

Protagonist Corner

The Healing Survivor: A Model of Vulnerability for the Modern Preacher

Peter Bynum

Mount Pleasant Presbyterian Church, Mount Pleasant, South Carolina

In the 1970's, Henri Nouwen offered ministers a radical new way to understand our vocation. He encouraged us to see our individual brokenness not as a flaw to be eradicated or a hindrance to be overcome, but as a holy space for ministry where God's people might find healing. The work of a minister, Nouwen wrote, "will not be perceived as authentic unless it comes from a heart wounded by the suffering about which he speaks. Thus nothing can be written about ministry without a deeper understanding of the ways in which the minister can make his own wounds available as a source of healing."¹ The book was aptly titled *The Wounded Healer*.

As a pastor, I agree with the premise that my personal vulnerabilities can be a powerful resource in my Christian calling. As my seminary professor Dr. Charles Brown taught us repeatedly, "The greatest tool you have for ministry is yourself." However, I do have some questions about the lengths to which Nouwen would have us go in the exposure and utilization of our vulnerabilities. In Nouwen's view, a minister cannot hope to help another "without entering his whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt, wounded *or even destroyed* in the process."² By this measure, each and every pastoral encounter presents the possibility of martyrdom. If that is true, then we as pastors owe it to ourselves to consider whether some reasonable boundaries should be erected around such "all or nothing" vulnerability.

Personally speaking, I come to this question in the midst of a particularly challenging period of pastoral ministry. I expect I am not alone in this. The angry polarization of American culture has turned weekly preaching into a regular stroll across the eggshells of raw nerves, jangled spirits, and stressed-out people in the pews. Some of them are demanding bolder and more prophetic statements from the pulpit, while others have their noses permanently cocked for the slightest whiff of anything "political." Even the most optimistic church leaders concede that attendance is dropping, giving is dropping, baptisms are dropping, and morale is dropping. And in March of 2020, when the burden of a global pandemic was added to this already burgeoning load, some experts predicted "a tidal wave of pastoral departures," as even the most committed and faithful clergypersons struggled to keep their heads above water.³

These experiences are almost universally shared by contemporary pastors. Some ministers, however, face an additional and far more personal challenge. I would call them wolves in sheep's clothing. Pastor, consultant, and author Dennis Maynard calls them "antagonists." In his work with hundreds of congregations in the U.S. and Canada, and after his specific study of forty churches across four Protestant denominations, Maynard has identified a pattern of dysfunctional behavior in some congregations, where small groups of members commit themselves to grabbing power and marginalizing pastors. "Antagonists" he writes, "are easily spotted. They thrive on being critical. They enjoy conflict. They have extremely controlling personalities. They get their feelings hurt easily and turn those hurt feelings into anger, bitterness, resent-

ment, and ultimately revenge. They are bulldozers fueled by a full tank of grudges. They will take down anyone that gets in their way. They exist not to build up but to tear down.” And, Maynard ominously adds, “Their ultimate goal is the destruction of the shepherd.”⁴

In these environments, Nouwen’s advice that ministers must commit to the point of being hurt, wounded, or “even destroyed” becomes all too real. A pastor in such a context is forced to balance a call to stay and protect the flock on the one hand, against the survival of his or her own health, happiness, family, and even faith on the other. A heavy thumb on the scales is the example of Christ, who accepted the humiliation, the whip, and even the cross willingly and quietly, “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.”⁵ As human shepherds called to follow the example of the Good Shepherd, we have always known that martyrdom is a possibility, especially when there are wolves around. My hope in this article, however, is to put at least some weight on the other side of the scale by suggesting that in certain circumstances, a choice for survival can be a faithful and viable spiritual option for pastors.

In fact, Jesus opened the door to this option the very first time he sent the Twelve out in ministry. “Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts,” Jesus said, “no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff.”⁶ Without armor or defense, the first pastors went out “like sheep into the midst of wolves.”⁷ However, Jesus’ initial instructions also granted the disciples considerable discretion to guide their own ministries. “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words,” Jesus explained, “shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.”⁸ In other words, even though his lambs would be vulnerable, Jesus never asked them to lie down indiscriminately before predators. If they were not welcomed or respected in any place, Jesus authorized his disciples to make the decision to stand up, brush off, and walk away so that they might live and witness another day. As servants of Christ, our call to be as “innocent as doves” has always been counterbalanced by the expectation that we will be as “wise as serpents” regarding how, when, and where to commit ourselves to ministry.⁹

To any pastors who may be struggling with wolves in your own congregations, I can attest that a new openness to survival as a faithful option has borne welcome fruit in my own ministry. One of the greatest gifts has been a renewed sense of *resilience*. Whenever I begin to feel a little beaten down by the difficulties of ministry, I think of an image that my friend and counselor Dr. Monty Knight once shared with me. He reminded me about those plastic inflatable punching bags many of us had as kids. No matter how hard we hit it, or how often, that smiling clown would just bounce right back up, steadied by the anchor of sand in its base. Ironically, that image does not make me feel like a punching bag. On the contrary, it allows me to access the sensation of bouncing right back up again, buoyed by the Christ who lives in me—the One who took the world’s punches but refused to stay down.

The image of the pastor as “survivor” can also be *empowering*. Once we acknowledge that the choice between continuing to commit to a difficult situation or opening ourselves to a more welcoming context for ministry is ours and ours alone, that freedom gives us license to reframe old definitions of success and failure. In a sense, it taps us into the gritty energy of Teddy Roosevelt, who, through a life of glorious highs and tragically painful lows, discovered the truth that in all great causes, the real credit, he says,

belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.¹⁰

In my estimation, Roosevelt's powerful statement does not speak to the difference between winning and losing, but to the difference between surviving and, well, not surviving. It is the experience of a person who, like Paul, is "*afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.*"¹¹ It helps those who dare to strive for a cause greater than self to know that every blow is a chance to push themselves up, brush themselves off, and mutter back to the adversary, "Is that all you got?!?" When I utter those defiant words to myself, I confess my inner voice may not be without sin. But our God is a forgiving God... and our God is also a survivor.

This last point—that human shepherds can be survivors because that is what the Good Shepherd was—is perhaps the greatest legacy left by the late Nancy Eiseland. Born with a painful congenital bone defect, Eiseland went on to become a leading political and spiritual voice for people with disabilities. In her best-known work, *The Disabled God*, she describes two distinct poles of Christological understanding. At one end of the spectrum is the "overcomer" Christ who bears no marks or scars from his earthly passion. This vision of *Christus Victor* claims his triumph but seems to have no memory of his earthly struggles. He is seen in the heretical memes of those who imagine their Jesus with six-pack abs, an AR-15 in one hand and an American flag in the other. This view of Jesus, Eiseland argues, is clearly repudiated in scripture when the risen Jesus unabashedly presents his wounds for inspection by the disciples.¹² At the other extreme stands a hapless, passive Savior. A reverse image of *Christus Victor*, the suffering of this servant is apparent, but so is his lingering defeat. Eiseland's epiphany came when she realized that the Christ she knew could be neither of these things. From her own bodily perspective, she "saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair.... Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant."¹³ The Christ standing before Eiseland was, to use her words, the "disabled God"—scathed but not defeated, weathered but not tragic, fully and utterly human, but also fully and miraculously God. "In that moment," she wrote, "I beheld God as a *survivor*."¹⁴

As pastors, we are called to bring the fullness of who we are to this wonderful, confounding, inspiring, and sometimes crushing call that we have answered. God knows better than anyone that we all have both strengths and weaknesses, aptitudes and handicaps, and, for some reason beyond my pay grade, God has called all of us to use all of who we are, both the beautiful and the not so beautiful, as tools for healing. On the way, we will all carry our crosses, but not every hill is meant to be our Golgotha. As Brené Brown says, our heart is the most valuable thing we have to give. For that reason, the people we encounter in ministry "have to earn the right to see [our heart], and they have to know when they are seeing it that it's an absolute honor and

privilege for [us] to have let them in.”¹⁵ If that respect is not being extended to you, remember that Christ has given you a powerful choice, a right to discern for yourself whether the hill you are currently occupying is really one to die on, or if the more faithful choice is to shake the dust off your feet and survive (or thrive?) for another day. Either way, in the meantime, keep bouncing up. And if it helps you, every now and then, you might try muttering with both power and resilience, “Is that all you got?!?!?”

Notes

1 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1972), Loc. 91 of 1257, Kindle.

2 Nouwen, p. 71 of 97 (emphasis added).

3 Laura Stephens-Reed, “The Coming Tidal Wave of Pastoral Departures,” September 8, 2020, Internet online, Available from <https://www.laurastephensreed.com> [September 26, 2020].

4 Dennis R. Maynard, *When Sheep Attack* (Published by the author, 2010), 14.

5 Isaiah 53:7.

6 Matthew 10:9.

7 Matthew 10:16.

8 Matthew 10:14.

9 Matthew 10:16.

10 Theodore Roosevelt, “Citizenship in a Republic,” Speech given at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910, printed in *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, Vol XIII, pp. 506-529, Internet online, Available from <http://www.leadershipnow.com/tr-citizenship.html> (November 10, 2014).

11 2 Corinthians 4:7-9.

12 Nancy L. Eiseland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 100.

13 Ibid., 89.

14 Ibid., (emphasis added).

15 Lynn Okura, “Brené Brown: The Most Valuable Gift You Can Give To Another Person (video),” October 2, 2013, Internet online, Available from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/brene-brown-trust-vulnerability-oprah_n_4022765 [September 26, 2020].