

It's hard to believe that I'm now looking at my life and ministry in the rearview mirror. After spending so many years looking to the future, your request to offer my take on "here's what I've learned over a lifetime" on your podcast, caught me by surprise. The world we live in today has so much discontinuity with the world I experienced when I first began in ministry. I now am realizing what a small slice of the Church my experience has been in, when compared with the broadness of Christian faith traditions. I'm amazed at the articulate voices that advocate for the various priorities they passionately believe should be at the center of the Church's mission in this world. The issues they raise and the insights they offer leave me wondering if what I have tried to faithfully offer those I have had the privilege to serve has had any impact at all. But since you asked, let me give it shot!

The renowned theologian from mythical Lake Wobegon, in his whimsical way, gets to my bottom line. Garrison Keillor muses *"if you can't go to church and briefly move from this life to the next, then why should you go to church? Just a brief moment of transcendence can cause you to leave that church a changed person."* Keillor's off-handed comments about religious life in America spotlights the place we find ourselves. For the faithful congregant or the cynical "none" there is often an unspoken desire to connect to the transcendent. Facing the pastoral leader is the question of whether or not they have enough familiarity with the transcendent; that they know the difference between humanly derived religiosity and God breathed transformation. Serious reflection on Keillor's observation should provoke us to ask; when a person enters your church, do they experience a Christian sub-culture only understandable by those who have learned the local dialect? We live in a time where hunger for the transcendent cannot be assuaged without some meaningful encounter with the transforming power of Jesus Christ. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assessment offers even greater clarification about our dilemma when he comments that *we have so much frustration in the world because we have relied on gods, rather than God.*

Before pastoral leaders start looking for problems "out there," they might do well to start with their own lives. While the pressures of pastoral life are daunting, one has to ask the question; so how does my life reflect the transcendence that our culture seems to be craving? Henri Nouwen posits that the great vocation of the minister is to continuously make connections between the human story and the divine story. Nouwen notes that *"the strategy of the principalities and powers is to disconnect us, to cut us off from the memory of God. ... our busy actions and restless concerns seem to be disconnected, reminding us of nothing more than the disorder of our own orientation and commitment. When we no longer walk in the presence of the Lord, we cannot be living reminders of his divine presence in our lives. Then we are no longer the way to the experience of God, but rather in the way of the experience with God."*

The book of Exodus records the narrative of Moses, a "pastoral" leader who is struggling with equilibrium between his own sense of calling and responsibility to the people he serves. Moses is leading a "congregation" who is "squirrely" to say the least. Violence, displacement, and injustice had been experienced with long term impact on the group. Their most recent cultural context has offered a vastly different spiritual reality than had been their historic experience. Moses' pastoral experience is filled with complaining people, blaming him for their current condition. He even experiences betrayal by his executive team.

A vocational crisis comes to a head in Exodus 33. Despite his best efforts and faithful service, he finds himself in a very volatile moment. Moses' desperation for a solution to his leadership dilemma results in a strategic effort which he calls the tent of meeting: a place where he would intentionally focus his attention on encountering the God who had called him to this grand endeavor. Verse 11 describes the result of this "intervention" by saying "the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friends." One of those chats is summarized in verses 13-16. In that moment of pastoral desperation, Yahweh assures Moses,, "my presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Moses' response reflects not only his personal vulnerability, but his continuing realization that his calling is connected to the community of people he serves (as volatile as that may be) . Moses says, *"if your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I, and your people? Is it not your going with us , so that we are distinct, I and your people from every other people on the face of the earth"*

The Moses case study is one I have often pondered. Pastoral life has become overly influenced by insights on effectiveness derived from the corporate world. Helpful as those may be, I am increasingly concerned that pastoral leaders see their critical part in connecting human stories to the Divine story. For that vital task to remain strong, pastoral leadership needs renewed emphasis on the leader's own connectivity to divine resources. The imagery of the vine and branches in John 15 comes to mind. Jesus calls Himself the True Vine. Fruitfulness is the result of "abiding" in the True Vine and the result of "not abiding" is being discarded as a tangential branch that withers and is only good for being consumed in a fire. I must admit that I sometimes look at my efforts over a lifetime and wonder what fruitfulness I've offered to those I've been called to serve. Did they see merely professional skill, or did they encounter a connection to a much more "sustainable" resource that Jesus is obviously referring to in John 15?

The stakes are really high for pastoral leaders. How do we communicate connection to the transcendent in a world that offers attractive alternatives sans reference to God? The context we live in constantly pits the contemplative dimension of our lives as pastoral leaders against the activist side. The mid-20th century author Edna St Vincent Millay framed well what is at stake for pastoral leaders when she said: *Upon this age...this age endowed with power to wake the moon with footsteps.. upon this gifted age, in its dark hour rains from the sky a meteoric shower pf facts. They lie unquestioned, uncombined. Wisdom enough to leech us of our ills is daily spun, but there exists no loom to weave it into fabric.* She penned this insightful description of our human dilemma in 1939 as WWII dawned and 30 years previous to Neil Armstrong "waking the moon" with his footsteps. Humankind feverishly continues to offer its response to St Vincent Millay's call for a loom to weave into a comprehensible fabric with the vast availability of human knowledge.

Our contemporary challenge as pastoral leaders mirrors what faced the Apostle Paul in his encounter with the "influencers" in Athens recorded in Acts 17. His conversation reveals a full awareness of the ideas that are trending in Athens. But he points them to a God that can't be fully described by even the most creative human endeavor. Paul summarizes this contrast between

Creator and created when he says in verse 25, “And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else”. As I have attempted to serve in the Name of the God that Paul is referring to, my experience has been mixed, somewhat like Paul’s experience at Athens. Some reject my efforts out of hand, some want to have a next discussion and for a very few, the light dawns.

If the ministry challenges of Moses and Paul are mirrored by my own, then what motivates me to continue? I have a deep desire that all may come to know and love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. That task requires pastoral leaders who first “know in whom they have believed” and that they continue to be persuaded that regardless of the best efforts of human self-sufficiency or the tragedy and hopelessness that is reflected in the human story; the divine story of God’s redemptive plan will prevail. I am persuaded like Paul, that nothing can separate humankind from the love of God, most clearly revealed in Jesus Christ. I just don’t want to stand in the way of that inevitability.

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