious reason for doing so, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth but this one." And that one, my friends, is the God to whom alone we listen, and whose words alone we speak, and in whose name alone we offer care to all those to whom the Father, in His grace, dispenses His care.

And now to that God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all majesty and honour, praise and glory, both now and forevermore. AMEN.