

T W E L V E

LASHED TO
THE MAST

Blessed are the peacemakers

*Huge cloud fists assault
The blue exposed bare midriff of sky;
The firmament doubles up in pain.
Lightnings rip and thunders shout;
Mother nature's children quarrel.
And then, as suddenly as it began,
It's over. Noah's heirs, perceptions
Cleansed, look out on a disarmed world
At ease and ozone fragrant. Still waters.
What barometric shift
Rearranged these ferocities
Into a peace-pulsating rainbow
Sign? My enemy turns his other
Cheek; I drop my guard. A mirror
Lake reflects the filtered colors;
Breeze-stirred pine trees quietly sing.*

Anne Tyler, in her novel *Morgan's Passing*, told the story of a middle-aged Baltimore man who passed through people's lives with astonishing aplomb and expertise in assuming roles and gratifying expectations.

The novel opens with Morgan's watching a puppet show on a church lawn on a Sunday afternoon. A few minutes into the show, a young man comes from behind the puppet stage and asks, "Is there a doctor here?" After thirty or forty seconds with no response from the audience, Morgan stands up, slowly and deliberately approaches the young man, and asks, "What is the trouble?" The puppeteer's pregnant wife is in labor; a birth seems imminent. Morgan puts the young couple in the back of his station wagon and sets off for Johns Hopkins Hospital. Halfway there the husband says, "The baby is coming!"

Morgan, calm and self-assured, pulls to the curb, sends the about-to-be father to the corner to buy a Sunday paper as a substitute for towels and bed sheets, and delivers the baby. He then drives to the emergency room of the hospital, sees the mother and baby safely to a stretcher, and disappears. After the excitement dies down, the couple asks for Dr. Morgan to

thank him. But no one has ever heard of a Dr. Morgan. They are puzzled — and frustrated that they can't express their gratitude.

Several months later they are pushing their baby in a stroller and see Morgan walking on the other side of the street. They run over and greet him, showing him the healthy baby that he brought into the world. They tell him how hard they had looked for him, and of the hospital's bureaucratic incompetence in tracking him down. In an unaccustomed gush of honesty, he admits to them that he is not really a doctor. In fact, he runs a hardware store. But they needed a doctor, and being a doctor in those circumstances was not all that difficult. It is an image thing, he tells them: You discern what people expect and fit into it. You can get by with it in all the honored professions. He has been doing this all his life, impersonating doctors, lawyers, pastors, counselors as occasions present themselves.

Then he confides, "You know, I would never pretend to be a plumber or impersonate a butcher — they would find me out in twenty seconds."

Morgan knew something that most pastors catch on to early in their work: the image aspects of pastoring, the parts that require meeting people's expectations, can be faked. We can impersonate a pastor without being a pastor. The problem, though, is that while we can get by with it in our communities, often with applause, we can't get by with it within ourselves.

At least, not all of us can. Some of us get restive. We feel awful. No level of success seems to be insurance against an eruption of *angst* in the middle of our applauded performance.

The restiveness does not come from puritanical guilt; we are doing what we're paid to do. The people who pay our salaries are getting their money's worth. We are "giving good weight" — the sermons are inspiring, the committees are efficient, the morale is good. The restiveness comes from another dimension — from a vocational memory, a spiritual hunger, a professional commitment.

The Danger of Doing the Job

Being a pastor who satisfies a congregation is one of the easiest jobs on the face of the earth — if we are satisfied with satisfying congregations. The hours are good, the pay is adequate, the prestige considerable. Why don't we find it easy? Why aren't we content with it?

Because we set out to do something quite different. We set out to risk our lives in a venture of faith. We committed ourselves to a life of holiness. At some point we realized the immensity of God and of the great invisibles that socket into our arms and legs, into bread and wine, into our brains and our tools, into mountains and rivers, giving them meaning, destiny, value, joy, beauty, salvation. We responded to a call to convey these realities in Word and sacrament. We offered ourselves to give leadership that connects and coordinates what the people in this community of faith are doing in their work and play, with what God is doing in mercy and grace.

In the process, we learned the difference between a profession, a craft, and a job.

A job is what we do to complete an assignment. Its primary requirement is that we give satisfaction to whomever makes the assignment and pays our wage. We learn what is expected and we do it. There is nothing wrong with doing jobs. To a lesser or greater extent, we all have them; somebody has to wash the dishes and take out the garbage.

But professions and crafts are different. In these we have an obligation beyond pleasing somebody; we are pursuing or shaping the very nature of reality, convinced that when we carry out our commitments, we benefit people at a far deeper level than if we simply did what they asked of us.

In crafts we are dealing with visible realities, in professions with invisible. The craft of woodworking, for instance, has an obligation to the wood itself, its grain and texture. A good woodworker knows his woods and treats them with respect. Far more is involved than pleasing customers; something like integrity of material is involved.

With professions the integrity has to do with the invisibles:

for physicians it is health (not merely making people feel good); with lawyers, justice (not helping people get their own way); with professors, learning (not cramming cranial cavities with information on tap for examinations). And with pastors, it is God (not relieving anxiety, or giving comfort, or running a religious establishment).

We all start out knowing this, or at least having a pretty good intimation of it. But when we entered our first parish, we were given a job.

Most of the people we deal with are dominated by a sense of self, not a sense of God. Insofar as we deal with their primary concern — the counseling, instructing, encouraging — they give us good marks in our *jobs* as pastors. Whether we deal with God or not, they don't care over much. Flannery O'Connor describes one pastor in such circumstances as one part minister and three parts masseur.

It is very difficult to do one thing when most of the people around us are asking us to do something quite different, especially when these people are nice, intelligent, treat us with respect, and pay our salaries. We get up each morning and the telephone rings, people meet us, letters are addressed to us — often at a tempo of bewildering urgency. All these calls and letters are from people who are asking us to do something for them, quite apart from any belief in God. That is, they come to us not because they are looking for God but because they are looking for a recommendation, or good advice, or an opportunity, and they vaguely suppose we might be qualified to give it to them.

A number of years ago, I injured my knee. According to my self-diagnosis, I knew all it needed was some whirlpool treatments. In my college years we had a whirlpool in the training room, and I had considerable experience with its effectiveness in treating my running injuries as well as making me feel good. In my present community, the only whirlpool was at the physical therapist's office. I called to make an appointment. He refused; I had to have a doctor's prescription.

I called an orthopedic physician, went in for an examination (this was getting more complicated and expensive than I had

planned), and found he wouldn't give me the prescription for the whirlpool. He said it wasn't the proper treatment for my injury. He recommended surgery. I protested: a whirlpool certainly can't do any harm, and it might do some good. His refusal was adamant. He was a professional. His primary commitment was to some invisible abstraction called health, healing. He was not committed to satisfying my requests. His integrity, in fact, forbade him to satisfy my requests if they encroached on his primary commitment.

I have since learned that with a little shopping around, I could have found a doctor who would have given me the prescription I wanted.

I reflect on that incident occasionally. Am I keeping the line clear between what I am committed to and what people are asking of me? Is my primary orientation God's grace, his mercy, his action in Creation and covenant? And am I committed to it enough that when people ask me to do something that will not lead them into a more mature participation in these realities, I refuse? I don't like to think of all my visits made, counseling given, marriages performed, meetings attended, prayers offered — one friend calls it sprinkling holy water on Cabbage Patch dolls — solely because people asked me to do it and it didn't seem at the time that it would do any harm and, who knows, it might do some good. Besides, I knew there was a pastor down the street who would do anything asked of him. But his theology was so wretched he would probably do active harm in the process. My theology, at least, was orthodox.

How do I keep the line sharp? How do I maintain a sense of pastoral vocation in a community of people who hire me to do religious jobs? How do I keep professional integrity in the midst of a people long practiced in comparative shopping, who don't get overly exercised on the fine points of pastoral integrity?

Entering the Wreckage

An illusion-bashing orientation helps. Take a long look at the sheer quantity of wreckage around us — wrecked bodies,

wrecked marriages, wrecked careers, wrecked plans, wrecked families, wrecked alliances, wrecked friendships, wrecked prosperity. We avert our eyes. We try not to dwell on it. We whistle in the dark. We wake up in the morning hoping for health and love, justice and success; build quick mental and emotional defenses against the inrush of bad news; and try to keep our hopes up.

And then another kind of crash puts us or someone we care about in a pile of wreckage. Newspapers document the ruins with photographs and headlines. Our own hearts and journals fill in the details. Are there any promises, any hopes exempt from the general carnage? It doesn't seem so.

Pastors walk into these ruins every day. Why do we do it? What do we hope to accomplish? After all these centuries, things don't seem to have gotten much better; do we think another day's effort is going to stay the avalanche to doomsday? Why do we not all become cynics? Is it sheer naiveté that keeps some pastors investing themselves in acts of compassion, inviting people to a life of sacrifice, suffering abuse in order to witness to the truth, stubbornly repeating an old, hard-to-believe, and much-denied story of good news in the midst of bad news?

Is our talk of citizenship in a kingdom of God anything that can be construed as the "real world"? Or are we passing on a spiritual fiction analogous to the science fictions that fantasize a better world than we will ever live in? Is pastoral work mostly a matter of putting plastic flowers in people's drab lives — well-intentioned attempts to brighten a bad scene, not totally without use, but not real in any substantive or living sense?

Many people think so, and most pastors have moments when they think so. If we think so often enough, we slowly but inexorably begin to adopt the majority opinion and shape our work to the expectations of a people for whom God is not so much a person as a legend, who suppose that the kingdom will be wonderful once we get past Armageddon, but we had best work right now on the terms that *this* world gives us, and

who think that the Good News is nice — the way greeting card verse is nice — but in no way necessary to everyday life in the way that a computer manual or a job description is.

Two facts: the general environment of wreckage provides daily and powerful stimuli to make us want to repair and fix what is wrong; the secular mindset, in which God/kingdom/gospel are not counted as primary, living realities, is constantly seeping into our imaginations. The combination — ruined world, secular mind — makes for a steady, unrelenting pressure to readjust our conviction of what pastoral work is. We're tempted to respond to the appalling conditions around us in terms that make sense to those who are appalled.

Ministering as People Set Apart

The definition that pastors start out with, given to us in our ordination, is that pastoral work is a ministry of Word and sacrament.

Word. But in the wreckage, all words sound like "mere words."

Sacrament. But in the wreckage, what difference can water, a piece of bread, a sip of wine make?

Yet century after century, Christians continue to take certain persons in their communities, set them apart, and say, "You are our shepherd. Lead us to Christlikeness."

Yes, their actions will often speak different expectations, but in the deeper regions of the soul, the unspoken desire is for more than someone doing a religious job. If the unspoken were uttered, it would sound like this:

"We want you to be responsible for saying and acting among us what we believe about God and kingdom and gospel. We believe that the Holy Spirit is among us and within us. We believe that God's Spirit continues to hover over the chaos of the world's evil and our sin, shaping a new creation and new creatures. We believe that God is not a spectator, in turn amused and alarmed at the wreckage of world history, but a participant.

"We believe that the invisible is more important than the visible at any one single moment and in any single event that we choose to examine. We believe that everything, especially everything that looks like wreckage, is material God is using to make a praising life.

"We believe all this, but we don't see it. We see, like Ezekiel, dismembered skeletons whitened under a pitiless Babylonian sun. We see a lot of bones that once were laughing and dancing children, adults who once aired their doubts and sang their praises in church — and sinned. We don't see the dancers or the lovers or the singers — or at best catch only fleeting glimpses of them. What we see are bones. Dry bones. We see sin and judgment on the sin. That is what it looks like. It looked that way to Ezekiel; it looks that way to anyone with eyes to see and brain to think; and it looks that way to us.

"But we believe something else. We believe in the coming together of these bones into connected, sinewed, muscled human beings who speak and sing and laugh and work and believe and bless their God. We believe it happened the way Ezekiel preached it, and we believe it still happens. We believe it happened in Israel and that it happens in church. We believe we are a part of the happening as we sing our praises, listen believingly to God's Word, receive the new life of Christ in the sacraments. We believe the most significant thing that happens or can happen is that we are no longer dismembered but are remembered into the resurrection body of Christ.

"We need help in keeping our beliefs sharp and accurate and intact. We don't trust ourselves; our emotions seduce us into infidelities. We know we are launched on a difficult and dangerous act of faith, and there are strong influences intent on diluting or destroying it. We want you to give us help. Be our pastor, a minister of Word and sacrament in the middle of this world's life. Minister with Word and sacrament in all the different parts and stages of our lives — in our work and play, with our children and our parents, at birth and death, in our celebrations and sorrows, on those days when morning breaks over us in a wash of sunshine, and those other days that are all drizzle. This isn't the only task in the life of faith,

but it is your task. We will find someone else to do the other important and essential tasks. This is *yours*: Word and sacrament.

"One more thing: We are going to ordain you to this ministry, and we want your vow that you will stick to it. This is not a temporary job assignment but a way of life that we need lived out in our community. We know you are launched on the same difficult belief venture in the same dangerous world as we are. We know your emotions are as fickle as ours, and your mind is as tricky as ours. That is why we are going to ordain you and why we are going to exact a *vow* from you. We know there will be days and months, maybe even years, when we won't feel like believing anything and won't want to hear it from you. And we know there will be days and weeks and maybe even years when you won't feel like saying it. It doesn't matter. Do it. You are ordained to this ministry, vowed to it.

"There may be times when we come to you as a committee or delegation and demand that you tell us something else than what we are telling you now. Promise right now that you won't give in to what we demand of you. You are not the minister of our changing desires, or our time-conditioned understanding of our needs, or our secularized hopes for something better. With these vows of ordination we are lashing you fast to the mast of Word and sacrament so you will be unable to respond to the siren voices.

"There are many other things to be done in this wrecked world, and we are going to be doing at least some of them, but if we don't know the foundational realities with which we are dealing — God, kingdom, gospel — we are going to end up living futile, fantasy lives. Your task is to keep telling the basic story, representing the presence of the Spirit, insisting on the priority of God, speaking the biblical words of command and promise and invitation."

That, or something very much like that, is what I understand the church to say — even when the people cannot articulate it — to the individuals it ordains to be its pastors.