

Grace is everywhere. There are long stretches of darkness and invisibility and silence that separate planting and reaping. During the stretches of waiting there is cultivating and weeding and nurturing and planting still other seeds. One of the genius aspects of pastoral work is locality. “Who are these particular people, and how can I be with them in such a way that they can become what God is making them?”

Christian spirituality means living in the mature wholeness of the gospel. It means experiencing all the elements of life—children, spouse, job, weather, possessions, relationships—as an act of faith. The assumption of spirituality is that always God is doing something before I know it. So, **the task is not to get God to do something, but to become aware of what He is doing so that I can respond** and participate and delight in it.

My job is not to solve people’s problems or make them happy, but to help them see the grace operating in their lives. **There aren’t many happy people in the Bible.** But there are those who experience joy, peace, and the meaning of Christ’s suffering in their lives. **Joy is the capacity to hear and recognize that God is here**—a kind of exhilaration because God is doing something and it’s enough at the moment.

Everyone is born to live creatively, but many of us fail to do so. Largely because we are lazy. Creativity is difficult. We don’t know what’s next because the created is what’s never been before. We’re living at the edge of something in which we’re not very confident. All the creative people I know throw away most of the stuff they do.

Nothing is more devastating to prayer than when I begin to evaluate prayer by my feelings. Prayer is a subversive activity. It involves an open act of defiance against any claim by the current regime. The attractive thing about America to outsiders is the materialism, not the spirituality. I have tried to develop in myself the mentality of the subversive, working quietly, hiddenly, patiently. The subversive has committed himself to Christ’s victory over culture and is willing to do the small things. No subversive does anything big. He is always planting suspicion that there is something beyond what the culture says is final. If we can develop a sense that sacrificial love, justice, and hope are at the core of our identities, then we are in fact subversive. The gospel images are images of growth that comes from underneath.

A *Pastor* is passionate for God and compassionate with people. How can I persuade others to live by faith and not by works if I have to juggle my schedule constantly to make everything fit into place? I am busy because I am vain. I want to appear important. Significant. I live in a society in which crowded schedules and harassed conditions are evidence of importance. I am busy because I am lazy. I indolently let others decide what I will do instead of resolutely deciding myself. I let people who do not understand the work of the pastor write the agenda for my day’s work because I am too slipshod to write it myself. How can I lead people into the quiet place beside the still waters if I am in perpetual motion?

I want all of my life to be intimate with the God who made, directs, and loves me. I want to witness out of my own

experience. In order to pray I have to pay more attention to God than to what others are saying to me; to God than to my clamoring ego. There must be a disciplined detachment from the insatiable self. I want to speak the Word of God in the language and rhythms of the people I live with. I require an immersion in biblical studies and reflective hours over the pages of Scripture, as well as personal struggles with its meaning. I want to preach in such a way that others hear its distinctive note of authority as God’s Word and to know that their own lives are being addressed. “All speech that moves men was minted when some man’s mind was poised and still” (R.E.C. Browne).

Leisure is a quality of spirit, not a quantity of time. Only in that ambiance of leisure do others know they are listened to with absolute seriousness and treated with dignity and importance. Listening to a story takes more time than delivering a message. If I provide margins to my day, there is ample time to listen. I mark out times for prayer, reading, leisure, silence and solitude out of which creative work can issue. When these central needs are met, there is plenty of time for everything else. The only way I have found to accomplish the tasks and administrations of pastoral ministry without resentment and anxiety is to first take care of the priorities. “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps 26:10). “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (Is 30:15). History is a novel of spiritual conflict. Somehow it always seems more compelling to assume the work of the oarsman, laboring mightily in a moral cause, throwing our energy into a fray we know has moral consequence.

I am a pastor to introduce people to the real word and train them to live in it. The methods of my work must correspond to the realities of the kingdom. I have had to learn a new methodology: truth-telling and love-making, prayer and parable. It is the oldest religious mistake: refusing to countenance any real difference between God and us, imagining God to be a vague extrapolation of our own desires, and then hiring a priest to manage the affair between self and the extrapolation.

The language we learned in seminary preparation for our work was language of battle, danger, and austerity. After arriving on the job, we find precious few opportunities to use our leadership language. And so, like the 2 years of Spanish we took in high school, it is soon nonfunctional from nonuse. No one seems to think we mean what we say, when we say “kingdom of God.” It’s hard to maintain a self-concept as a revolutionary when everyone treats us with the same affability they give the grocer. Many pastors slip into the role of chaplain to the culture.

Jesus was a master at subversion. Until the very end, everyone, including his disciples, called him Rabbi. Jesus tried to keep it quiet—“Tell no one.” Jesus’ favorite speech form, the parable, was subversive. Parables sound absolutely ordinary: casual stories about soil and seeds, meals and coins and sheep, bandits and victims, farmers and merchants. And they were wholly secular. But He was talking about God; they had been invaded. Parables aren’t illustrations that make things easier; they make things harder by requiring the exercise of our imagi-

nation, which if we aren't careful, becomes the exercise of our faith. Parables trust our imaginations, which is to say, our faith.

Assumptions of subversives: The status quo is wrong and must be overthrown if the world is going to be livable. There is another world aborning that is livable. The usual means by which one kingdom is thrown out and another put in its place—military force or democratic election—are not available. Often we assume that the congregation is close to being the kingdom already and that if we all pull together and try a little harder, it will be. When we equate the church and the kingdom and that turns out to be false, we feel “taken in.” Jesus is the Way as well as the Truth. The way the gospel is conveyed is as much a part of the kingdom as the truth presented.

Prayer and parable are the stock-in-trade tools of the subversive pastor. Parables are consciousness-altering words that slip past falsifying platitudes and invade the human spirit with Christ-truth. Words are the real work of the world—prayer words with God and parable words with men and women. Sin-habits dull our free faith into stodgy moralism and respectable boredom. American Christians do their best to fireproof themselves against crisis and urgency. How can I live with these people and love them without being shaped by the golden-calf culture?

Prayer is the pivot action in the Christian community. People are not comfortable with God in their lives. They would rather talk to the pastor than to God as they conspire to find the shortcuts by which the long journey to the Cross can be bypassed since we all have such crowded schedules, right now. Prayer is the most thoroughly present act we have as humans and the most energetic: it sockets the immediate past into the immediate future and makes a flexible, living joint of them.

John, in Revelation, used words in new ways, making truth right before our eyes, fresh in our ears; used words to make relationships, shape beauty, form truth. If Revelation is not read as a poem, it is virtually incomprehensible. People hear what was not heard before and are changed by the sound from loneliness into love. Words create. God's work creates; our words can participate in the creation.

The cure of souls is a decision to work at the heart of things, where we are most ourselves and where our relationships in faith and intimacy are developed, the personal language of love and prayer. Calvin often referred to the world around us as a “theater of God's glory,” God's dazzling performance in arranging the components of the cosmos. But we told God, like we tell a child who is annoying us, to shut up and go to his room. He heard our prayer. Our worship is either sentimentalism or snobbery, the twin sins of touristy aesthetes.

There are 2 great traditions in the life of prayer, sometimes labeled kataphatic and apophatic. Kataphatic prayer uses icons, symbols, ritual, incense; the creation is the way to the Creator. Apophatic prayer attempts emptiness. We find ourselves in the company of saints and monks, in a kind of contemplative seeing requiring a lifetime of dedicated struggle.

Nearly all my preparation for being a pastor had taken place in a classroom, but the central and shaping language of the church's life has always been its prayer language. My primary educational task as pastor was to teach people to pray. The ancient spiritual leaders who trained people in the disciplines of

attending to God, forming the inner life so that it was adequate to the reception of truth, not just the acquisition of facts. The society in which we live sees education primarily as information retrieval. But I found help from making friends with some ancestors long dead, who convinced me that teaching people to pray was my best work. Under their influence I came to be in awe of the way language works and to realize the immense mysteries that surround speech.

There are 3 types of language: Language I is that of intimacy and relationship, the first language we learn. The cornerstone words are names, or pet names: mama, papa. Language II is that of information. Everything has a name. Language III is that of motivation, the power to make things happen, to move inert figures into purposive action, the predominant language of advertising and politics. Language I, the language of intimacy, the language that develops relationships of trust and hope and understanding, languishes. Prayer is Language I, *to* and *with* God in faith. If the primary preaching task of the pastor is the conversion of lives, the primary teaching task is the conversion of language. Competency in all languages is necessary in this life of faith that draws all levels of existence into the service and glory of God.

Growing up, I made repeated decisions for Christ as evangelists and pastor took turns at sowing doubts about the validity of my last decision and urging me to do it again. “Ships sail East, and ships sail West, while the selfsame breezes blow. It's the set of the sail, and not the gale that determines the way we go.” There are 2 approaches to the will--breaking it and exercising it. In adulthood I became puzzled by their apparent dissonance. In a gospel of divine grace, what place does the human will play? My will is my glory; it is also what gives me the most trouble. “To will or not to will, that is the question.” Standing in the presence of these mysteries—work, language, love—I found insights developing and experiences occurring that were convergent with the greatest mystery: God and my relationship to him in payer and belief and obedience.

When real work is done well there is a kind of submission of will to the conditions at hand, a cultivation of humility. It is a noticeable feature in all skilled workers. Adolescents are workers bent on self-expression. Real work, whether it involves making babies or poems, hamburger or holiness, is not self-expression, but its very opposite. When we work well, our tastes, experience, and values are held in check so that the nature of the material or the person or the process or our God is as little adulterated or compromised by our ego as possible.

The active, middle, and passive voices are clear in Greek grammar. With the middle voice, the subject participates in the results of the action. It reads like a description of Christian prayer. I neither do it, nor have it done to me; I will to participate in what is willed. Prayer take place in the middle voice. The gospel restores the middle voice.

In marriage what was first experienced as a gift must be developed as an art. The art is will passivity. The largest part of our life is experienced in the mode of passivity. Most of life is not what we do but what is done to us. We experience as happening to us weather, our bodies, our parents, much of our government, the landscape, much of our education. But there are different ways of being passive. There is a willed and attentive

passivity that is something more like worship. Gospel reverence, Christ reverence, spouse reverence is a vigorous, bold freedom in which we find ourselves loved and loving before God. The apostle Paul teaches husbands and wives how their will can become the means for love. Every act of intimacy, whether in work or language or marriage or prayer, suppresses willfulness and cultivates willingness.

The practice of manipulating conversation was widely used among people I respected in my college and seminary years. But if we bully people into talking on our terms, if we manipulate them into responding to our agenda, we do not take seriously where they are in the ordinary and the everyday. If we belittle small talk, we belittle what most people are doing most of the time, and the gospel is misrepresented. We need to cultivate conversational humility. Some insights are only accessible while laughing. Others arrive only by indirection. Art is involved here. We're not trying to make something happen but to be part of what is happening—without being in control of it. Jesus, who embraces little children, also embraces our little conversations.

People yearn for the nurture of their psychic life, for a way in which they may bypass grace and walk on their own. Theological understanding of people as sinners saves us from continual surprise that they are in fact sinners. So, *sinner* becomes not a weapon in an arsenal of condemnation but the expectation of grace. We deal with stories of sin. Each generation is unwell in a new way, experiencing episodes of adolescence. There was a time when ideas and living styles were initiated in the adult world and filtered down to youth. Now the movement goes the other way: lifestyles are generated at the youth level and pushed upward. Youth culture began as a kind of fad and grew into a movement. Today it is nearly fascist in its influence. The sins of the sons, it seems, are being visited upon the fathers.

A feeling of inadequacy is characteristic of adolescent life. When a person is growing rapidly on all fronts—physical, emotional, mental—he or she is left without competence in anything. The adolescent is immature, and therefore inadequate. And he is acutely self-conscious about this inadequacy. In the past the Christian church has more often had to deal with the Pharisee—the person who feels he achieved adequacy long ago.

Paul had a meticulous eye for signs of grace. He knew people were sinners. But his passion was for describing grace and opening their eyes to what his eyes were open to—the activity of God in their lives. Discernment sees **grace operating in a person keeps him in touch with the living God.**

Another characteristic of the adolescent that has spread into the larger population is the absence of historical sense. The adolescent, of course, has no history. As a consequence, he is incredibly gullible. There is no feeling of being part of a living tradition that already has some answers worked out and some procedures worth repeating. They have little consciousness of being part of a community that carries in its Scripture, its worship, and its forms of obedience a life more than 20 centuries in the making. They are subject to consistent trivialization. They find it impossible to tell what may be important. They buy things, both material and spiritual, that they will never use. They hear the same lies over and over again without every becoming angry.

This is not basically a cultural condition. What begins as a normal characteristic of adolescent, when stretched into Christian adulthood, becomes a clever ruse to mask sin: the sin of denial of dependence on God and interdependence among neighbors, a refusal to be a *people* of God. It repeats what began in the Garden of Eden, the decision to substitute firsthand experience for obedience to the command of God. The Old Testament established a foundation in the covenant life of the people of God, which protected the divine value of every person, showing a way of salvation and promising a future. Ezekiel, pastor to a similar people, diagnosed the sin that was using “loss of history” as a front and convincingly preached a word of grace.

In crafts we deal with visible realities; in professions with invisible realities. For physicians it is health; with lawyers, justice; with pastors, God. Most of those we deal with are dominated by a sense of self, not a sense of God. Insofar as we deal with their primary concern—counseling, instructing, encourage—they give us good marks in our *jobs* as pastors. Whether we deal with God or not, they don't care over much. We become one-part minister and three parts masseur. What we see are bones. Dry bones. We see sin and judgment on the sin. But we believe something else. We believe in the coming together of these bones into connected, sinewed, muscled human beings who speak and sing and laugh and work and believe and bless their God. We need help in keeping our beliefs sharp and accurate and intact.

With vows of ordination we are lashed fast to the mast of Word and sacrament so that we will be unable to respond to the siren voices. If we don't know the foundational realities with which we are dealing--God, kingdom, gospel—we end up living futile, fantasy lives. **Any job done well requires everything that is in us.**

The idea for a sabbatical developed from a 2-pronged stimulus: fatigue and frustration. It is in a capacity for intensity and intimacy, staying at the center where God's Word makes things alive, that I felt in need of repletion. So much that is mature and ripe for harvest remains unwritten. I wanted to write what we had lived together. **The experience of my maturity is now coupled with the energy of my youth.** I felt I would never again be in a hurry. The sabbatical had done its work. And the congregation were refreshed and confident in a way I had not observed before.

Use words with reverence.

No star is visible except at night. I open my eyes to the cursed but requisite dark.

Why should the loved and innocent (newborns) greet existence with wails? Dreams and deliveries never quite mesh.

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