



The Pastor as Wordsmith

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Words matter. Human beings are speaking creatures who use words to reveal and conceal, to invite and reject, to startle and subdue, to converse and confuse. Authentic expressions of faith in God and compassionate care for others also depend on words. There is, of course, sighing in the presence of God that is too deep for words, and there are human situations demanding care that render us mute, without words adequate to speak the depth or horror of human suffering. Most of the time, however, we need words to validate the human story of another and convey our empathy. When we preach, we pay attention to the words we speak in order to render the hearts of the listeners pliable to a word from God. The work of pastoral care requires a similar passion for words.

A wordsmith is an expert in the use of words. We often think of a poet or a novelist as a wordsmith who carefully crafts words that have the power to fashion a virtual reality or transform our vision of the world. But, along with poets and novelists, a pastor, too, is a wordsmith. In many and varied ways, pastors use ordinary words, biblical words, and theological words to console, challenge, or bear witness to the Word embodied in Jesus the Christ. To be a Christian, Marcus J. Borg has proposed, “is to know, use, and be shaped by this language—to live one’s life with God within the framework of this language.”¹ Indeed, in order to help people of faith

¹Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power—And How They Can Be Restored* (New York: HarperOne, 2011) 7.

Since words matter—indeed, since they can create reality—pastors must be careful wordsmiths, using words authentically and imaginatively to provide a linkage between human stories and the biblical story, even to enable people through the Spirit to reconstruct their lives in a new way.

to live this language as they navigate between and among biblical words and common speech, a pastor needs to be a wordsmith who is proficient in the use of words.

BECOMING PROFICIENT IN THE USE OF WORDS

Becoming a wordsmith is a critical issue for pastoral ministry today. Because of the increasing secularity in the culture, there is a diminishing fund of religious words, metaphors, or verbal images that have common currency. A recent newspaper article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, in describing the death of a man outside a building with a cross on the front door, took time to define what a cross means for Christian believers.² Pastors face new challenges when conducting weddings and funerals because of the absence of shared speech to celebrate or mourn. Digital forms of communication add to the present crisis. However, for people who believe that Christ is *the Word* made flesh, using words carefully matters.

Words are windows both to the divine and to the deeply human. While a word may point to meaning beyond itself, words also gather significance in themselves. When the common meaning of a word changes, either it drops out of usage or there is an effort to put “new wine in old wineskins.” While I may not agree with every redefinition of Christian words that Borg offers in *Speaking Christian*, his aim is commendable: “to redeem rather than replace Christian language.”³ Borg argues that we need to release Christian words from conventional modern meanings because

Christian language is perceptive, persuasive, and powerful. Its insights about the human condition illuminate the way we commonly experience our lives. It points to an alternative vision and way of life centered in God and God’s passion for a different kind of world. It has power. . . . But how we understand this language matters.⁴

Using words is a complicated task. Because we become attached to words being used in a certain way or having a particular meaning, we are reluctant to redeem them when their meanings change. Using biblical words is even more complex because we invest ordinary words with sacred power. Even if we could discover with some certainty what biblical words “meant for *their then*,” we still must ask “what might their meaning be for *our now*?”⁵ That is one way to describe putting new wine in old wineskins. Ironically, if we let go of old certainties about biblical words and if we open ourselves to discovering the metaphorical surplus of meaning in the Bible, we are more likely to preserve both the authority and evocative power of biblical words.

²Matthai Kuruvila, “Man Shot to Death Outside East Oakland Church,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 17, 2010, at <http://www.sfgate.com/crime/article/Man-shot-to-death-outside-East-Oakland-church-3165974.php> (accessed July 13, 2012).

³Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 18.

⁴*Ibid.*, 19–20.

⁵*Ibid.*, 29. Italics in original.

The motivation for the book *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, which I wrote with Edward Foley, was in large part to overcome the disconnect between the divine and human stories both in worship and pastoral care.⁶ Ancient, archaic speech may connect us to the familiar or root us deeply in the Christian tradition, but it also increases the gap between the human story and God's story. When we preside at worship, we need to look for words in hymn texts and prayers that express in lively language the struggles of Christians today. If God is a "wide-eyed insomniac pacing the night and scheming how to get us back," as Edward Foley once said, what words will open us to God's relentless pursuit? We will need passionate, evocative words in preaching that startle and provoke us and open our hearts to the One who broods over us and longs for our love. Although authenticity is critical in our preaching and presiding as in all aspects of pastoral ministry, authentic expression still requires imaginative and evocative words that inspire, invite, and challenge.

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The essence of pastoral care, as I understand it, is to live fully in the joys, struggles, and sometimes painful realities of the people with whom we minister; to discern the presence of God in the midst of their daily living; to help people find themselves in the biblical stories; and then to find authentic ways for linking faith's wisdom to the human story. This is a critical task for several reasons. On the one hand, biblical illiteracy is common even in our churches. The Bible has become a closed book with less and less authority for faith and daily living. On the other hand, the Bible has become a battleground for arguments about the meaning of words. It is important to remember that God's word transcends all words. In order to link common words and human stories with biblical words and God's story, a pastor needs to be a proficient wordsmith.

SYNONYMS, VERB TENSE, AND THE USE OF PRONOUNS

The aim of this essay is to explore the implications of the pastor as wordsmith for the ministries of care. The care of souls has always taken words seriously, and listening carefully to human stories—even when they take us to the edge of human struggles—has always been central in pastoral care. Pastoral care is embodied speech. Unless words are said, nothing changes: the situation into which the pastor enters will always remain the same. Similarly, there is no understanding without expression. Words are one way to give body to that expression and thereby create

⁶See Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998) 36–54.

something out of nothing. Pastors are wordsmiths when they are able to help people find evocative words to name the struggle or worry that people cannot express or to transform mute pain into a shared experience.

The pastor must be an expert on synonyms so that the words used are accurately empathic. If the pastor is uncomfortable with intense emotions, the words used to respond may diminish the intensity of the moment. If a person laments that “I am not able to see light at the end of the tunnel,” the experience is diminished by a pastoral response that suggests “everybody gets down in the dumps now and then.” To alter isolation or help people identify what may be hidden from their awareness, empathetic pastoral responses need to find the proper synonyms. The psalms of lament are filled with evocative words and metaphors that liberate grievors from the isolation of mute pain and provide for an external speech event that corresponds to internal anguish. In order that our pastoral responses convey healing empathy, we need to be particularly proficient with such synonyms.

Wordsmiths are attentive to the use of pronouns. The careful use of “I,” “you,” and “it” are critical for the pastor as wordsmith. For example, we have been encouraged from many perspectives to make “I” statements rather than avoiding accountability and responsibility by focusing on “you.” One of the most common questions asked of people seeking help from physicians or pastors or therapists is something like, “How is it going?” If the care seeker is reluctant to talk about “it,” he or she might respond by saying, “It’s going pretty well” or “It’s better now.” The caregiver, who is inclined to avoid human struggle or chaos, might respond by saying something like, “I am glad to hear it’s going okay.” So the conversation ends without acknowledging “it,” and nothing has changed. Asking about the meaning or use of an ambiguous pronoun like “it” may make it possible to reveal and explore unspoken and unexamined human dilemmas. Likewise, using “I” instead of “you” implies greater accountability for what is said. Finally, in my own experience of pastoral ministry, the ubiquitous “they” was the most dreaded pronoun. The nameless “they” were regularly reported to be unhappy about how things were going on at church.

Pastoral wordsmiths are particularly attentive to the tense and voice of verbs. People seeking pastoral care may tell their story in the passive tense because they perceive themselves as powerless and without voice or as victims in response to forces acting upon them. Being a wordsmith with verbs becomes a way of helping people reimagine their narrative in an active voice. Pastoral wordsmiths are particularly attentive when grieving individuals continue to refer to the deceased in the present tense long after they have died. Grievors may be stuck in the past (because the present is too painful) or a future (because it is uncertain). In *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Andrew D. Lester suggests that the future is unspeakable when people believe that it holds nothing new.⁷ Guiding persons without hope into

⁷Andrew D. Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 1.

a constructive view of God's future presumes pastoral wordsmiths who are particularly skilled in the use of verbs.

NARRATIVE RECIPROCITY

Stories are the content of pastoral conversation. Thinking in story is the way to weave together into a coherent whole the unending succession of people, dates, and experiences that fill our lives. A story imposes order on events and in the process creates meaning and fashions a world. When we listen carefully to people, we discover that they often live with competing stories, with no overarching way of stitching their stories together into a coherent whole and little understanding of the connection between daily events and larger narratives of life and faith. The first pastoral task is to hear the story as fully and completely as possible. We listen carefully to their stories in order to help people imagine a new narrative in the light of God's story.

The Bible tells the story of God in narrative form. The biblical narrative is the account of a creating, covenanting, redeeming, and sustaining God whose character is love. God is hidden and revealed, present and absent, powerful and vulnerable in the divine narrative. It is a script that reveals God's relentless love for the world and, at the same time, observes with vigorous honesty the human struggle to live faithfully in that love. The Bible is a book of human stories about unbridled passion, remarkable births, sibling rivalry, military heroics, political intrigue, and the complex dynamics of family living. As such, the Bible is a book of observation as well as revelation.

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If the aim of pastoral care is to help people refashion their life story through the lens of God's story, then the Bible is inextricably linked to the care of souls in a way I have called *narrative reciprocity*. When we are fully attentive to the stories of God, we are also in the midst of the human narrative—valuing our own past, pushed by the power of story, strangely aware of the One whom we dare to call God. Weaving the human and the divine enables us to hear our own stories retold with clarity and new possibility. The task of weaving together human and divine stories without violating the integrity of the biblical narrative or the human story is seldom easy. Telling our stories and connecting those stories to the biblical stories and other stories of God refines truth through expansion rather than constriction. For that reason, imagination is as important as information as a pastoral wordsmith learns to think in stories.

The image of narrative reciprocity suggests that we are always moving back and forth between human stories and divine stories as we seek to understand God's

intent for us today. It does not matter where we begin; what matters is that we move back and forth between human and divine stories, listening attentively for a word from God and listening equally carefully to human stories of pain, struggles, and joy. A narrative approach to the Bible as well as to pastoral care makes it possible to move beyond a simplistic equation between the biblical world and our world.

If we listen carefully to the stories people tell us and if we continue to find connection with the biblical stories, we will ensure that no one feels excluded from the community of faith. Linking human and divine stories in a narrative reciprocity is a form of hospitality and inclusion. Birth, adolescence, rejection, triumph, friendship, betrayal, anxiety, bliss, the fear of the stranger, failure, the terror of contingency, and the frightful darkness of death are all avenues to God. If we help people live into the biblical stories from their own stories, they might discover along the way how to re-story their lives in the larger, liberating, grace-filled divine narrative.

A pastoral wordsmith uses common speech to startle, to confirm and to challenge, to wrest attention from the mundane, opening others to the living Word through common words. Pastoral ministry is incarnational when it holds in tension the mysteries of God and the mysteries of the human soul. The impulse to become part of God's story and the simultaneous hope that God will be present in our narrative find convergence in Jesus Christ, who is the mediation of divine and human stories. It requires both humility and imagination to stand habitually and stubbornly in the presence of God and stand fully in the human story in all its messiness in order to speak a word of hope and grace from God to people who are afraid and alone. Narrative reciprocity is something like moonlight leaking through roof planks of an old barn, a hole in the sky that shatters our cosmologies, or a hole in the roof that welcomes the sick and paralyzed into the middle of ordinary living. When a wordsmith uses ordinary words in new and remarkable ways, God's light may leak through the roof planks, undermining our carefully constructed theological formulas and breaking open our cherished symbols.

THE DISCLOSIVE POWER OF THE BIBLE

The words of the Bible bear witness to what the Bible itself calls the word of God. Douglas John Hall states, "For Christians, the words of the Bible point to the living Word that can't be reduced to words—the Word 'made flesh'—Jesus."⁸ God's Word transcends all words. And yet, as Donald Capps has proposed, biblical texts also have the power to change attitudes, behavior, and perceptions. Capps identified this as the "disclosive power of specific biblical texts."⁹ Being a wordsmith in pastoral ministry includes an acknowledgment of the disclosive ef-

⁸Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 154.

⁹Donald Capps, "Pastoral Use and Interpretation of the Bible," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990) 84.

fects of biblical texts in actual situations of care. Pastoral theologian Ed Wimberly has reaffirmed how biblical stories shape perceptions of reality. “My faith perspective,” Wimberly observes, “leads me to proclaim that there is an objective reality behind the liberating work of Bible stories.”¹⁰ For African Americans, Wimberly contends, the Bible is a pastoral document that shapes, orients, and strengthens their lives. The narrative approach to Scripture focuses on the power of the Bible to draw people into its world and into God’s history in ways that do just that.

The narrative perspective believes the liberating promise that if our lives are socially constructed, they may also be reconstructed. We are never fully trapped in the narratives we construct. It is always possible to narrate our lives in another way. Consequently, storytelling is an act of hope—even defiance—because it carries within it the power to change. The disclosive power of the Bible presses us to see what we might like to ignore in our lives and invites us to discover alternative visions for whatever traps us and saps us of life. In this sense, evocative biblical images and stories are as much a part of the tools of pastoral care as are good listening skills and accurate empathy.

Because of the disclosive power of biblical words to change how we live, pastoral wordsmiths are careful about the use of the Bible in pastoral care. Whatever biblical text is used in a pastoral conversation where care is the focus should connect to the struggle of a particular individual and be sensitive to that person’s pain. Certain texts are more appropriate for the grieving, other texts fit the birth of a child, and still others are helpful for persons facing a difficult life decision. We are also rightly cautious about making the pastoral care moment a bully pulpit or an occasion for admonishing people when they are vulnerable. Good pastoral care is not individualized homiletics, nor is it a moment for formulaic speech or unfamiliar images that do not resonate in modern ears. The pastor as wordsmith is attentive to the disclosive power of the Bible for a particular circumstance.

Pastoral theologian Kathleen D. Billman and systematic theologian Daniel L. Migliore invite us to recover the prayer of lament as a way to hope in a time of irrational suffering and deepening despair. Billman and Migliore define a prayer of lament as the unsettling biblical tradition that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair, and protest to God. “Contrary to what we may assume,” they write, “the Bible makes room in the life of faith for daring complaint to God rather than declaring such prayer off limits.”¹¹ The structure of lament is an alternation between resistance and relinquishment, between protesting against injustice and trusting in the mystery of God. Resistance without relinquishment ends in bitterness and relinquishment without resistance leads to quiet powerlessness in the face of evil. The language of lament gives voice to mute pain and creates a community of the suffering. The recovery of the language and

¹⁰Edward P. Wimberly, *Using Scripture in Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 71–72.

¹¹Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999) 6.

structure of lament may be the most important aspect of connecting the Bible and pastoral care for our time.

A CLOSING WORD ABOUT WORDS

The goals and modes of pastoral care have varied over the centuries according to the demands of the culture or the needs of the situation, but the aim has been the same: to respond to human pain and struggle with understanding, compassion, and grace. The modern practice of pastoral care, partly to avoid didactic or moralistic patterns of ministry, has generally promoted supportive listening and relied more on psychological language than Scripture for interpreting human situations. As a result, the divine narrative is often overlooked in pastoral conversations.¹² The aim of this article has been to consider the pastor as wordsmith in order to recover a linkage between human words and stories and biblical words and stories for the sake of care.

It is often said about moments of pastoral care that we have stood on holy ground when we have been allowed to experience the depth of another's pain or been invited into the intimacy of very private fear or struggles of faith. When the primal stories we tell one another connect to primal biblical narratives, healing and hope may be reborn from the discovery of God's promised future. Our words need to mirror God's blazing word that is determined to melt frozen hearts or render our lives susceptible to the infectious love of God. Standing on the "holy ground" of a pastoral moment may be a dangerous thing precisely because both the recipient of care and the caregiver are vulnerable to God's relentless pursuit. The person of the pastor might never be the same even if the one seeking care experiences no change.

The biblical script insists that the world is not without God. We are very much aware that the darkness is real because of what we hear in listening care. What we all need is light enough to live boldly and faithfully in darkness that we do not and cannot control. The Bible is a lamp, light enough to help us live in that darkness. Passionate, evocative words that startle and provoke us are more likely to pry open our hearts to the Wholly One who broods over us and longs for our love. The Bible is a resource of words that offers evocative images of hope and a transcending vision of God's relentless love that sustains us as we care for one another in the darkness. ⊕

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¹²For a longer discussion of the connection between the Bible and pastoral care, see Herbert Anderson, "The Bible and Pastoral Care," in *The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church*, ed. Paul Ballard and Stephen R. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 195–211.