

Strategies for Effective Pastoral Leadership

The Shepherd's Staff

Several years ago, on Good Shepherd Sunday, I gathered the children with a shepherd's staff in my hand and asked them to imagine they were tending sheep. What would you do with this curved end? "Bring the lost lambs back into the flock," they suggested. Yes, for safe keeping! And what would you do with this pointy end? "Poke them until they made it into the next field," they laughed. Yes, life is an ongoing adventure! One precocious little boy shouted, "Hey, that's what Moms and Dads do!"

What a wonderful metaphor for parenting, for contemplating God's spiritual care in our lives, and for the practice of ministry. In the Gospel we find many examples of Jesus "the embracing" shepherd - inviting the desperate to hope, welcoming the marginalized, reconciling the broken, and forgiving the sinner. In one sense his mission was all about drawing people in. Yet, when we least expect it he turns the crook around and becomes Jesus "the admonishing" shepherd. Pick up your mat and walk! Sell your possessions and give money to the poor! Love your enemy. Forgive seventy times seven.

The story of the Prodigal Son may end with a grateful, reconciling embrace, but it begins with an exasperated sendoff in which the father says, "Fine then, get out there and give life a try."

In the Church, there is a time to push ahead with new music and progressive theology, with justice issues and building projects, with controversial paint colors and the radical notion that even young children are welcome at the communion table! There is also a time to pull back, when grief is acute and anxiety is high, when conflict needs addressing and people need reassuring, when community has suffered a shock, or when the time is right to simply celebrate and savor life.

In recent weeks the "Black Lives Matter" movement has galvanized many voices and gained significant momentum. At long last our society is coming to grips with the reality of racial profiling, police brutality, and a criminal justice system that is unacceptably inequitable. We know the statistics around arrest and incarceration rates for African Americans. We know the suspicions and stereotypes that too often bias our policing. We cannot back down from our convictions. We must demand change.

Yet, following the awful tragedy in Dallas last week, many of us felt pastorally confounded. No single message was possible. This was an anguishing and complicated time that, for me, necessitated both ends of the shepherd's staff. Suddenly, we felt profound anxiety and grief around the senseless loss of those who wear the uniform and keep the peace. Most of us resisted any groundswell that unfairly stereotyped all officers as discriminating. Instead, we felt the need to reassure our people that calm will prevail, that most cops are fair, and that we can change our prejudicial system without resorting to the very violence we detest. The ensuing tension between "Black Lives Matter" and "All Lives Matter" points to the complexity of our times, and forces us to sit with a certain amount of dissonance.

The push and pull of ministry is like a liturgical dance - it flows naturally and guides us to intuitively understand when to comfort the afflicted and when to afflict the comfortable. This is the spiritual balance between pastor and prophet. I've often thought of it as a natural rhythm, like that of our breathing - we take in the wounds and struggles and fears of the church and we send forth the courage and strength and transformative power of God's Spirit.

Knowing when to prophetically push and when to pastorally pull is sometimes instinctive and other times requires us to monitor closely the pulse of our congregation. Prayerful discernment and careful attention to our Emotional Quotient (EQ) can keep us keenly aware of this dynamic.

Perhaps you are willing to share a thought about this ministry continuum? How do you discern when to speak out and advocate for systemic change, and when to tend more inwardly to the needs for care and compassion? Please go to my blog site to share your insights.

Shalom,

Franz