

To the beloved pastors serving communities of Christ during this cultural moment marked by social polarization, division, and animosity,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I write to you with deep gratitude in my heart for all the ways you strive so patiently and faithfully for the good of the church and the building up of God's kingdom. Your labor is not in vain. Though it may seem at times "you are being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice" (Philippians 1:17) of the church amidst the cultural currents of this present moment tossing congregations about, leaving many weak kneed and nauseous, remember the fundamental vow you proclaimed at your ordination: "Love Christ" (Form for the Declaration of Ministers, Reformed Church in America).

The challenges facing you in pastoral ministry require a deep-rooted sense, not first in your vocation and call, but first in your identity. You are child of God. You are loved by Christ. And the challenges you face are immense, complicated, and compounded. Love Christ, who loved you first. When we gather around the waters of baptism with our youngest ones, we declare together, "It was for you that Christ came into the world, it was for you that he died, it was for you that he rose again, even though you may know nothing of it now, we love because God first loved us" (Order for Baptism, Reformed Church in America). And the fullest expression of God's love is his only son, Jesus Christ, of whom our Apostle announced,

Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-11)

God's love is revealed supremely in Jesus Christ who emptied himself and humbled himself even to the point of death on a cross. That is how much he loves you, that is what is most true of you, that is what defines you. As one of our priests, Henri Nouwen, puts it so well, "You have to keep unmasking the world about you for what it is: manipulative, controlling, power-hungry, and, in the long run, destructive. The world tells you many lies about who you are, and you simply have to be realistic enough to remind yourself of this. Every time you feel hurt, offended, or rejected, you have to dare to say to yourself: 'These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity, and held safe in an everlasting embrace'" (Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*).

A deep-rooted sense of your beloved-ness is necessary to withstand the onslaught of pressures and opinions and expectations of this polarized moment. The conditions of pastoral ministry are not entirely new, but they have been taken to new heights. Our prophet and priest, the Rev. Martin Luther King once preached, “It is midnight within the social order... Nations are engaged in a colossal and bitter contest for supremacy... world wars have already been fought and the clouds of another are dangerously low. It is midnight within the psychological order. Everywhere paralyzing fears harrow people by day and haunt them by night... It is midnight in the moral order... absolute right and absolute wrong are a matter of what the majority is doing. Right and wrong are relative to likes and dislikes. Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing.” (Martin Luther King Jr, A Knock at Midnight). That was 1964, what would he preach now? Add to his concern the technological advances of the internet and social media that give to you and your communities access to more information at your fingertips than at any other time in human history. The racial injustices that wreak havoc on our communities. The moral failings of our most public Christian leaders devastate congregations and our public witness, while denominations fracture in a failing, last gasp effort to maintain control and power in the search of survival. All the while, the Surgeon General declared “loneliness” an epidemic in the United States. Anxiety among our teenagers, especially among Generation Z, are on a parabolic trajectory, the vitriol of the current public discourse has led to communal polarization, congregational divisions and even fear and hesitation among pastors on what to say, when to say it, and to how to say it in such a way that you remain faithful to the gospel of Christ and remain employed. Love Christ, who first loved you. You belong to Christ.

So, what do we do? How do we respond to a culture set against itself? Love Christ by going the way of Christ in humility, practice empathy, listen well.

Humility is a gift to the one who is loved. When you are sure of who you are you do not have win all the arguments and fight all the battles in a contest for superiority. The polarization of this moment is not only a function of ideological differences, but also a function of how we comport ourselves amidst difference. In a world defined by “might makes right” and “the winners get to write history,” it is easy to get swept up in the pursuit of power, to use all means necessary to win the argument, including dehumanizing those with whom we disagree. Aldous Huxley once said, “The propagandist’s purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human.” The way of Christ is the way of descent, the way of Christ is not the power games of our cultural moment but the way of humility. We would do well to “regard others as better than ourselves” (Philippians 2:3), rather than enemies seeking to destroy the fabric of our public witness.

Humility invites us into empathy, to stand in the shoes of the other. Is there a better demonstration of empathy than the incarnation of Jesus Christ himself? Christ, who left the glory of the eternal communion with the Father and the Spirit and entered the finite realities of our creatureliness. He took on what we are, flesh and blood, sinew, and tissue, he took on the cultural pressures of the first century, he experienced the political dominance of Rome’s rule and Greek culture. He took it all on, and “was tested in every way that we are” (Hebrews 4:14). To “other” another opposes the way of Christ, to enter the experience of another as Christ did with the woman caught in adultery, as Christ did with the woman at the well, as Christ did with blind

Bartimaeus begging on the roadside, is the way of the gospel. Empathy is the way forward; empathy is the way of Christ.

So, listen well. Humility invites us into empathy and empathy calls us to listen. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it so clearly as he navigated the horrors of 20th century Nazi Germany, “The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them... Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*). He offered that as World War II was just igniting, during that cultural chaos, he urged the pastor to listen. We would do well to listen to him now.

My hope, my prayer, my desire for you is as simple as it is profound. Love Christ. Humility is a gift. Empathy is the way forward. Listen well. Remember what you promised and who you are, go the way of the one who loves you first always trusting God’s Spirit at work in the world redeeming all things. Christ who descended in humility was exalted by the Father, and given the name that is above every name, “so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11),

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.