

THE PASTOR REFLECTS

Texts for Trinity Sunday

May 26, 1991

John 3: 1-17

II Corinthians: 2:14 - 3:6, 4: 1-2, 5-7

"You yourselves are our letter, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all, and you show that you are a letter of Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts."

Soon, I will have been ministering in this town for five years. As next Sunday is Children's Sunday; and as the Sunday following I will be away in Baltimore, serving as our Presbytery's commissioner to the General Assembly of the PC (USA); and as the Sunday after that, we will begin to meet at 10:00 A.M. in shirt sleeves and summer, this sermon today is the last I deliver in clerical robe till the fall. I would like to reflect on a characteristic of ministry which has impressed itself upon me during these five years.

In the first ten days of my ministry here, two people died—Flora Messenger and Edwin Mesick Sr. Of course, I had no knowledge of either person or of their families-- I was completely new to the town. But more than that, I was completely new to pastoral ministry! I had never been pastor for a family at the time of death; never developed a funeral service; never conducted one. This was O-J-T in the classic form. Considering all the serious things that take place under the hand of a minister, it is hard to comprehend where a Pastor Nominating Committee finds the courage to call its new minister from the ranks of June's seminary graduates. But they did. Perhaps what is at work is a divinely guided form of despair. Whatever the case, now it was August, 1986, and I was the pastor here, and two families and many friends were grieving their losses, Flora's quite suddenly, Ed Sr. quite at the end of long suffering.

Very quickly, I learned something about pastoring quite unusual and worthy of remark: it works! Pastoring—being in the homes of these good people and conducting their funerals—it works! Grief moved more or less as it ought. The funeral services provided that essential expression of finality which permits something resembling the future to begin amidst the time-rupturing shock of the fact of new death. It worked. I am sure that the first time I baked bread, it did *not* work. I *remember* how much it cost to repair my parents' car after the first time I drove on my learner's permit. Certainly, there is always a first time for the beginner's use of serious skills, like cutting diamonds, or the new surgeon cutting open a chest. But these serious endeavors follow years of watching, watching, testing, reading, watching. Seminarians rarely have the chance to study the conduct of funerals so closely, yet these are not less serious. Still, back in August of 1986, they worked. It was the real thing.

Now, all this had a curious effect on me. In spite of the fact that grateful family and respectful worshipers offered thanks directly to me for work well done, I most certainly did not take credit for the powerful and healthful effects of my brief ministries at that time. Why, if the first time ever you stood in a horseshoe pit and pitched your two shoes at the distant post and both of them rang ringers round that post, well, you wouldn't turn to onlookers and beam with the pride of accomplishment, but rather with surprise, as if some force other than your skill were at work. Such was my experience that August: some force was at work beyond my skills, some force which made of simple ministries a good and useful service to those who desired it. Let us not call the force "God" for that says both too much and too little; I drew a different conclusion: my ministry was successful at that time because of the good will of the people to whom I ministered. They *wanted* what I did to work, and therefore it worked. They helped make it spiritually useful according to the goodness and humbleness of the desire in their own hearts. My job was to fill a role reasonably well—that of clergyman: to speak simply and sincerely, to be present, to avoid needless offenses. I was to be a person, to be ... a parson. In other words, to

offer a reasonable representation of the human form of caring—as a model standing before an art class offers a reasonable example of human form. The grievers complete the picture, and make it a bright, or dark, or passionate thing; *they* were the artists. They paint the funeral service with the pastor, who is a medium of their expression. His job, her job is to not get in the way of the mysterious and unconscious spiritual thing that is going on.

Since those days, I have observed this spiritual operation literally hundreds of times. Because I was relatively inexperienced five years ago, I knew that I could not be the cause of such a flow of personal gratitude, unless the families were doing something in themselves to give their thanks away. So the phenomenon jumped directly to my attention. But the phenomenon does not fade with a pastor's added experience. It simply becomes more complex and less obvious as it is woven into the fabric of real gifts and real errors and weaknesses in the pastor. All this merely camouflages the facts, which are these: although in the plain sense, the pastor in public is often performing a task; and although it is natural to judge that performance as good or bad or engaging or boring, something far more profound is going on in those for whom this church is their church and this pastor their pastor. To a very substantial degree, the pastor is a mirror. In it, you see yourself. In it, you see God. Not because of who he is or anything she does, whether well or badly—but because humans yearn for expressions and symbols of spiritual reality, and will find them in one willing to allow that process move through him—the pastor. This is a very complex thing, and profoundly true. If you consider it seriously, it may lead you in self-understanding.

I decided to preach this sermon after a particularly revealing incident. During a worship service earlier this year, I had put my arms around one of our people who, during a moment of great emotion, needed just exactly that. I didn't plan it. I just did it. And I learned later that some who saw me do that simple, tender thing were rather surprised. This was a departure from the personality they expected. The pastor who would give a sign of care in just that way was warmer than the man they had come to think a somewhat distant, cooler personality. Yet as I am familiar with myself, the gesture was no departure. This is a complex thing, and it caused me to marvel again at the different readings taken of a pastor. I think the idea of the mirror best accounts for the disparity of perceptions. I hesitate to oversimplify, but try this out. Think about a mirror.

If you are at peace with the pastor, is it not at least in part, that you are at peace with yourself, and with God? If the pastor turned out differently from what you most wanted, and yet you let him be, is it not because perhaps you know that you turned out differently from what you expected, too, and know that God has let you be?

If you are angry with the pastor, if you won't let go of some error he made, is it in some degree because you are angry with yourself, and you will not let go of some error in yourself, for which you have found no forgiveness? If you think he talks too much, is it perhaps because... Is it?

A preacher's sermons are heard in dozens of different ways. People have often criticized me for speaking too much about social, economic, and political matters. The critique came to me quite pointedly earlier this year, so I reviewed my last forty-five sermons. I found seven which had such themes. And so I must ask, What hurts so deeply in the hearts of those who hate to hear the gospel applied to the injustices of our society and our ethics that all of worship becomes so readily spoiled? What is the dark thing the person sees but does not want to see in himself, when the evils of our nation are openly named? The pastor is a mirror; the scene proceeds inside the listener. Or inside God's relation to you, depending on the angle of reflection. How else shall we understand that people of similar education and vocabulary react so differently to the same sermon—some saying "brilliant," some saying "boring." Tentatively, aware that what I am proposing is overstated, for I have faults galore, I nevertheless prod you to look in the mirror: do those saying "brilliant" feel brilliant? Do those saying "boring" feel boring? In some measure, you get from your pastor what you see in the mirror. And what you see, in some degree, is something of yourself. Something you love, perhaps, or something you fear; even something you hate.

This is the way I have come to understand the vast array of reactions—or rather, "reflections"—cast upon my pastorate. And not mine especially, by the way. What I am speaking of here is part of the job description of any pastor and every pastor. Now, all of what I have said to this point can be summarized in terms which psychology calls "projective identification," defined as a tendency in all of us to see in others parts of ourselves, especially those that cause us anxiety. Good and bad can be projected onto other persons. Author and marriage counselor Maggie Scarf writes about projective identification in her book *Intimate Partners*. She tells one clinical case story after another of the demons which one spouse saw in another, until he or she, through counseling and self-examination, came to see that the terrible errors and faults of the spouse were cast like an image onto the spouse from deep within the vexed partner. Scarf goes so far as to suggest that most people, where abuse is not in play, simply should not bother divorcing because their problems mostly lie within themselves, and are projected onto the other where they can easily be seen. Scarf argues that divorce may function to help each member of a couple avoid the struggle of new self-understanding and change. Something similar might be said about leaving a church in the midst of anger at the pastor, or at "those people," or at the use of church funds. Often, such externals merely mirror internal anxieties deep at work in the disgruntled, anxieties which they project outside themselves as a means of avoiding the spiritual and psychological tasks of learning and changing and forgiving.

There is a lot of value in the psychological insight that we project our own images on a person who is powerful in our lives. Spouses, bosses, and clergy are all prime targets. But there is a potential problem in this mirroring which is unique to the spiritual dimension. If a person thinks she is seeing the pastor for who he is, while she really is looking in a mirror, God may be blocked from touching that person. I think of the people who do not often get to church, but who, when I visit, apologize profusely, as if I were their judge and apology is needed to discharge their debt. But you have no debt to me! To God, certainly, you owe debts. But the pastor cannot discharge them, and this pastor does not judge you in terms of any debts whatsoever. But God is surely blocked by the action of confusing human judgment for divine. Some see the pastor coming, and they see judgement, but it is not coming from the pastor. They are seeing in a mirror. It is their own conscience there, in confusion about God's nature and about God's purpose for them.

Once I told a person who very often is spreading a table for unexpected guests that I saw in her work a real ministry, an offering, a table open for Christ. "You do?" she exclaimed in surprise. Here we might say that God had been blocked. She looked in the mirror expecting judgement, and I tilted the mirror just enough for her to catch the light of God's gifts in her own works of love. She caught it, too, and seemed surprised at the light. I think she turned her eyes aside.

Oh, how many ways we might come at this. I think of Nicodemus, who goes to see Jesus thinking he knows himself well, thinking he knows whom he is looking at in Jesus. He goes at night, though, lest new light shine. But Jesus tilts the mirror a little: "You, old man, you can be / will be / must be born anew, born from above. Your mind must give up its literal, caged-in notions about religion, so that you may see. The Spirit blows where it wills."

Friends, each of you has a relationship to God which is your own and unique. The pastor's work, insofar as the church is helped by it, is to offer some means, some words, and some time that function reasonably well so that you yourselves, together, may make the connection to God befitting people who are one body. I don't make the connections for you. I am not your holy one. I am not your devil. I am both better at some things than is evident, and far worse at some things than will ever become known. But that is my business with God. Here, in the pastorate, I am often a mirror. And if you know that, you can find great power in the strange old traditions of having a pastor and attending to the preaching and praying together, in which we are at one.