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PREACHING LIKE PAUL? LESSONS FROM ANCIENT CORINTH*

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Pastoral Affliction and the Example of Paul

Fred Lehr offers a series of sobering statistics that should be of concern both to clergy and to their congregations—not to mention denominational authorities and the seminaries that prepare future ordinands for ministry. From a study conducted by Fuller Theological Seminary in the late 1980s:

- 90% of clergy believe that seminary education did not adequately prepare them for the demands of pastoral ministry.
- 80% of clergy believe that pastoral ministry has a negative impact on their families; 33% agree with the statement “Being in ministry is clearly a hazard to my family.”
- 75% report at least one stress-related crisis in the course of their ministry.
- 70% report a lower self-image in the course of ministry compared to when they entered pastoral ministry.
- 70% say that they do not have at least one person they would consider a close friend.

According to a 1994 article on clergy spouses, clergy in the United States rank in the top 10 percent of the population in terms of education, but in the bottom 25 percent in terms of salary: 325th out of 432. A 2001 study conducted by Duke Divinity School found that 40 percent of the 2,500 clergy they

* Three addresses under this title constituted the 2009 Finlayson Lectures in Homiletics at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, Nova Scotia. While the addresses were largely based on my recent study, *We Preach Not Ourselves*, the following article summarizes material from the lectures that further develops the substance of my previous work.

surveyed reported being “depressed at times, or worn out ‘some or most of the time.’”¹ In 2006, the Church of England appointed Stephen Lowe as Bishop for Urban Life and Faith. Writing in *Crux*, published by the diocese of Manchester, “he said that many of the clergy now worked 70 to 80 hours a week, and routinely put their ministry ahead of their family or their own health,” which led him to comment, simply, “We just can’t go on like this.”² Staying with the Anglican theme, Yvonne Warren conducted a series of 60 interviews with the clergy of two anonymous English dioceses, and identified five key themes of vital significance for clergy in congregational ministry: irrelevance, isolation, despair, guilt, and low self-esteem. Published in 2002, her study is entitled *The Cracked Pot: The State of Today’s Anglican Parish Clergy*. Not accidentally, it alludes to 2 Cor 4:7, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels—fragile pots—to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.” We will return in a moment to the implications of this statement for Christian faith and ministry.

Reverence, Trust, and the Courage to Preach

Since we can hardly imagine either the situation or the statistics being much different in a Canadian context, the ever-increasing difficulty of pastoral ministry raises a critical theological and practical difficulty. Short of simply throwing in the towel, how does one pastor and preach to a congregation when one is ensnared by personal difficulties of one’s own? How do we minister to others when ministry itself is the problem, as often as not? Or from a congregational perspective, what does it mean to *receive* ministry from religious professionals already preoccupied with their own pressing concerns? One answer—perhaps not the only answer but an answer rich in theological character and comfort nonetheless—is to be found in the life and ministry of the apostle Paul.

Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of “Virtues That Nurture the Lives of Preachers,” as well as the opposite qualities that betray

1. All references are from Lehr, *Clergy Burnout*, 4–5.
2. Harden, “What Price Priesthood?”

a loss of hope and vision.³ First, she says, is “reverence,” which is the acknowledgement of mystery (with regard to God) and trust (with regard to ministry itself). Its opposite is cynicism. The second virtue of healthy homileticians, according to Taylor, is theological “courage,” which includes defending the place of prayer, meditation, and silence against any domestication of the gospel. Third is curiosity, not just about Scripture and theology, but about the whole of creation. And the opposite of curiosity for preachers is boredom, and narrowness of focus. Fourth is play, un-self-consciousness, and freedom from self-preoccupation. Its opposite is fatigue and depression, “which comes not so much from the high demands of the preaching life as from your incessant criticism of how you are living it.” Taylor’s analysis offers a helpful diagnostic for preachers, ordained clergy, and anyone else engaged in full-time Christian ministry. Reverence, courage, curiosity, and the absence of self-preoccupation indicate emotional and spiritual robustness amidst the turmoil of ministry, whereas cynicism, loss of courage, narrowness of vision, and depression are signs that ministry threatens to become a chore and a bore, if not something worse . . .

Imitating the Apostle

This is where the example of Paul becomes intriguing, if only because his own ministry attracted more than its fair share of opposition. Paul writes to a congregation somewhere in ancient Galatia: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:19–20). We usually understand that passage as a reference to his conversion, but might it also indicate the conditions of his ministry? His life and ministry are characterized, he says in another passage, by “affliction at every turn—fighting without and fears within” (2 Cor 7:5). Elsewhere Paul goes into painful and extensive detail with regard to the difficulties he has endured:

3. Taylor, “Teaching Preaching.”

To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day (1 Cor 4:11–13).

Second Corinthians continues in much the same vein:

We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger . . . We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything (2 Cor 6:3–5, 8–10).

In fact, in a manner that seems almost morbid, Paul has kept a careful tally of his every affliction:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked (2 Cor 11:24–27).

So where does his vision, his hope in the face of opposition, come from? What exactly enables him to continue preaching, and not to fall victim to cynicism, disinterest, or self-protective behaviour? How is it that he has not succumbed to stress, anxiety, or simple exhaustion? The answers are essential not only from a pastoral point of view, as a matter of appropriate self-care, but also because in the first of the three passages cited above, Paul explicitly—and unexpectedly—bids every reader to follow his lead.

We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day. I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to

admonish you as my beloved children. For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me (1 Cor 4:13–16).

For some it might seem that “imitating” Paul (at least where opposition and rejection are concerned) is part of the problem, rather than a fitting solution. Yet upon closer examination, the life and ministry of Paul offer a paradoxical vision of consolation and renewal amidst affliction, above all as these apply to the task of preaching, and with it the controversy and opposition that faithful proclamation sometimes entails. Even if affliction is not a goal to be pursued as an end in itself, we will nonetheless want to inquire what it might mean to imitate Paul in more positive and general terms, with regard to Christian discipleship and ministry today.

Preaching Like Paul

If imitating the apostle is our goal, what might it mean to preach like Paul? For some it will mean, for the most part, repeating the content of Paul’s letters. Of course, not everyone can do a Martin Lloyd Jones and expound the book of Romans verse by verse, every Friday night for thirteen years—which is about 350 weeks for 433 verses, or about one and a quarter verses per sermon. But classical expository preaching is even more broadly problematic in our day, and that for at least two reasons. The first of these has to do with the nature of religious authority in general, and our contemporary cultural response to claims of religious authority in particular. We live in an age that has a well-established habit of questioning authority, and very few people are likely to take the word of Paul or any other preacher just because they happen to say so, which makes preaching—in principle—a highly problematic endeavour. The second difficulty has to do with Paul’s apparent preference for linear logic and propositional discourse. Sesame Street, Star Trek, and soap operas—depending on one’s generation—have moved us in the direction of narrative modes of discourse. Given the choice between a good

story and even a well-organized presentation of logical propositions, abstract concepts, or theories and applications—for most people, there is no contest whatsoever. My own appreciation of Paul begins only once I am able to get some sense of the life story that lies behind his letters. I need a narrative to make the principles and concepts fit together. So simply repeating the content of his correspondence will not make for compelling preaching in our day, even if it may have done so for a previous generation, or may still today in other parts of the world. So what other possibilities are there for preaching like Paul?

St. Augustine of Hippo, in the fifth century, saw Paul as a skilled orator whose rhetoric was intended to instruct, to delight, and to persuade. And that is important if only because Augustine said so in what appears to have been the very first systematic exposition of Christian preaching, a book called *On Christian Doctrine*. But that approach does not help us much, for any number of reasons. Paul wrote in Greek, Augustine in Latin, but both shared the appreciation of the classical age for rhetoric as a public skill. In our day, by contrast, clever speech is the domain of politicians and television advertizing, neither of which anyone in their right mind takes very seriously. Besides which, Paul himself insists that he does not rely on rhetoric. “When I came to you,” he reminds the Corinthian church, “I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God . . . in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:1–2).

Many academics and teachers of preaching still believe that preaching like Paul means preaching Paul’s theology. But those same scholars disagree rather strongly as to where the center of Paul’s theology, and the center of his preaching, should lie. So if you are trying to preach like Paul, and assuming in any event that some degree of faith or trust in Christ is essential, what part of Paul’s theology do you emphasize? Do you admonish your congregation to live a holy life? Do you explain the new covenant, or new creation? The power of Christ’s blood to wash away sins? The obligation to seek justice and oppose oppression? The fact that we are destined to share God’s glory, and do

so already? Or perhaps one should emphasize the power of the Holy Spirit, the importance of proper doctrine, or the meaning of God's call on one's life. All these are critical in the life of faith. But which one premise or principle makes all the others possible for the content and the conduct of Christian faith, life, ministry, and preaching in particular?

The Message of the Cross

Here we are wise to take our cue from Paul's own account of the gospel that he preaches, which he describes as the "word" or "message concerning the cross," ὁ λόγος . . . ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ (1 Cor 1:17–18). That is to say, his preaching and his theology alike focus on the crucifixion of God's Messiah: "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:25). As he goes on to explain to his congregants in Corinth,

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God (1 Cor 2:1–5).

So paradoxical and paradigmatic are the cruelly shameful death of Jesus and its breathtaking reversal by the life-giving intervention of God that these joint events draw all hermeneutical and theological attention, all practical and methodological considerations, to themselves.

This unifying singularity of focus in Paul's thought and practice serves us well, for in the last analysis, our questions are not only "What is Paul's theology?" or "Where does the center of Paul's theology lie?" The more holistic and relevant considerations, at least for pastors and preachers (or those in particular who seek to emulate Paul), are not merely what it might mean to proclaim the content of Paul's letters, to recapitulate the major contours of his thought, to use (or avoid)

particular rhetorical strategies, or to inculcate some sense of conformity to Pauline ethics. Our preaching may well include these. But more centrally, we will want to understand Paul's theology *of preaching*. We will want to know what Paul believes happens when *he* preaches about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, then, second, whether we can do the same thing, or something rather like it.

In one sense, of course, we already know the answer to such concerns: with alarming regularity people mock or beat or stone or imprison him (and occasionally such opposition comes even from those who claim Christian allegiance). As we said at the outset, these are not particularly attractive options, although more than a few beleaguered clergy may feel a certain kinship with the apostle on this point. But in addition to this public and external response (if only so as to escape it ourselves), we also want to inquire into the *internal*, personal consequences of Christian conviction. Rather than seeking simple external conformity to the conditions of Paul's preaching, our deeper interest in the cross and resurrection, as well as our theological commitment to the priority of grace and divine enablement (Phil 2:13), will lead us in search of that which makes preaching possible within Paul himself.

Here, too, the apostle is unexpectedly forthcoming:

Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised for them (2 Cor 5:14–15).

This is what preaching Christ does to Paul: it kills him, brings him to the end of himself, in order that he might live for the sake of someone other than himself, relying utterly on the life of another. As he writes to the church of Galatia:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:19–20).

We should not be misled by a bias toward pietist models of conversion to imagine that this description refers simply to Paul's "Damascus Road" experience. On the contrary, Paul is unmistakably describing the ongoing conditions of Christian life and ministry.⁴ There is, of course, a certain irony here: the deadly opposition Paul faces in the flesh is matched—even preceded—by the spiritual death that comes from following Christ!

Obligated to Death

Yet one could hardly imagine a less congenial message, either for Paul's day or for our own, as Timothy Savage explains:

First century worshippers looked to religion for contact with the divine. But this was contact as they defined it, according to their wants. They wanted divine benefits, not enlightenment—health, wealth, protection and sustenance, not moral transformation. Naturally they were attracted to convincing displays of the gods' power, for they yearned to tap into and display that power for themselves."⁵

Likewise in our own day, freedom of expression, personal fulfilment, even the expectation of social advancement, are not only cultural norms, but goals that religious affiliation is expected to help us achieve. Religion serves to foster our sense of personal well-being, our emotional integration and wholeness, our sense of "connection" to the world at large. Yet rather than rescuing us from suffering, affliction, humiliation, and death, the cross of Christ, says Paul, invokes these very things upon us, confronts us with the very things from which religion might normally be expected to save us: "one has died for all; therefore [he insists] *all have died*"! The challenge from the letter to the Colossians is even more direct and blunt: "For *you have died*, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3).

If this is true of Christian confession in general, it will apply in particular to preachers and pastors who are expected to serve as examples of Christian faith and discipleship. To recapitulate,

4. This theme is more fully explored by Gorman, *Cruciformity*, to whose study my own understanding of this theme is indebted.

5. Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 25.

then, “preaching like Paul” does not involve a simple recitation or repetition of the content either of his theology in general or his preaching specifically (to say nothing of attempting to imitate the conditions of his ministry). That would be too simple, or simplistic. Rather, preaching like Paul surely means being confronted by and coming to terms with the gospel that Paul himself first preached. This is not a matter of having confidence in Paul as a pastor, theologian, or preacher; or a high view of Scriptural inspiration. Or even a low view for that matter. It is more accurate to say that we find ourselves compelled to wrestle and come to terms with the substance of Paul’s preaching not because *we* have chosen to believe *it*—as though we were bestowing on God the great favor of our consent—but because *the content of that preaching has seized us and commanded our allegiance*.

In fact, this is precisely what Paul claims for his own ministry:

An obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission (1 Cor 9:16–17).

Once again, his explanation refers to more than the circumstances of his own sudden and surprising conversion. To be a preacher like Paul is to be impelled in the direction of an untimely death. As Paul himself insists, “We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5). Or as Eugene Peterson puts it, “Remember, our Message is *not about ourselves* . . . All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you.”⁶

To preach like Paul is to proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection: not just as a question of theological content, but as a matter of theological method. We preach Christ crucified and risen not because it sells, makes sense, or makes converts (and sometimes it does none of these); not because we ourselves choose to do so, because it makes us happy, or because it sure beats unemployment, but because we are impelled to do so by the will of another. If our own experience of discipleship and

6. Peterson, *The Message*.

ministry in any way resembles that of Paul, we will find ourselves seized by a reality immeasurably greater and more significant than our own insignificance. Despite what every other voice in our culture tells us, we are not free to decide either the content of our message or the nature of our ministry. We preach “Christ crucified”—if we have understood Paul correctly on this point—simply because the message of the cross is imposed on us as much as it is imposed on anyone and everyone else.

The Ministry of the Crucified

Even so, we must immediately add that crucifixion is only one half of the picture, only the first (albeit essential) step in the direction of a God-given life. No matter how long a list of afflictions and reversals Paul may provide—and he in fact offers a comprehensive Greek vocabulary of suffering—or no matter what the manner of our own identification with Jesus’ death, “crucifixion” is only ever one half of an indivisible theological dyad; only ever the essential precondition for being overtaken by the all-transforming life of Christ.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit *gives life* (2 Cor 3:4–6).

To preach like Paul, then, identifying as Paul does with the death and resurrection of Jesus, and acknowledging this as the essential dynamic that undergirds both the life of faith and the ministry of the church, allows us to see the particular task of preaching in a new and unexpected light. Paul would contend, surely, that preaching as a merely human activity is incapable of accomplishing that to which it testifies. It bears witness to God’s ability to give life, but without imagining that we ourselves are somehow able to dispense that gift—as though we were handing out free passes to the Pearly Gates.

It is customary in some quarters to speak of our responsibility as Christians for “building” the kingdom of God. On such a view, ours is by nature a foundational and constructive task.

According to the New Testament, however, the kingdom or reign of God may only be received as a gift (Mark 10:15, Luke 12:32); it may be earnestly sought (Matt 6:33) and highly esteemed (Matt 13:44–46); it may be entered (Matt 5:20) or inherited (Matt 25:34). One may be declared fit (Luke 9:62), worthy, or unworthy of God’s reign. Like Paul’s companions, we may be fellow workers “*for* the kingdom of God” (Col 4:11). But nowhere in Scripture are we said to “build” God’s kingdom. God’s reign belongs, rather, to the poor, the oppressed, and those who are persecuted for the sake of δικαιοσύνη (righteousness and justice: Matt 5:10); it is entered only by children and the child-like. God’s kingdom belongs, in short, to those who lack the wherewithal to construct anything, or to accomplish anything on God’s behalf, least of all God’s own rule.

The task of ministry belongs, therefore, to the crucified, the living dead, those who are alive only because the crucified and living Christ is alive in them, and who therefore confess, with Paul, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). To be sure, the human impossibility of ministry is only fitting given the nature of the task. As I have been known to say to my students, tongue only half in cheek, “Go ahead, save my soul.” The whole point of Christian faith is that it is based on the premise that we have proven incapable of saving ourselves. How much more so must this be true of pastoral ministry. Not that ministry is a breeze, the proverbial “free ride,” or a refuge for slackers. “On the contrary,” Paul insists, “I worked harder than [anyone]—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor 15:10). Or, as he tells the church at Philippi, “God is at work within you, both to will and to achieve his good purpose” (Phil 2:13). Paul’s great discovery is that life by faith in Christ, and ministry in the cause of Christ, is the task of the crucified, because it is the work—in and through us—of the Risen One.

This leads to an unexpected observation. Whereas the church has a responsibility to prepare clergy who are professionally competent and pastorally qualified for the many tasks of ministry, what ultimately makes pastors and preachers open to grace, and thus qualifies us to speak of Christ, is not our abilities, but

our inabilities, even our liabilities. What qualifies us for the life of Christ, and by the same token enables us to speak of Christ, is our prior and ongoing participation in the death, the crucifixion of Christ. So when Paul comes to speak of his own qualifications for ministry, he is at least, if not more, conscious of his *lack* of qualifications to the point of *disqualification*: “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor 15:9). So however well trained and equipped for Christian ministry we may sometimes think ourselves to be, the operative question is, “What, in our experience, our history, our identity, brings us back to the cross of Christ, and opens us to grace?”

On the basis of Paul’s experience, therefore, I venture to suggest that the trials and genuine suffering that ministry often entails are unfortunately normative. This is not to imply that personal or pastoral adversity is either right or good, that we should welcome it, much less that it is sent by God. I do want to suggest, however, that it should not be unexpected. More particularly, the example of Paul offers us the challenge of finding both death and life, crucifixion and resurrection, human failure and divine grace—finding Christ himself—in the midst of whatever adversity we face, above all the adversity that arises precisely because we have been captured by the death and life of Christ, and so seek to follow and serve him. This, surely, is what Paul intends by his otherwise self-defeating confession in 2 Cor 4:7, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels in order to demonstrate that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.”

Preaching “According to Christ”: A Hermeneutic of Hope

How, then, might contemporary preachers put this perspective into actual practice? Here I venture to propose four possible responses from the hand of Paul in 2 Corinthians, four processes at work in the preacher that express a hermeneutic of hope and offer, in concrete terms, ways in which we may bear witness to Christ’s redemption of human affliction.

Ministry by God's Mercy

First, Paul places a high premium on divine “mercy,” as for example in 2 Cor 4:1–2:

Therefore, having this ministry as those who have received [or been shown] mercy, we do not lose heart. We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practise cunning or to tamper with God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

Nor is Paul alone in this: the history and theology both of Judaism and of the Christian church return again and again to the same subject. We think immediately of Psalm 51, for example, attributed to King David in the aftermath of his affair with Bathsheba:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin
(Ps 51:1–2).

Likewise, one of the most misunderstood passages in the Pauline correspondence is his explanation in Romans 9 of the ongoing role and status of Judaism:

What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy [ἐλεήσω] on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion [οἰκτιρήσω] on whom I have compassion.” So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy (Rom 9:14–16).

His point in quoting Exod 33:19 here is not that God has mercy on some and not on others, compassion for a few and lack of it for everyone else. On the contrary, his point—well understood within Judaism then and since—is that election and divine favor are exercises in divine mercy, not human deserving.

Perhaps the easiest way of demonstrating that this is a thoroughly Jewish way of explaining the text in question is to make a brief and anachronistic detour by way of the early medieval Jewish commentary known as *Exodus Rabbah*, from perhaps the tenth century CE. According to the biblical text,

when Moses asks to be shown God's ways, God's glory, the LORD responds,

I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The LORD"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy (Exod 33:13, 18–19).

To explain the meaning of the verse, *Exodus Rabbah* tells a story (which probably originated as a sermon illustration) about how the LORD answered Moses by taking him on a tour of the heavenly treasure house:

Then it was that God showed him all the treasures in which the rewards of the righteous are stored away. Moses asked: "To whom does all this treasure belong?" And He replied, "To those who fulfill My commandments."

"And to whom does this treasure belong?"

"To those who bring up orphans." And so it was with every treasure.

Later he saw a huge treasure and inquired: "Whose is this great treasure?" The Divine rejoinder was: "To him that has [such things to his credit] I give of his reward, but to him who has not, I have to supply freely and I help him from this great pile, as it says, 'And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious,' namely, to him to whom I wish to be gracious. Similarly, 'And I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy'" (*Exod. Rab. 45:6*).⁷

There are those, by this account, who earn their heavenly reward by virtue of their obedience or acts of compassion. But outweighing all such recompense is the treasury of mercy God reserves for those who can claim no merit, on whom God shows compassion simply because it is his nature to do so. That is a point that John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407 CE), one of the greatest preachers of the early church, understood well. "For this is what it is to be human," he said in one of the many eloquent sermons for which he is known, "To be merciful. Or rather, this is what it is to be God—to have mercy."⁸

7. Quoted from Suomala, *Moses and God in Dialogue*, 140–41.

8. John Chrysostom, "Homily 4 on Philippians 1:22–26"; PG 62.212 (author's translation).

Paul himself, as we have seen, is conscious more of his disqualification, as a persecutor of the church, than of any qualification for the office of an apostle or preacher. One would never know it from the polite language of most English translations, but in 1 Cor 15:8 he goes so far as to call himself an ἔκτρωμα, a Greek term that means an abortion, a stillbirth, in this case a spiritual miscarriage. So when it comes to ministry, he says, that too is only by the mercy of God.

We ourselves live in a culture of entitlement and privilege. We aspire to the office of ordained ministry, imagining that it will convey some benefit, some rank or status in the eyes of others. We imagine, as preachers and teachers of the gospel, that people will somehow look up to us, acknowledge our wisdom and insight. And we think that any right-minded bishop, presbytery, or board of deacons will recognize our talents and provide us with the opportunities for ministry that our gifts deserve. Paul, at least, has few illusions on this front. But knowing that God has been merciful to him in the past, consistently and unexpectedly merciful, encourages him in his present ministry: “Therefore, having this ministry by virtue of having been shown mercy, we do not lose heart.” In fact, he says, it is mercy that keeps him honest in ministry, keeps his preaching honest:

We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practise cunning or to tamper with God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

Whether because of his personal past, the circumstances of his conversion, or the overwhelming, insurmountable difficulties of apostolic ministry, Paul confesses that his motive for ministry is mercy.

From this comes an invitation. Paul invites us to consider mercy; to remember that as pastors, preachers, and teachers we have been entrusted with this ministry not by virtue of our excellent education, our personal charm or gifts or pastoral skills, or personality—but because God in Christ has had mercy on us, and encourages us in turn to speak of mercy with those who need it as much as we ourselves do.

The Spirit of God

First, mercy; second, the Spirit of God. Here Paul is interested less in debating the merits of the more obvious spiritual gifts than in getting to the heart and soul of ministry. Even so, his meaning is rather deeply buried in the following passage from chapter 4 of 2 Corinthians, which will require some careful exegetical spadework on our part.⁹

For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence (2 Cor 4:11–14).

Paul is quoting here from the Greek translation of Psalm 116, "I believed, and so I spoke" (LXX Ps 115:1; MT Ps 116:10), one of a series of Psalms (113–118) known as the "Egyptian Hallel" that was recited at Passover, where these Psalms formed an integral part of the public liturgy during the slaying of the sacrificial lambs (*m. Pesah* 5:7). In the Septuagint, the psalmist writes, "I believed, therefore I spoke, having been exceedingly humbled." So for Paul this text becomes another expression of the basic premise that God raises up the humble and the dead. But he also makes an extraordinary claim. He says that the Spirit that inspired the Psalmist to write is the same Spirit that inspires him to endure, to trust, and so to speak.

What sustains Christian ministry, and the ministry of preaching in particular, in the long run? I remember only too well that after my first year of ordained ministry, I complained to a dear, sainted, and retired priest and missionary by the name of Reg Savary that I had run out of energy; I felt exhausted. His answer was gentle, but pointed. Actually, he told me, all that had happened was that I had come to an end of my initial

9. See also the fuller treatment in Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves*, 187–89.

enthusiasm, my first flush of excitement at having a new job. That was all. I wonder whether, after all those years of ministry, Reg had discovered another source of strength.

So that is the second answer Paul invites us to consider: faced with the impossibility of ministry, might we entertain the importance of God's Spirit at work within us? To know as a preacher that one has no eloquence, no "charisma" (in the popular sense of the word), no life-giving power of one's own to offer anyone, is to know the necessity of relying instead on the life and Spirit of God.

Another quick illustration. The central liturgical act of the gathered church is, obviously enough, the Lord's Supper. I wonder if we might pause to consider the implications of that action for ministry and congregational leadership. For it is not simply bread that we break, week after week, but the body of Christ. And there you have it. The chief act of the church, and of liturgical ministry, is not only to confess, but actually to act out the death of Christ. Not just to act it out, in fact, but to *enact* it: to demonstrate that our role in this drama, our first act, is to participate in the breaking of this body. Nothing could demonstrate more clearly the fact that as broken human beings, what we bring to the table is only complicity in the death of our Lord; whereas what God brings to the table is the gift of life. If ministry functions like that at the table of the Lord, I propose that the same principles apply in the pulpit also. Paul, for one, is willing to admit that when preaching "works," it works by the mercy and the Spirit of God rather than by virtue of excellent technique, or even the absence of it. Given the low esteem in which they hold him, the Christians of ancient Corinth would probably have grudgingly agreed.

From One Degree of Glory to Another

How may preachers and pastors maintain their vision in the face of opposition? How does Paul manage it? And what are the sources of hope and transformation not only for the preacher, but more importantly, for the congregation? First, a recognition that we have this ministry by the mercy of God; second, that we rely for life on the Spirit of God. Third, glory. This is one of the most

ticklish and difficult aspects of preaching and pastoral care. Paul, as we have seen, has something of a “love-hate” relationship with his congregation. He claims to love them, but they are not always so sure; they argue and object to him, while he tries to put them right and encourages them to “mend their ways” (2 Cor 13:11). Sometimes he is reduced to pleading with them to believe that his actions have only been motivated by love (2 Cor 11:11). Yet for all this, Paul is still convinced that preaching makes a difference, and that his own preaching in particular has made a difference in their lives. Paul is convinced that preaching out of human inadequacy—preaching that relies utterly on mercy, grace, and the Spirit of God—produces change. The ticklish and difficult part is that it is not always the kind of change the hearers are looking for. In Corinth they hunger for glory. And glory is what they get:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17–18).

The glory they *want*, as we saw earlier, has to do with “public applause and esteem,” the experience of divine power, “health, wealth, protection, and sustenance.” The glory they *get* is considerably more problematic. It entails suffering and humility, service of others, conflict with their founding pastor, and, in the case of Paul, what he modestly describes on one occasion as “affliction at every turn—fighting without and fears within” (2 Cor 7:5). So they have a right to ask: if it doesn’t look like glory, feel like glory, or function like glory, is it really glory at all?

Whether for Corinthians or Canadians, Paul has an unexpected sort of glory in mind. We live in a culture that makes personal identity a marketable commodity, in which “make-believe”—especially in the form of “make-up” and “make-overs,” “modelling” and the “*fashion* industry”—is a necessary virtue. But Christ offers the possibility of a personal identity that is neither negotiable nor unstable, but authentic; a sense of self

that operates from the inside out rather than the outside in. That is precisely what the apostle describes:

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us (2 Cor 4:6–7).

For people who are preoccupied with personal appearance, body weight, and sexual performance; for a society in constant pursuit of "health, wealth, protection, and sustenance," conformity to the image of Jesus offers the possibility of accepting our human frailty as a necessary condition of creaturely existence; of deriving our sense of worth and identity from something more than what can be purchased at the local mall; perhaps even of freedom from our obsession with ourselves and our terrible mortality.

The task of the preacher is not to do Christ's work for him, but to point out where Christ is already at work. Preachers do not create hope—much less *false* hope—so much as remembering aloud (as much for our own benefit as anyone else's) where the true source of hope and transformation lies. We remind ourselves and our congregations that glory and adversity, death and resurrection, humiliation and transformation are part and parcel of one another for followers of Christ—not one without the other. What that will look like will differ according to local circumstances. A congregation overwhelmed by its own insignificance and frailty will want to hear of Christ still at work among them, just as a congregation addicted to its own importance will benefit from meditating on Jesus in the form of a slave, and the social implications of crucifixion. One way or another, it requires us to know Christ well enough to recognize his handiwork both in our own lives and in the congregations committed to our charge.

*A New Creation*¹⁰

This leads to a fourth process or perspective on the part of the preacher that serves as consolation both to preachers and to their congregations. First, mercy; second, the Spirit of God; third, glory; fourth and finally, a new creation.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor 5:16–19).

Here the “human” side of the equation is clear enough. Aging facilities, elderly congregations, dwindling resources, social insignificance, and too much work to do. In Corinth, a congregation divided between two, three, or maybe four different pastors; with parishioners who take each other to court, in addition to arguing about sexual ethics, idol worship, the Lord’s Supper, and spiritual gifts. And that is just in 1 Corinthians. We have yet to exhaust Paul’s own litany of complaints, to which we may here add another:

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals . . . To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless . . . (1 Cor 4:9, 11).

Then on top of everything else there is the rather odd spectacle of a crucified Jewish preacher, a condemned and rejected criminal whom some claim is the Son of God. Which is why Paul hastens to reassure his readers:

So from now on we regard *no one* from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.

10. See also the fuller treatment in Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves*, 187–89.

Therefore, if *anyone* is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Cor 5:16–17).

No doubt he is also speaking autobiographically, as one who—not so long ago—was himself unable to see past the grisly spectacle of judicial murder to anything remotely divine. So much for the human point of view, for neither Christ, Christians, or preachers seem very attractive “according to the flesh” (which is Paul’s actual expression).

On the other hand, to pastor and to preach *not* “according to the flesh,” not on the basis of a merely human way of viewing things but rather “according to Christ Jesus” (which is the phrase Paul uses in Rom 15:5) is to minister in light of the resurrection of “the Lord Jesus Christ, who . . . will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21). It is easy for pastoral care-givers to feel overwhelmed by the constant demands of ministering to others. If we are not careful, our vision reduces to seeing people first and foremost in terms of the demands they make of us, much as hospital patients find their identity reduced to a diagnostic label: “the splenectomy in bed five”; “the gunshot wound in post-op.” We can easily add our own equivalents from pastoral ministry.

But to see ourselves and our congregations “according to Christ” is to see them not according to some socially or culturally mandated set of criteria, not as problems to be solved, difficulties to be overcome, or projects for improvement, but as objects of grace, according to God’s transformative power. This is possible not because preachers are by nature optimists, or believe in the human capacity to adapt and triumph. At least for Paul and the kind of preaching that he models, the possibility of a Christ-formed life is made possible only by the unexpected and humanly inexplicable resurrection of Jesus:

Therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view . . .

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old has passed away; behold, the new has come . . .

To regard no one from a human point of view speaks to the perspective of the preacher; to be “in Christ” and to become part of a “new creation” speaks to the responsibility and freedom of

human choice. Thus preaching stands between the potential and actual dimensions of human salvation, between the divine offer of life that enables preachers to envisage their hearers as subject to resurrection, and the reception of that offer on the part of those who are indeed “in Christ” (or its rejection on the part of those who choose not to be). Preaching does not seek by its own power to move the hearers between one position and the next; it simply articulates and bears witness to God’s invitation for hearers to enter into the death and life of Christ. Indeed we may say that apostolic preaching derives its urgency equally from the overwhelming magnitude of God’s offer and from the irreplaceable freedom of the human response.

Conclusion

We should not imagine that the citizens of ancient Corinth were “just like us,” or that our ministries will be “apostolic” in the directly Pauline sense. Nonetheless, there are more than a few points of contact that prove illuminating for the ministry of preaching in our own day. Crucifixion and resurrection remain primary categories for understanding the life of Christian faith and the roller-coaster ride of Christian ministry. Preaching in particular, at least as Paul accounts for it, entails abandoning ourselves to the human folly of crucifixion “in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life” (to borrow the words of the funeral liturgy). We do this not because we find it congenial, attractive, or personally rewarding, but because we have been captured by the death and life of Christ. Congregations in our own day still look to preachers for news of God’s mercy, for evidence of spiritual anointing, an alternative to their own many wants and wishes, and a new account of human identity. Congregations look to us to speak of grace. Perhaps they look to us also for blessing, but on this point especially we should be guided by Paul who, rather, blesses God for the blessing and comfort he and his own congregants continue to receive. This, then, is the source of Paul’s apostolic ministry (preaching included), on which point we would do well, indeed, to imitate him:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too (2 Cor 1:3–5; RSV).

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