

“MAKING THE MOST OF THE TIME: Leadership, Communication, and Media Skills in Times of Conflict, Crisis, and Stress.”

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by

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### **A THEOLOGY OF PASTORAL LEADERSHIP**

Foreword: I'm talking here specifically about leadership in the context of the life and mission of Christ's church. It may or may not apply in other venues. My focus is primarily on pastoral leadership (the leadership of those called and ordained to the ministry of the word and sacraments). I think that this focus is readily transferable to non-ordained church leaders, rostered or not. This transferability lies in the theological nature of leadership itself.

I have two main points to make today. The first is that a faithful pastoral leader has an active and adequate theology of leadership. The second is that an effective pastoral leader is non-anxious, well differentiated, and connected.

#### **A FAITHFUL PASTORAL LEADER HAS AN ACTIVE AND ADEQUATE THEOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP:**

Let me place before you a pastoral theology of leadership. It is one that must be rooted in and prompted by one's pastoral tradition. In this particular case, I'm talking about the Lutheran pastoral theological tradition. In this tradition, I judge that the theology of leadership I'm going to put forth for the ordained is easily transferable to other offices of leadership in the tradition. I also think that this model of leadership can contribute to and learn from leadership understandings in other pastoral and non-pastoral traditions.

Where and how does leadership fit theologically? Where does it fit in Lutheranism's understanding of who God is and how God works in the church and in the world, most particularly how God works in and through the leadership of human beings?

To begin with, the issue of pastoral leadership has been part and parcel of the office of ministry in the Lutheran tradition from its beginnings down to the present. Luther, in talking about the office of ministry in his commentary on Psalm 110, says, "Out of the multitude of Christians some must be selected who shall lead the others by virtue of the special gifts and aptitude which God gives them for the office." (LW, 13, 332) The Formula of Concord states that, "In a time when confession is necessary, as when the enemies of God's Word want to suppress the pure teaching of the Holy Gospel, every Christian, especially servants of the Word as leaders of the community of God, are obligated...to confess true teaching and everything that pertains to free and public religion." (BC, 2000, 637) The ELCA's Vision and Expectations for ordained ministers posits leadership like bookends, at the beginning and ending of its document, saying that ordained persons are "called to give leadership" to congregations and other ministries of the church, and that "giving leadership in the church's witness to the world" is an integral part of ordained ministry. Finally, the national church's eleven "Imperatives for Theological

Education,” which were approved by the 1993 Churchwide Assembly (and certainly determined how this seminary operated during my tenure here), mentions leading, leaders, and leadership no fewer than twenty times. In fact the document seems to indicate that “preparing leaders” is the primary task of Lutheran theological faculties, and that serving as communities of theological discourse is secondary.

Pastoral leadership in this tradition has its origin in the creaturely nature and creaturely needs of humanity. It is motivated by gratitude for God’s grace, through faith in Christ: faith that comes as a gift from the Holy Spirit working in the preaching and hearing of the gospel; faith that is both the foundation and the fruit of sanctification. Pastoral leadership also requires particular gifts from the Creator Spirit.

As an activity of the pastoral office, pastoral leadership is a function of the administrative work of the pastor. It has to do with the executive management of the organizational structures of the institutional church. As such, it is an expression of Christian vocation and Christian ethics. It is one way that faith (as a response to the gospel) becomes active in love, part of the activity associated with service to the neighbor, and with being a caring creature, one who is a part of and participant in God’s creation.

Pastoral leadership is not associated so much with the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments (which focus on the church in its redemptive form, as the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel), as it is on what George Forell calls “the empirical church,” what Luther calls “physical external Christianity” in contrast to “spiritual, internal Christianity,” what Bill Lazareth calls “the institutional church.” This is the church as one of the three social structures (along with the state and the economy) through which Lutherans believe God as creator continually works, to maintain some semblance of order and sanity in human culture.

Therefore, the arena for pastoral leadership, and other vocational forms of leadership associated with the church, is God’s creation, the church living in, and functioning as, an essential part of God’s world. And the theological focus of pastoral leadership is on God’s activity as creator, and on the pastoral leader’s understanding of and participation in God’s creative activity, with all of the rest of God’s human creatures, baptized and not baptized.

Pastoral leadership in the Lutheran theological tradition requires that we recognize and focus on the church in its creaturely form: as an institution of society; as one of the ways that God maintains order and justice in society, and renews and revitalizes human culture.

Pastoral leadership requires also that the tool we use to understand and operate in the world and in the empirical church is the tool given uniquely to the human creature by the creator. That tool is human reason. Used properly, and in the proper context, Luther saw reason as God’s supreme creaturely gift. Good pastoral leadership in the Lutheran theological tradition requires a high level of cognitive functioning, and the will and the ability to use it. It also

requires a high capacity for integration- the ability to see, explicate, and apply relationships among varieties of ideas and issues, and to do this in a coherent, organized and understandable manner, one that makes sense, on the one hand, and is able to effect action on the other.

Now you might be asking yourself, “But what about faith? What about the gospel and the sacraments?” The gospel and the sacraments are crucial in Lutheran pastoral theology. In fact, they, and the gift of faith that both leads to and comes from them, are *sine qua non*, that without which a pastor is not and cannot be a pastor, and the church as God’s community of redemption is not, and cannot be the church.

The gospel, and the faith by which the gospel is understood and apprehended, are the vital center of the church as redemptive community. The gracious gospel of God’s forgiveness and the gift of faith join us to God, our redeemer, by God’s action and on God’s terms. And pastors are called by God through the community of faith to participate in a critical and unique way in God’s redemptive activity: to preach the Word, to administer the sacraments in accordance with that word, and to nurture faith in that Word.

But pastors are also called to lead the church as institution. And leading the church in its empirical form is not the same as serving the church in its redemptive form. Leading is not the same as preaching the word, administering the sacraments, and nurturing faith. It is understood differently, and it is done differently. Luther would say we must make a distinction between the two functions.

Hearing the gospel of forgiveness in faith frees us from the power that sin, death, and the devil have in our lives. Hearing the gospel in faith also frees us from the uncountable, subtle, and not so subtle ways we use our minds and our reason to justify ourselves before God and to justify our self-service among humans. As Luther puts it, hearing God’s gracious gospel of forgiveness through Christ in faith “untrammels” our reason and “unfeters” our judgment; it unties and unchains us, frees us from being curved in on ourselves, so that motivated by gratitude, we can turn our attention and energy outward, from self-service, to the vocational service of God’s creatures and God’s creation. (LW, 45, 126) And one of the very important ways both ordained and not-ordained Christians serve God’s creatures and God’s creation, using God’s gift of reason as their primary tool in their vocations, is through leadership.

Let me summarize. God operates in at least two distinct ways in the human world:

First, through Jesus the Christ, who is our Lord and redeemer, and through the Holy Spirit, who calls us through the gospel, enlightens us with the gift of faith, and strengthens and preserves us in the true faith as children of God.

Second, as Creator, who creates us and all that exists, sustains us, provides for us, and protects and preserves us as creatures in the world.

Leadership that is related to the church, be it pastoral or other, leadership has to do with God’s continuing work of creation; it has to do with our lives as churchly creatures, and with the

sustenance, provision, protection, and preservation of the church as institution. It has to do with the establishment and maintenance of order and direction in the church, and with the way the church as a social and cultural institution participates, along with the government and economic structures, in the preservation, order and ordering of the world.

However, good leadership in the church exists not only for the sake of the world, but also for the sake of the gospel. In fact, good leadership in the church provides an extremely important function related to the proclamation of the gospel. Its presence can calm chaos; and its presence can nurture the kind of non-chaotic context in which the gospel can be spoken and be heard. If your experience has been anything like mine, you know that it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to speak and to hear the gospel in the midst of the chaotic clatter and clutter created by bad pastoral leadership. Good pastoral leadership, on the other hand, turns attention from itself to the gospel.

Finally, leadership in the church and the church's institutions is not something I blame on the Holy Spirit. Leadership in the church is something for which I take responsibility, and for which I am to be held responsible as part and parcel of my vocation calling as a church leader. It is reason freed from self-justification and self-service that is the guiding light of good leadership, not a blue print magically sent or revealed by the Holy Spirit. As a baptized Christian, I am motivated by gospel-produced gratitude to be the best leader I can be; and as a baptized Christian whose vocational calling is to be a leader, the goals and objectives of my leadership are informed by Christian theology. But my leadership is not the result of my ability to read the mind of God or discern the will of the Holy Spirit. The will of the Holy Spirit is that God be God and that humans be creatures of God who serve their neighbors and tend to God's creation. How that is to be accomplished in any given situation is not something God prescribes; it is something God frees us to do; it is something God frees us to take responsibility for, using our reason and plain old fashioned common sense. Human history is littered with the mistaken conclusions of those who felt they understood the will of the Holy Spirit when it came to establishing order in the church, or non-proclamatory action by the church. Direct mandates from God, claimed by those who lead, be it in the church, the economy, or the government, can carry and have carried with them very dangerous and destructive consequences, both for our neighbors and for our world. We ought to be highly suspicious of them, and of the leaders who claim to possess them.

#### AN EFFECTIVE PASTORAL LEADER IS NON-ANXIOUS, WELL-DIFFERENTIATED, AND CONNECTED

These terms and this description come from Edwin Friedman, a Jewish rabbi and family systems specialist who was very interested in clergy as leaders. Given the pastoral theology of leadership I just put forth, I judge that these terms and description fit well. They are well-researched and reasonable characteristics of good leadership, both in the church and beyond.

Lutheran Christians believe firmly that in matters dealing with living our lives as creatures in the created world, (and leadership is one of these matters) we have no corner on the market. Christian baptism does not guarantee that a woman or man will be a good leader any more

than it guarantees that one will be a good doctor, an effective president of the United States, a talented trumpet player, or a smart and honest stock broker. All of these functions require high cognitive capacity, related skills, and vocational commitment. And in these matters, Lutheran Christians are always ready and willing to listen to and learn from fellow human beings with high integrity, who are intelligent, practical, and dedicated to their vocations.

Edwin Friedman was one of those people. The fact that he was not a baptized Christian makes no difference.

Friedman makes the following statement concerning the nature of leadership: "Self-definition is a more important agent of change than expertise." (p. 3) For Friedman, leadership is not so much about what you know or where you've been as it is about who you are, and what you do with who you are. It is the person of the leader that precedes the activity of leadership.

But that doesn't mean that acting as a leader is not extremely important, because it is. And how you act, how you lead, is even more important. Here's what Friedman says about this: "What is vital...is not knowledge of technique or even of pathology but rather, the capacity of the leader to define his or her own goals and values while trying to maintain a non-anxious presence within the system " (p.3) I like to distill this phrase into three basic terms. The terms are: non-anxious, well-differentiated, and connected. To say that a good leader defines her/his own goals and values, maintains a non-anxious presence, and does this within the institutional system of which s/he is a part, is to say that a good leader is non-anxious, well-differentiated, and connected.

Let's take a quick look at what these terms might mean for leadership in the church, including pastoral leadership.

Non-anxious- When I was a gawky teenager, and more-than-prone to say and to do things that were inappropriate at least, and got me into trouble at most, my mother would say to me, "J., use your head. Use your head." That's what Friedman means by "non-anxious." But he means using a very specific part of your head: the brain's frontal lobes; the cerebral cortex; your center of reason and rational thinking. Chronic anxiety and the stress which is part and parcel of anxiety set up a vicious chemical cycle in the body which shuts down our capacity for reason and throws the more reactive and self-protective parts of our brain and body into gear. And not only do they do that to the individual leader, but a leader's anxiety and reactivity tends to be contagious within a system. When a leader telegraphs anxiety, the system tends to become anxious, reactive, and self-protective also; when a leader contains and controls his/her anxiety, the system becomes less anxious and more able to move beyond self-preservation. Good leaders, says Friedman, learn to contain at least, and control at most, their anxiety. My mom would say they use their heads.

Well-differentiated- When I was in primary school, my family shared a house with my dad's parents. During those years I spent a good bit of time quite literally at my grandmother's knee. Where my mother's advice to me later in life was "J., use your head," the earlier message I

remember from my grandmother was, "Remember you're a Balas." This came usually at a time when I was trying to push the behavior envelope too far, and was using the excuse "Everybody else is doing it" to justify my actions. Grandma Balas would look me in the eye during those exchanges, and say, "You're not everybody else. Remember: you're a Balas!" A well-differentiated pastoral leader knows who she is- personally, socially, and especially theologically. And she knows who she is not. And she's comfortable with that. A well-differentiated leader knows what he believes, and why he believes it. And he's comfortable with that. And well-differentiated pastoral leaders have no problems communicating these things to those who call them to lead. And finally, well differentiated pastoral leaders have come to terms with and have differentiated from their family junk. They know about the skeletons in their family closets, and the destructive family stuff that has in the past poisoned their self-understanding and their ability to relate; and they don't allow this to seep into and contaminate the cognitive/affective processes that underlie their leadership in the present.

Connected- A good pastoral leader connects well with those s/he is called to lead. S/he does this in a variety of ways; and s/he can remain connected even in the most challenging and stressful situations and circumstances. A good leader must have good personality tools; and anxiety management and effective differentiation enable these to be expressed in his/her leadership. This is not as easy as it sounds. Friedman says this about it: "Many leaders have the capacity to stay in touch, fewer leaders have the capacity to differentiate their selves, fewest have the capacity to remain connected while maintaining self-differentiation. It is the most difficult part of leading a family, personal or congregational." (p. 230)

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