

JULY 19, 2009
PENTECOST 7
“THE AUTHENTIC PASTOR”

Let us pray: Shepherding God, strengthen and sustain pastors, that with patience and understanding and prophetic truth-telling they may love and care and challenge your people. Grant that together they may follow in the way of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep, in whose strong and gentle name I pray. Amen.

No, today isn't Good Shepherd Sunday although three of our readings use sheep and shepherd imagery and we'll be singing a paraphrase of the 23rd Psalm as our sending hymn. But isn't it interesting that in the midst of this month of hearing from God's fiery prophets—the likes of Ezekiel and Amos and today Jeremiah and next week

Elisha, that we hear God’s incendiary Word of lamentation and woe regarding the “*shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture,*” as we find Jeremiah doing today on God’s behalf. The image of shepherd in Hebrew scripture really functioned as the master metaphor for leadership among God’s people—and it could be invoked to critique political leadership, as in the case of the Davidic king, for example, as with the false shepherd, King Jeroboam of Israel in last week’s reading from the prophet Amos. But it could just as well be used to describe faulty religious leadership, as with Amaziah, the priest of Bethel who was a false shepherd as well, telling the king and the people only what they wanted to hear—and not what Yahweh wanted them to hear, as Amos insisted.

The Good Shepherd, as described in Psalm 23 which we earlier read, is of course God godself—the supremely good shepherd

who cares for the sheep, leading them beside still waters, pasturing them in green meadows, leading them in “*right paths for his name’s sake*” —right paths that sometimes include walking through the valley of the shadow of death—as we experienced once again with Lilli’s recent death—the oldest sheep of our flock. It is God the Good Shepherd’s rod and staff that both comfort and protect us—as well as keep us in those “right paths” the psalm speaks of. In the tenth chapter of John from which we read every Good Shepherd Sunday in the Easter season, Jesus comes clean and says in no uncertain terms, “*I am the Good Shepherd.*”

And in today’s Gospel reading from Mark 6 we hear that Jesus “*had compassion*” for the great crowd of people that was pursuing him from place to place “*so that they had no leisure even to eat,*” Mark says. Jesus “*had compassion*” on them, Mark says, “*because they were like*

sheep without a shepherd” — sheep without someone to care for them like the prophets knew God’s people needed — godly leadership of the type that Jesus the Good Shepherd is the exemplar.

Isn’t it interesting that especially for us Lutherans the title by which clergy are usually known is “pastor,” the Latin word for “shepherd.” I’ve never heard a very good explanation as to just why this title rather than “Father” or “Reverend” or “Preacher” or “Minister” or “Priest” is most common for us Lutherans but it certainly is — although it’s certainly used in other denominations as well. But I think it means for us Lutherans, at least, that “shepherd” is in some way **the** master image for how we who are specially ordained to leadership in ministry within the church are to understand our calling and responsibility.

I think I’ve told you once before the story of how I as a young pastor in my first call chaffed a bit at people calling me

“pastor” — and I encouraged folks to simply call me “John” — probably a reflection of my own “low” church inclinations and what I liked to think of as my egalitarianism and healthy “anticlericalism,” not all of which I hope I’ve lost. I remember one day visiting an older parishioner in the hospital — Ralph Davies Medical Center right up the hill from our church made famous as the hospital they’d always show bringing the latest gunshot victims to in the then popular “Streets of San Francisco” tv series starring the very young Michael Douglas and the veteran actor Karl Malden, who just died a few days ago. Anyway, Mathilda, one of the older members of St. Francis from the Finnish-speaking part of the congregation, was seriously ill and having read a psalm with her and shared communion, she said in a soft, confidential tone of voice, “Pastor, I have something I need to tell you.” Being pastorally sensitive, I of course leaned in closer, awaiting some word of confession or

disclosure of some heretofore unmet spiritual need, and said, “Yes, Mathilda?” To which she replied with all deference, “I don’t know if I should tell you this, Pastor, but I want you to know that I’m not comfortable with you telling us all to just call you by your first name rather than “pastor.” Because to call you “pastor” makes me feel closer to you than calling you “John.”

And the penny dropped, as the English say, and I suddenly was made to understand that “pastor” — a title I had personally felt uneasy with when substituted for my real name — was not for Mathilda some high and lofty title that distanced me from her, as much as I may have felt that. But for her it was literally a “term of endearment,” that bridged the gap between an 80-year old member of the flock and her 20-something, straight out of seminary, wet-behind-the-ears shepherd.

Years ago, Gene Bartlett, the father of a very good friend of mine, Dave Bartlett—who served as preacher at Ruth and my wedding—and who recently retired as the professor preaching at Yale Divinity School (and whose son, Ben, was recently staying with us in the parsonage)—Dave’s father Gene, himself a famous preacher, seminary president, and one-time head of the American Baptist Convention—the “good” Baptists, as we call them—Gene wrote a little book entitled The Authentic Pastor. In a chapter called “The Pastor’s Search for Identity,” Dr. Bartlett identifies some of the “ready-made” answers our culture provides to the question “What’s a pastor, anyway?”

“People will make room for us, for example,” he begins, “if we are willing to become *keepers of the public morals*.” Here pastors might find a niche as those whose role it is to keep an eye out for those things that threaten other people’s traditional morals. Invariably, when I’m playing golf

with somebody I don't know and it comes up in conversation that I'm a pastor, the person begins apologizing for having cussed at missing an easy putt. Some pastors, of course, embrace the role enthusiastically like Pat Robertson, was it, who so quickly identified 9.11 as God's response to the growing tolerance for same sex couples in our country? But keepers of the public morals is not a pastor's prime calling.

Or we can find a place, Dr. Bartlett suggests, as "*chaplains to the culture*" — as, I suppose, in my story of being asked to "do" an invocation for the LA County Board of Supervisors — to say a "little prayer" at some public event. We can become spiritual "ombuds-persons" adept at bringing a religious "presence" to our otherwise normally secular world of business and government.

Or we can become "*organization persons*," Dr. Bartlett says, mentioning how "most of us belong to denominations which

will keep us busy with packaged programs” and sitting on committees. Or we can become CEOs of our local congregation—ecclesiastical business folk expert in the arts of managing human and financial resources under the rubric of “stewardship.”

Or we can become social workers and therapists, sensitive souls adept at counseling and referrals and manipulating the bureaucracies of the medical and social welfare institutions—as well as dispensers of good advice to the homeless and hapless whom we daily encounter on the street or at our office door.

But, as Dr. Bartlett concludes, “We can fill our days with these things. But we can’t fill our hearts.” “For most of us,” he judges, “the failure to find real and deeper meaning of (pastoral) ministry leaves us feeling increasingly trivial and at least demeaned. Or we feel we’re playing a role, theatrically speaking, and are really an illusion created to fill a need people have for religious

authority that they won't claim for themselves—or do claim but need somebody to represent nostalgically the old-time religion.

Dr. Bartlett goes on to recall a story told about an encounter one day between Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who lived near one another in Concord, Massachusetts. They were talking about their alma mater, Harvard in nearby Cambridge. “Well,” said Emerson, “I see Harvard now teaches all the branches of knowledge.” To which Thoreau replied snidely, “Yes, all the branches and **none of the roots.**”

I resonate with much of what Dr. Bartlett pointed to as lying at the roots of the pastoral identity crisis he diagnosed over 30 years ago now. These 35 years of my ministry as a pastor have certainly seen a decline in the social status of clergy in our society, some of it, I'd argue, well earned, due to the declining intellectual ability of

those attending seminary, as some studies have shown—only the admission of women to the pastorate keeping the level anywhere near respectable. Of course some of this is due to such factors as the rising educational level of our society generally—at least until very recently--where clergy are long since no longer the only educated persons within a community. Just as recently experts have lamented the siphoning off of the best and the brightest from such fields as medicine and law into the high-flying world in finance and investment, it's been quite some time since seminaries have competed for such students in anything like the numbers of old.

Then too, the public face of Christianity in recent years has been so dominated by televangelists and megachurch leaders and other sorts of religious “entrepreneurs,” often beset by stories of corruption of one sort or another—plus the horrendous disclosure of sexual abuse on the part of clergy especially in the RC Church—but in

others as well—that the prospect of spending years in academic preparation for a relatively low-status and low-pay career compared to other professions, is a hard sell for today’s financially and socially savvy young folk. These past years have also seen an influx of so-called “second career” pastors, some of whom—take Pastor Stephanie or Pastor Ellen, for example—have become clergy after gaining Ph.D.s in other areas. But some too have come from failed first careers or failed marriages and seminary has become a kind of refuge for them, making them sometimes good and compassionate pastors, other times persons trying to work out their own personal problems in the context of congregational life—people who “need to be needed”--not always a healthy proposition.

No, I’m all too aware—here near the end of my “career” as a pastor—of the difficulties we face in the church over issues of pastoral leadership, and am acutely aware

of my own pastoral disabilities. And that's why, with Gene Bartlett more than a generation ago, I too feel we need to return to the "roots" of the matter—which lie in the reality of what Luther called "the priesthood of all believers"—our common baptismal ordination into ministry in daily life which is each and everyone of our callings out of which certain individuals are identified and called by God through the community of faith to exercise servant leadership as pastors to enable and empower the ministry of all. It's not that pastors need be all things to all people—to be supermen or superwomen—to have all the vigor of a thirty year old with the experience of a sixty year old, as we often joke. No, pastors need to be "authentically" themselves—real flesh and blood persons—who are willing and able—because enabled by the call of God's empowering Spirit—to "shepherd" God's flock with the compassion and the insight—the intelligence and the moxy—of Jesus, the

Good Shepherd—who as John Calvin put it, is at one and the same time “prophet, priest and king”—of which pastors continue to exercise a prophetic role on behalf of God’s Word in church and society. It’s my sense that we pastors—largely out of our need to be liked—too often neglect our prophetic role, our agency on behalf of and in response to the call to be Word-bearers on behalf of God to a world yearning and needing to be encountered by the Good News of Jesus Christ, prophets, as some wit once put it, whose calling is to comfort the afflicted—like Jesus. But also, like Jesus to afflict the comfortable—on God’s behalf.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.