

The Splendid Embarrassment

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In a recent article on the countercultural virtues of tithing, Thomas Boogaart invites us to attend to Imelda Marcos, and particularly to her fondness for shoes. “Whatever else she may have done in her life, she bought shoes. Thousands of them: different colors, different styles, shoes for any conceivable situation — more than she could possibly wear in a lifetime. Why such an extravagance?” Boogaart asks. “Is it not because Imelda Marcos was addicted? A shiny new pair of shoes had the power,” he adds, “to make her feel young again and to give her a rush of joy and happiness.”¹ That rush, that “power to make one feel young again,” is, of course, the great promise of a consumer culture, a culture which seems almost gnostic in its desire to escape the limits of the flesh, to add a cubit to one’s span of life through the sheer accumulation of things. As silly as such a project may seem, it is, as each of us knows, exceptionally powerful and is able to transform us all into addicts who differ, not in kind but only in degree, from Mrs. Marcos. Boogaart offers the chilling words of AT&T’s Summer Olympic commercial as a kind of cultural indicator, a commercial in which a long jumper clears the Grand Canyon and the message is intoned: “Imagine a world without limits, where anything is possible.”² That a world of unlimited selves might not be worth imagining, might, in fact, prove profoundly lethal to families, marriages, friendships, and neighborhoods, seems an almost unpatriotic thought in a nation that likes to celebrate its contempt for limits.

Boogaart remains suspicious, however, because he is afraid that we are building towers of Babel which will cause us to forget the house God is preparing for us in the heavens, and he is right, I think, to caution us in this matter, though I believe his fears to be misplaced. It is not our eternal home whose glory is jeopardized by our desire to transcend limits, but, rather, it is our understanding of the cross, whose limitation has embarrassed better cultures than our own and which seems to have a strange fondness for “where two or three are gathered together.”

I offer these observations at the outset of my reflections on parish ministry, not because they are original to me (obviously, they are not) or because my reading of the culture is particularly perceptive, but, rather, because I believe that one way to understand the work of parish ministry is to see it as Boogaart sees tithing, that is, as a countercultural activity, especially in its happy embrace of a particular place, in its celebration of a grace embedded in the mundane and ordinary, and in its regular encounter with the disturbing presence of God’s redemptive love incarnate in the hard realities of space and time. To a culture which hopes to realize itself by transcending such limits, the work of ministry which embraces them can only appear to be a kind of foolishness, even a kind of dying, an assessment which, in fact, is not far from the mark. Parish ministry is, like all true discipleship, a way of dying — a fact not commented upon nearly enough, I think — which is to say, it is a way of receiving the only gift which Jesus Christ promises us in his service, the gift of his cross. That yoke may indeed be easy and its burden light when shouldered in his company, but it is, nevertheless, a limit, a limit whose gift it is to define us in a particular place within its cross-shaped terms. What I would like to suggest is that dying is the way parish

ministry happens, the way it is made possible, even the way it is made happy and fruitful. Moreover, I hope it will become clear the extent to which it is dying, and not leaping across canyons or undertaking superhuman efforts of righteousness, which enables us to do what is truly impossible, that is, to forget self and even our own salvation long enough to have time for another, to summon folk to receive and extend the miracle of forgiveness and to do so with a straight face, to rejoice in the splendid embarrassment, the happy thievery of being a minister of Jesus Christ's.³

The Integrity of Place

P.D. James, in an interview I once saw on TV, confessed that she gets most of her ideas for novels from a sense of place: a room, a house, a Victorian-Gothic church, a lonely stretch of beach. "There's a story in this place," she says to herself, and her job, like a sculptor standing before a marble slab with only a chisel, is to dig it out. I wonder if something similar is not true of parish ministry. Perhaps the most obvious aspect of parish ministry is its "parishness," that is, the fact that it is not everywhere but here or there. It is in Kerrville or Pittsburgh. It is located on a corner or down the street or out in the country. It has a history and smell and look and memory. Lest we think such matters only trivial, we do well to remember that most of the correspondence we have in the New Testament is written to churches in particular places: Corinth, Rome, Philippi, Ephesus. What the New Testament is remarkably free of is general advice offered universally to individuals unencumbered by the claims of the Word made flesh. Which means, I take it, that far from being an embarrassing result of the Easter preaching, the believing community is, in fact, the authentic response to that kerygma. This side of the Kingdom, the Easter message results in churches. That is what happens when folk hear the gospel and are baptized into Christ's death and raised to life in his body. They become a community; indeed, they live — however poorly, however inadequately, however absurdly — they live as the body of Christ in a particular place.

In a particular place. There is, it seems to me, the most wonderful resistance in scripture to any kind of universality which obliterates the significance of time and space. Why, after all, does grace have to be mediated through a particular people, Israel? Why the attention given to their tedious rehearsals of generation upon generation, the geography of their movement from bondage to freedom, their wilderness wanderings and desert privations, their crossing of a particular river and their entering a particular land? Why Hebron, Jericho, Gilgal? Why this nation? Why not all people or, better, some disembodied idea to which we might all give allegiance? Why Corinth or Rome or Ephesus? When we read the correspondence to these churches, we are not mightily impressed with the virtuosity of their faith. Indeed, if anything, their failures seem more on display, reminding us how petty and self-serving particular places can be. Yet, as Paul summarizes the gospel for his readers in the Roman church, the gift of life in Jesus Christ is not a piece of information which will help us escape the vicissitudes of time and space, but, rather, it is being engrafted into the story of a particular people, made heirs of a particular promise, adopted as children of a rather strange covenant. An idea might well have been easier to manage; something more useful would have made more sense. But the promise is bound up with Israel, with Abraham, with the God who is named in Jesus Christ.

That God assumes this name, this flesh, in the Jew, Jesus Christ, who, though dead, lives, forces us to reckon with the possibility that this God is near to us and has in fact

taken up residence in the worship and life of that body which is claimed in the waters of baptism and which is nourished by the bread of Word and Sacrament. It is the particularity and concreteness in which Jesus Christ is made present to us that we begin to see something of the mystery and wonder of the parish.

Mystery and wonder may not be words which pop into most minds when folk think about the parish, but I wonder if that does not reflect our own poverty of faith and imagination, not to mention our eagerness to avoid the unsettling questions which such mysteries pose, preferring to construe our work, instead, in terms of some more respectable theory of management.

The first congregation which I was privileged to serve consisted of ninety-four members who lived in a small, central Texas county seat town. They met in a turn-of-the-century sanctuary purchased from the Methodists in 1950 and kept in repair through sporadic, if heroic, efforts at maintenance. About fifty percent of the congregation actually lived in town, while the other fifty percent lived out in the county. The town folks I could locate fairly readily, but the farmers I would need help with. So, on my first day of work, an elder picked me up in his truck and helped me locate the people whom I was to pastor.

That morning, one of our first stops took us to Dube Honerkamp's place. He was a German farmer who raised mostly hay and cattle. He came to the door on crutches, and I learned that he was in the fairly early stages of multiple sclerosis. He could walk then only with great labor. Later he was wheelchair bound. I thought to myself, "Well, here is one man I will have to learn to pastor." For the next twelve years, I did become his pastor, watching him grow progressively worse, watching his family care for him, watching him die. In December 1994, when he died, his wife asked me to preach his memorial service. The point of this rehearsal is, however, as every pastor knows, that this victim of a debilitating and deadly disease became my teacher. He taught me about dying and, therefore, about pastoring. Only as one can who knows he is dying, Dube had enormous time for others and so was a good teacher. His presence in worship was never taken for granted by those who watched him struggle to be there. His laughter and singing were robust reminders of the blessings of life together. His body was nothing but limitation but, just so, helped us discern the mysterious presence of that body into which we had all been baptized. Years before, in seminary, I had read Bonhoeffer's words in *Life Together* about the sweetness of embodied praise. In this little congregation, I was shown rather than told what that looked like. Bonhoeffer writes:

The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. Longingly, the imprisoned apostle Paul tells "his dearly beloved son in the faith," Timothy, to come and see him in prison in the last days of his life; he would see him again and have him near.... The believer feels no shame, as though he were still living too much in the flesh, when he yearns for the physical presence of other Christians. Man was created a body, the Son of God appeared on earth in the body, he was raised in the body, in the sacrament the believer receives the Lord Christ in the body, and the resurrection of the dead will bring about the perfected fellowship of God's spiritual-physical creatures.... Visitor and visited in loneliness recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body...."⁴

So, in the company of the dying, one learns to pastor and to rejoice in the Christ who is not afraid to be small but, rather, who hides himself in our midst so that we, who have died with him, might find our lives hidden in his.

The Tools of Ministry

Parish ministry is hard. It is not only hard; it is also filled with occasions of such sweetness that one can sometimes forget how hard it can be, but it is hard. It is hard only partly because it is busy. I must confess that I am always amazed and perhaps also a little bit guilty when I hear from parishioners that they think I am very busy. To be sure, I often am, and, like many ministers, I find that being busy is one way I can reassure myself that I still matter, that I am doing something important. Nevertheless, I also know that busyness is a marvelous way to make parish ministry easier, much easier, and that it sometimes offers a welcome retreat from the hard work of listening, studying, praying, not to mention believing, hoping, and forgiving amidst the mess of life. In our culture there is no better protection from the claims of the gospel than being busy. It is the ultimate form of self-justification and has the additional advantage of keeping things neat.

What makes parish ministry hard is a question, I think, that is worth pursuing. The tools of ministry are, after all, only useful if they help us with the hard work which we have to undertake. What makes parish ministry hard is what makes Christian discipleship difficult. We grow discouraged with ourselves; we find ourselves losing hope; we grow tired of waiting and not knowing; we find trusting in God's grace humiliatingly difficult; we grow weary with the embarrassment of trying to speak the word of God and sensing instead our own emptiness. Samuel Johnson once called a second marriage "the triumph of hope over experience." I wonder sometimes if his words are not just as apt a description of the Christian faith.

I look out on those gathered for worship on a Sunday morning and wonder what possible business I have in speaking to them of God. The absurdity of it all can overwhelm. And there is a great temptation to want to escape that absurdity, to make things easier, to seek some neutral ground, some nonthreatening place where we can stand together, a place like my own personality, for example, or successful image, or political views. The old joke told by the workers in Soviet Russia has theological relevance here: "We pretend to work, and our bosses pretend to pay us." Perhaps our temptation is: "We pretend to preach, and our people pretend to listen to us," a neat arrangement in which no one is wounded and no one is healed.

In truth, of course, speaking such a word of grace is quite beyond us, and there are no strategies or methods, spiritual or otherwise, which will enable us to do so. However, our real embarrassment is not one of poverty at all but of wealth, not of emptiness but of being given a word to say, the Word God has spoken in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. What makes parish ministry hard is that that word is near to us, nearer to us than we are to ourselves; indeed, it is on our lips and in our hearts. It is not too high that we should have to devise some new hermeneutic to bring Christ down or too low that we should think ourselves able to spring him up. Rather, it is the gift which, in coming to us ever and again, reveals our need of it; which ever and again can only be celebrated and enjoyed but not used or stored up or managed; which ever and again hides itself within the limits of God's own choosing such that we discover it only as we stumble over it on our way to what we often regard as more important business.

Ministry is hard in the same way that the disciples found it hard, in the same way that our temptation to self-sufficiency is overcome only by the embarrassment of the cross.

But such embarrassment is rich and, in fact, is what liberates for ministry. In Graham Greene's novel, *The Power and the Glory*, he tells a story of a parish priest: a dissolute drunkard, who has even fathered a child and who knows himself to be a poor excuse for a priest. Arrested by an anticlerical revolutionary junta which is taking over Mexico, the priest is almost glad to be put out of his misery as an imposter, a fraud. The priest is arrested for carrying a bottle of whiskey, however, and not for being a priest, his true identity remaining undisclosed to the authorities. Nevertheless, he is thrown into jail along with most of the rest of his little village, along with mothers and children, old men and various ne'er-do-wells. The priest is petrified that they will laugh at him or ridicule him, "the whiskey priest," or perhaps even betray him to the authorities, but, instead, an old lady comes up to him and asks him to hear her confession; a young mother asks him to baptize her child; the gathered prisoners beg him to celebrate mass. In the company of the miserable, the priest discovers his vocation, is given it, in fact, by the community of faith. And so he serves and finds that the Word and Sacrament are not only enough to sustain that community of faith but are also the stuff of courage, courage to offer one's self to God.

Does it sound strange to us today that Word and Sacrament instill such courage or even that courage is needed to minister? The image of ministry in our culture is hardly the stuff of derring-do, but perhaps that is because our culture knows so little about courage. I am not a New Testament scholar, but I think a case could be made that courage in scripture often has to do with not losing heart, not giving up, keeping faith, steadfast love. Many people in the churches I have served have found themselves walking into the valley of the shadow, have found themselves before the dragon's mouth of cancer or chemotherapy or worse, have found themselves betrayed by a child or a spouse or a parent and know only a kind of unreal and lonely desert. Such people are rarely looking for Rambo or even Superman, but it is important to them that someone walk with them through that valley, that someone pray with them, someone remain steadfast with them along the way, and that someone speak the truth to them in the face of defeat and death. Word and Sacrament are the ways ministers learn to speak the truth, witnessing not only to God's presence, but also to Jesus Christ's victory. This story is mightily *encouraging*, and, therefore, its rehearsal, its celebration, its disturbing presence is the chief tool of ministry that we have.

Passions Required for the Splendid Embarrassment

I want to conclude by noting some of the passions, not skills so much, but passions required in the splendid embarrassment of ministry. My list may differ from yours, and, in any case, my list is hardly meant to be exhaustive.

In an essay on the regional writer, Flannery O'Connor tells of when Walker Percy won the National Book Award and was asked why there were so many good Southern writers. "Because we lost the War," he said. "He didn't mean by that," she writes, "simply that a lost war makes good subject matter. What he was saying was that we have had our Fall. We have gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence. This knowledge is what makes a Georgia writer different from Hollywood or New York. It is the knowledge that the novelist finds in his

community. When he ceases to find it there, he will cease to write, or at least he will cease to write anything enduring. The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location.”⁵

Ministers of the Word should have a passion for reading. If O’Connor is right, then the “crossroads where time and place and eternity” intersect will be a location familiar to those who are hungry for a word of grace. Eugene Peterson tells in one of his books of his weekly appointments with his mentor in ministry, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and how he found in that novelist’s rendering of a broken and grace-soaked world the wherewithal to discern the mysteries of his suburban Baltimore parish and the terrors of the two-car garage and the loneliness of a three-bedroom house.⁶ No one, I suppose, could be against reading, but to cultivate a passion for narratives depicting “the heart in conflict with itself” is to prepare the soil, I believe, for kingdom seed which, when it falls on good soil, yields some hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Second, parish ministers should have a passion for theology. It has become fashionable recently to remind ourselves that “theology matters,” as if to say that among the many other things we do as pastors, this theological business has to be kept trimmed up to remain presentable. In fact, how little theology matters is revealed in our discomfort with it, how fearful we are of our genuine differences, how ill-equipped we are to speak the truth in love. Instead, we tend to speak the language of therapy, explaining to each other why we need not take each other’s ideas seriously and can safely afford to ignore each other’s claims.

Theology’s home is in the parish. That is where it belongs. That it is not very well there and, worse, that it shows signs of becoming merely an academic enterprise does not bode well for the future of either the church or the academy. Without the lifeblood of the church’s worship, theology becomes anemic and uninteresting, and without reflection on the source and content of our praise, worship becomes self-indulgent and vapid. What theology does in the parish is make life difficult. People leave over theological differences. Recently, a young couple left the church I serve. They were kind enough to come by and tell me why they were leaving and joining an evangelical-charismatic congregation. “We just want to praise God,” they told me. “We like to sing praise songs and meditate; we like to feel good about what we are doing. Worship here is too hard.” I suspect that there was some truth in their words and perhaps more in what they were too polite to say. They were, in fact, however, offering a reading of God, suggesting that God is worshipped without difficulty, without struggle even, yielding in us good feelings and a general note of benevolence. I do not belittle this reading of God out of hand, in part because the culture in which we live is so noisy and frantic that “good feelings and a general note of benevolence” are not unwelcome things. But I wonder if this reading is an adequate witness to the God who hides his comfort in the cross.

My friends were right, I think, to relate theology to worship. Indeed, it is because theology is worship, that is, doxology, that it matters so and that its true home is to be found not in the seminary or university but in the church, the community of faith which has been called into being by the Word made flesh. “Our speaking about God,” David Johnson reminds us, “must come from our speaking *to* God, and our listening to God....”⁷

But to which God do we speak and to whom do we listen? The god who invites us to buy more shoes, who promises that happy rush that can make us feel young again,

or the God whose life begins in a stable, cradled by a manger, and ends among thieves nailed to a cross, who encounters us along the road in the midst of our despair and makes life difficult for us by singeing our hearts with quite unexpected joy, revealing his presence in our midst through the breaking of bread.

Finally, a parish minister ought to be passionate about the people with whom she ministers. Parish ministry is, I have found, rarely neat and, like law-making and sausage-manufacturing, sometimes difficult to watch. Trying to pastor a family as it falls apart, trying to minister to children whose mother is dying, voicing a word of hope to a spouse bereft of her life's companion, enduring the anger of a troubled youth or the bitterness of a retiree convinced that life has passed him by — such work, though rarely neat, nearly always brings to the surface the heart of the faith and discloses heroic struggles of disciples seeking to follow Jesus Christ. I have encountered such determination as to put one's own faith to shame in single mothers who sacrifice to make sure their children are a part of the worshipping congregation each Sunday. I have witnessed what I could only call "steadfast love" in the care of a husband for his wife who has Alzheimer's and who no longer even recognizes him. There are, as P.D. James might well tell us, stories in our midst, gospel-like in their hardness of heart and healing of spirit, well-acquainted with sorrow and often inconvenienced by joy. Not all the martyrs died in the first century, nor are they all such sad and serious folks. "For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come," (angels who are so popular now and who can seemingly be here or there in a moment) but to him "who for a little while was made lower than the angels," in order that he might bring "many children to glory," making their salvation perfect through his suffering. "For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters..." (Heb.2:5, 9, 10, 11). For this reason. And for this reason, the embarrassment of proclaiming this gospel can only be a splendidly happy one.

Notes

¹ Thomas Boogaart, "Tithing and Addiction," *Perspectives*, (October, 1996). 24

² Ibid

³ The term, "happy thievery" is from Christian de Cherge, whose "Last Testament" was printed in *First Things* (August, September 1996). Cherge was a French Trappist monk martyred by Islamic terrorists. Before he died he was able to leave his family with a testament "to be opened in the event of my death," a testament which ends with these words spoken to his executioner. "And you also, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, for you also I wish this 'thank you' — and this *adieu* — to commend you to the God whose face I see in yours. And may we find each other, happy 'good thieves,' in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen."

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 19

⁵ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Noonday Press 1969), 58-59

⁶ Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992), 49-67

⁷ David W. Johnson, "Making Theology Come Alive in the Parish," *Pro Ecclesia* 3 (Fall 1994). 402
I am greatly in the debt of this article for the insights it provides concerning the connection between theology and worship