

To the American pastor -

Grace and peace to you, who in North America in the 21st century, have committed your life to following Jesus Christ and to serving His church. I commend you for following a path which, like the earliest disciples, is likely to earn you more pain than glory.

The calling to which you have been called has never been easy. Whatever nostalgia some might have for past days, faithful Christian witness - that is to say, witness undefiled by ego or bias or self-gain - has always been terribly unpopular and thus far, has a complete success count of one. Coming to terms with that will likely help you to remain faithful in the work.

There are others who are much more wise than I about what a pastor today needs to be able to know and do. Instead I write to you of a conviction to which I pray you will hold fast. And that is this: that God's love and mercy remains as *necessary* and *sufficient* today as it was in the time of Eve, of Moses, of Ruth, of Jesus, and of his apostles.

Affirming that God's love and mercy are both necessary and sufficient is the antidote to two great heresies of our time that will hinder anything else you seek to do as a pastor in Christ's church. These dangers are not unique to American churches, to be sure, but are pervasive and deeply entangled within them, just as much as outside them.

The first, and perhaps most insidious, is the American belief that the primary goal of life is to advance our own interests. You see overt expressions of this self-aggrandizing individualism all over, of course; social media, politics, and the public sphere condone vainglory and avarice as desirable qualities of leadership. But there are also subtler forms that convince each of us, you and I included, to put our own well-being first. As my friend Kate Bowler write, whole industries promise to help us improve our financial outlook, extract the most meaning from every moment, get the raise/praise/recognition that we deserve, and generally fix whatever is broken in our lives.¹ Your congregation will be filled with people who have been led to believe that life's problems can be solved by the right optimization strategy. Do you feel overwhelmed? Here is a 5-step time management plan. Are you tired? You just need more "me" time.

At first look, this strategy seems to pay off. After all, for many in this country, never before has a culture had greater prosperity, greater longevity, or more collective capacity to shape the future. The wealthy and powerful are indeed rewarded with public adoration. The highly optimized become influencers who set a standard of self-actualization. You, though, see the bitter outcome of this idolatry. "He feeds on ashes," the prophet Isaiah reminds us, "a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, 'Is there not a lie in my right hand?'" (Isa 44:20) Fractured relationships, an epidemic of loneliness, widespread anxiety and distrust – these are gnawing reminders that we are not the means to our own salvation. "Bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man, but afterward his mouth will be full of gravel" (Pro 20:17).

¹ Kate Bower, *No Cure for Being Human (And Other Truths I Need to Hear)*, Random House (New York), 2021.

Against these lies, the Christian pastor proclaims that God alone can save and that gift of grace - not by our own merit - is necessary for our salvation. Guard yourself against participating in and sanctioning the self as first among God's creation. Your calling, even when it feels impossible, is to a Christ-like, kenotic love. Inevitably, seeking to submit your life to God will require an uncomfortable reformation, from how you use your time and treasure to who you listen to, what you reward and incentivize, and what you protect. You may well find yourself caught in social retribution for doing so. I pray that our churches find a way to resist the mutual annihilation of Cancel Culture and seek ways to honor the *imago dei* in one another, but do not let it stop you from resisting a culture that wants to make each of us into our own gods.

If individualism teaches us to put ourselves in the place of God, a second danger - hopeless agnosticism - infects the church with the fear that God has abandoned us. In the first instance, we have no need of God. In the second, we are desperate for God but cannot find Him.

Perhaps every generation believes that the ills of the world have accelerated in an acute way unique to their time. To be sure, each generation of believers has faced trials that stretched the limits of their endurance and found the edges of their faithfulness. In my own context in a largely white, Protestant denomination, most worshippers can only imagine what it means to face religious persecution in daily life, or to live in fear of state violence.

Yet even as American prosperity for some has flourished, never before in history have rapid changes in our global community felt so terrifying and irreversible. Climate crisis, global pandemics, wars that span continents, the unknown impact of artificial intelligence, and social structures and technologies that fuel and reward polarization all challenge our fundamental understanding of what it means to be human and globally interdependent. In the face of this disorientation, it is easy to lose hope that God is still for us.

For all who walk in the shadow in all its forms, your call is to bear witness to the steady, unrelenting love of God that is sufficient to defeat death. "The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (Deut 31:8). For "truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love" (Psa 33:18). Remind the people that God receives the cries of the righteous. Let their prayers be the psalms of lament, the cries of Job, the petitions of Naomi. Do not offer easy answers or explain away suffering. For "we know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:22). God is not the cause of the world's evils, but God's mercy and love will be sufficient to redeem us from it. Even so, we feel the terrible birthpangs of a new creation that is both *already*, and *not yet*.

The ability to be uncomfortable and not seek easy resolution may be one of the most singular and significant things you can do for the sake of the gospel and the witness of the church. Pastors - strengthened by the waters of their baptism - swim against the cultural slipstream of convenience, efficiency, and control. Let the church be the place that can hold all the messiness

of human experience without flinching or looking away. It reveals our utter dependence on God and our need for one another. No other place can offer this holy honesty.

In the same way, release to God your fears about the future of the church. A clenched fist on the wheel of church authority is yet another form of seeking to control that over which God alone is sovereign. You are right to seek to preserve and uphold the great truths and wisdom of the Christian tradition, and yet the Scriptures also tell us that God is about to do a new thing. Affirming a future that is already in Christ's sufficient hands frees our ability to perceive and to participate in it. We need not react to threats that our present actions in the church will bring stagnation and decay, so long as we are seeking the life that really is life (1 Tim 6:19).

Finally, do not be discouraged when some challenge your witness or resist what you offer. Where the world wants to reward judgmental superiority, let your ministry model deep relationships, a willingness to step outside your comfort zone, the humility of a heart that can be changed, and the ability to hold space for holy mystery.

Those who accept the call to follow Christ do so with extraordinary courage. One cannot follow Christ without walking toward the sites of the world's wounds, both visible and invisible. When the chaos of the world threatens to suffocate your clarity of purpose and your ability to keep going, remember that a cloud of witnesses across thousands of years will claim for you your faith and the integrity of your calling, even when you cannot do so for yourself. In the same way, when God's love feels most needed, may you also know, with confidence, its sufficiency for you.