

# THE MINISTER AS MORAL THEOLOGIAN

(OR THE OTHER STUFF YOU SIGNED UP FOR  
WHEN YOU BECAME A PASTOR)

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# THE CHURCH IS A MORAL COMMUNITY

- ▶ A context for reflection on lived implications of faith.
- ▶ A community for moral formation
- ▶ A setting for ethical discussion and discernment
- ▶ A place for moral support—and accountability.

# SYSTEMATIC FAILURE DE-NATURES THE CHURCH

- ▶ Suggests faith is only in your head
- ▶ Reinforces that ethics is purely personal
- ▶ Leaves secular accounts of life, conduct unchallenged
- ▶ Undermines the credibility of proclamation
- ▶ Detaches mission from theological conviction.

# LEADING A MORAL COMMUNITY

- ▶ Clergy is bearer and sign of a moral tradition
- ▶ Charged with institutional and symbolic power
- ▶ Exercises authority of interpretation
- ▶ Makes space for and models moral conversation
- ▶ Nurtures the virtues that make moral community possible

# ETHICAL ASPECTS OF MINISTRY

- ▶ Called to preach on morally difficult texts and occasions
- ▶ Occupy office of teacher and mediator when ethical challenges and divisions arise
- ▶ Offer moral support and counsel to those facing perplexity or temptation
- ▶ Taken as example of Christian moral conduct

# ASPECTS OF PASTOR AS ROLE MODEL

- ▶ May be wise or unwise, fair or otherwise
- ▶ Cannot be avoided
- ▶ Potential that should not be forfeited
- ▶ Risk of self-deception or collapse
- ▶ Need for unselfish self-care
- ▶ Calls for actual transformation

# PASTORAL POWER: INDISPENSABLE AND DANGEROUS

- ▶ Power is the capacity to have an effect in the world
- ▶ Alternative—to be ineffectual
- ▶ Power for what? For whom?
- ▶ Power over others vs. power for them
- ▶ Directing and restraining power--boundaries

# MINISTRY AS A (PECULIAR) PROFESSION

## A MORAL FRAMEWORK FOR PASTORAL POWER



# A CLUE TO ORIGINS

- ▶ The term “professional” is rooted in the verb “to profess” that is, publicly to declare central convictions and commitments
- ▶ A professional is someone dedicated to a fundamental human good
- ▶ This is an essentially moral enterprise
- ▶ She or he is honored because of the commitment to the other’s good pursued through professional work

# SIX CHARACTERISTICS OF PROFESSIONS

- ▶ Oriented toward an essential human good: salvation, health, or justice
- ▶ Require special knowledge and skills procured through extended study and supervised practice
- ▶ Embodies commitment to others' interests above one's own.

# SIX CHARACTERISTICS OF PROFESSIONS

- ▶ Requires coherence of person and role: character
- ▶ Includes duty to establish, transmit and enforce standards of knowledge and conduct appropriate to profession
- ▶ Includes concept of fiduciary power

# FIDUCIARY POWER

- ▶ Power *for* those served, in contrast to power *over* them
- ▶ Use of knowledge and skill rigorously disciplined by interests of congregant/patient/client
- ▶ Requires altruism, commitment to sacrifice and risk to protect the other
- ▶ Professional obligations structure a space in which client's vulnerability is protected

# MINISTRY IS THE (REAL) OLDEST PROFESSION

- ▶ Religious sites and structures oldest evidence of human culture
- ▶ Minister/priest mediates relation to ultimate power and ultimate human good
- ▶ Invested with sacral authority

# UNMARKED TERRITORY

- ▶ In contrast to medicine and law, fewer external markers of character and limits of relationship
- ▶ More diverse contexts and aspects of professional service
- ▶ More diverse and multi-faceted roles and relationships
- ▶ Role draws more deeply on personality and interpersonal gifts

# CAN OBSCURE RELEVANCE OF ROLE DEMARCATION, BOUNDARIES

- ▶ In reality, made more necessary by diverse and flexible context of professional service
- ▶ Must be internalized by minister
- ▶ Frequently resisted or directly contravened by parishioners

# BOUNDARIES IN MINISTRY

- ▶ Serve as reminders of nature of pastoral relationship
- ▶ Deflect the meeting of pastor's needs to appropriate places
- ▶ Depend upon physical emotional and spiritual self-care
- ▶ Exist to create a safe space where ministry can happen

# Moral Leadership in the Pulpit: Guidelines for Preaching on Morally Challenging Texts



## ACKNOWLEDGE THE DIFFICULTY

- Do not ignore the stunning character of such texts, or by silence imply that you or your listeners are eagerly absorbing these directives and ready to go out and follow them.

## HEIGHTEN RATHER THAN REDUCE TENSION

- ▶ Do not try to play down the seriousness of the demand, or the distance between what seems reasonable. Instead, name and underscore that distance.

# EXPLORE CONNECTION BETWEEN GOSPEL AND DEMAND

- ▶ What if we suppose that the affirmations we routinely make in church are actually true?
- ▶ How would the unreasonable advice and the impossible demands of scripture make sense to us if we took these statements as descriptions of reality?

# HOW MIGHT FAITH MAKE RESPONSE POSSIBLE?

- ▶ Consider how the degree of faith we have might enable us to respond in some fashion to its call.

# EMPHASIZE IMPORTANCE OF BEGINNING

- ▶ However small the step, we can begin in some way on the path toward greater faithfulness, and that beginning is of enormous importance. It gives us a taste of what it means to share God's life in the world more deeply.

## AFFIRM GOD'S EAGERNESS TO BLESS SMALLEST RESPONSE

- We rest in the confidence that our pursuit of holiness and justice is met and sustained by the Spirit of God, and trust that no step, however small and halting, will be scorned.

*Pray honestly to at least come  
to **want** to do God's will*

# Moral Leadership in the Pulpit: Guidelines for Preaching on Controversial Texts



# Do not tackle divisive issues until trust is established

- The right to lead though painful and difficult territory must be earned

# Consider whether pulpit is best place to take up issue

- Generally better to address controversy in settings where dialogue is possible

# Use power of pulpit with fairness and restraint

- ▶ Acknowledge the complexity of real moral issues
- ▶ Present various positions responsibly

# Application of ancient texts to modern issues is uncertain

- ▶ Recognize constructive work of interpretation that may go awry
- ▶ Pray for God's wisdom and mercy on all parties to controversy
- ▶ Affirm that what unites us is deeper and more certain than what divides

# State personal positions with humility

- ▶ Explicitly recognize that smart and faithful people may hold other views
- ▶ Acknowledge possibility of error, including your own
- ▶ Speak of other views with respect

# Moral Leadership in the Pulpit: Guidelines for preaching in the face of disaster



# **Don't Say Nothing**

**That is, do not ignore the circumstance,  
pretend nothing has happened, or try to  
somehow bracket off from worship the  
one thing that fills everyone's mind.**

# Don't offer an explanation

When something terrible happens, it is natural to search for a reason: something that caused this event, something that might have been different and prevented it. This is chiefly to hold at bay the fearful idea that violence or illness or accident can be so utterly random.

# Don't try to fix blame

It is presumptuous to suppose that God's purposes, or even the complex web of motives and circumstances that govern human acts, can be read backward from the transcript of events.

# **Do not pretend to resignation**

**Manage your emotions sufficiently to speak,  
but do not assume a posture somehow above  
the pain and confusion of the time at hand.  
Just because we know theoretically that “all  
things work together for good to those who  
love God” (Rom. 8:28) does not mean that we  
can feel that in the face of catastrophe, or  
even say it with a straight face.**

# **Make space for full range of responses**

**There must be room for all of the things people are feeling: the frightening and troubling outbursts of rage and despair as well as the orthodox expressions of acceptance and trust and confidence in God's power to heal.**

# **Use the most common resources**

**In times of profound loss, confusion and pain, familiarity is powerful. The things we know “by heart” can hold us when the mind is still reeling.**

# Tell the truth

This includes not only the state of your own heart and mind, but the true experience of those most affected by the event. God, who has heard his own Son cry out his despair, can bear with our anguish and walk with us through the darkness. It is often the only road back to trust.

# Sending Litany

*Leader:*

You have been called,  
By the Spirit of God working in you,  
to a representative ministry within the people of God.

You are to lead the people of God  
in worship and prayer,  
and to nurture, teach,  
and encourage them  
from the riches of God's grace.



*(Leader, continued)*

You are to exemplify Christ's servanthood;  
to build up the people of God  
in their obedience to Christ's mission in the world,  
and to seek justice, peace,  
and salvation for all people . . .

*Response:*

**It is our task  
to proclaim by word and deed  
the gospel of Jesus Christ,  
to lead persons to faith in Jesus Christ,  
and to conform our lives  
in accordance with the gospel.**

We remember that we are called  
to serve rather than to be served,  
to proclaim the faith of the Church  
and no other, and  
to look after the concerns of Christ above all,  
so that we may know that  
we believe ourselves  
to be called by God.



# THE MINISTER AS MORAL THEOLOGIAN

*VAUMC Quadrennial Ethics Training*

