

Pastoral Epistles
Theologies For Pastoral Ministry
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Frederick J. Streets

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Dear Theo:

A sense of family and community at the church where I spent my youth wrapped around me like a warm coat worn in the wintertime. The music, praying and preaching combined to create a symphony of worship sounds that ushered me before God and God's grace and left me feeling grateful, hopeful, and capable of making, in the words of my parents' generation, "another day's journey." I have deep and abiding memories of growing up listening to evangelistic preaching and the "call and response style" of that African American Baptist church. The Christian nurture I received there helped to shape my identity and encouraged me to have faith in God and serve humankind.

Inspired by these experiences, the charismatic personality and style of the Pastor's preaching, I shared with him that I felt a vocational called to preach when I was sixteen years old. He counseled me accordingly and sometime later I give my trial sermon before members of my family and the congregation who gathered to listen to me preach. The church after I preached voted to give me a "license to preach." This was the beginning of my vocational path and the unfolding of my sense of call.

I also had age appropriate naivete about the meaning of ministry and the role of being a Pastor. A few years later while I was in seminary, I was ordained as a minister. I was fortunate to be called as a Pastor of a church that same year after graduating from divinity school. And I have learned over the years how life impacting, and even transformative experiences have qualified and deepen my understanding of myself and my calling. That calling for me has expressed itself in many different ways, ministerial roles and contexts. I could not have imagined when I began as a Pastor that there were other roles one could serve as a minister.

I have served three urban congregations, as a university chaplain and became a bi-vocational minister as a clinical social worker. Now, many years later, there is so much to think about regarding who we are as congregational ministers and our journey of faith.

We live in a profoundly fatiguing age. We cannot just think our way into better emotional, spiritual and physical health. Being a Pastor requires self-awareness, which comes with the capacity to be in touch with our feelings and then address the needs in us that those feelings signal. From time to time, we need to pause and rest. This is an urgent need exacerbated by the feelings of fear, vulnerability and profound grief, as a result of all kinds of losses due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. But we also need to access our capacity to generate hope by what we do and how we show up in the world.

Sometimes as Pastors, we are not fully aware of how tired we are. This can be a blind spot particularly when we are young and healthy. Overtime I have learned the importance of practicing self-care. Self-care is about letting go, about accepting our humanness and limits. Then we can make room for others to journey. How we live and lead as Pastors depends on our understanding of ourselves as ministers and of the world in which we are living at that moment. And understanding our human selves correlates with our self-care. Many of us as Pastors, practice ministry and serve people feeling anxious about our world's future as we discern our life's direction. Some congregants and Pastor's alike under these conditions are searching for their identities and a sense of belonging.

Thinking about and sensing the presence of God have been constants throughout my life. I was born a theist - one who believes in God. I cannot remember doubting the existence of God. I have always felt that God was present in the world, even when I personally felt distant from God. The reality of God for me does not mean that I have never had a crisis of faith or wondered about the mercy and justice of God. Sometimes suffering moments are met with the silence of the one suffering and God. Pessimism can accompany our fidelity to God. Having faith and also doubts about what it means to have faith is more a dynamic of thinking and feeling among us as Pastors than is evident to others and it can grasp us by surprise.

As you know, my dear Theo, people of different religious faith and those who are not religious believers sometimes inspire our own love of God, love of ourselves and our neighbors. I have found a blessing in having exemplars, mentors and friends who by their example and encouragement helped me to grow in faith and as a person. It is also sometimes difficult, particularly in moments of being in conflict with other people, to see how our differences and even their opposition of us are also ways that can contribute to our growth.

A new language of faith, models, ways and what it means to be the church in the world and to be called to the ministry –including the issues of pastoral technical skills (doing), the identity of the pastor (being) –are emerging and need exploring. The shift to online worship services during the pandemic, for example, required me to record at home, which meant that I had to quickly learn to use technology, including, sound, lighting and green screen equipment. Most of my face-to-face engagement with others was virtual via zoom. Many of these adjustments and adaptations I made to organizing and leading worship and giving sermons because of COVID-19 are now standard characteristics of doing ministry today. In the midst of all of these developments, it is important to reflect upon aspects of what it means to be committed to the parish ministry.

You may recall my sharing with you an experience I had. I wrote an opinion piece in our local newspaper many years ago sharing with readers that, as a Christian, I saw the life and teaching of Jesus Christ as an example of one of the many ways or paths by which one can be led to God and live according to the values Jesus taught. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is for me, as a matter of personal faith, the way, but not the only way to God. Some of my Christian friends in the community requested to meet with me to discuss my position taken in the article and to pray for me. I respected their religious conviction, accepted their prayers, but maintained that the diversity of creation itself suggests to me that there is more than one way to

understand God and practice religious faith. How can we look at the diversity of the world and claim that God only expresses God's self in one way? Jesus himself kept pointing those who would listen to him toward God. The ultimate direction on which to focus is the Creator and not the created and how such a gaze impacts the way we live our lives and with one another. This perspective has sustained me over the years and kept me open to learn from the diversity of life while yet anchored in my faith as a Christian.

I wish for you a sense of freedom that can come from the commitments you make that nourishes and aides your unfolding of your sense of self. I have wrestled and felt the tension, as will you, with integrating my inner or private life with my institutional or ministerial public practices. Our capacity to balance these two dimensions of who we are reflects the commitments we make. Making and living out our commitments is a process and done throughout life. Being committed means that we discover for ourselves our core purpose and values and are willing, not obligated, to reflect them in the activities of our life.

We know that a part of the process of maturing is that we imitate those whom we think we want to be like. This is normal and natural. Early in my ministry I did my best imitation of some of the senior clergy who impressed me. The key is not to get stuck in appropriating someone else's identity. Eventually we separate from our exemplars on our way to becoming ourselves, a process the psychologist describes as individuation. This development, from my experience, yielded in me a sense of humility and liberation, freeing me to value my gifts and being myself.

Commit to knowing yourself. Commit to disciplining your life by studying, praying, meditating, self-reflection and silence. Come to know God and yourself in your stillness. It is from here that our "being"-who we are-from which we do the practices of our ministry.

My beloved Theo, I can still feel the hands of those who laid their hands upon me as they prayed for me as a part of the service ordaining me into the ministry. They ushered me on a journey that none of us knew how it would unfold. The sermon title of the preacher who spoke at my installation as a Pastor of my first church was, "God Has a Plan." I have learned to trust this and its unfolding in my life. The great end of all that we are and do is that people come to know God and God's love for us. I am grateful to be a part of that plan. And God willing, so will you far into this century.

Peace.