

***The Pastor as Pontiff, Prophet, Poet, and Promise***

***Reflections on the Pastoral Office  
for the***

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***John H. Thomas  
General Minister and President  
United Church of Christ***

## Introduction

Over the course of these past ten years I have listened to a number of colleagues wrestling with the question of whether at any given point in their ministry they should function primarily as pastor or prophet. This has been particularly the case at moments of national crisis or controversy, and preeminently so on 9/11 and the ensuing years. Is it appropriate to offer the challenging or harsh Word of God to a community of frightened, wounded people? Is it permissible to be the consoling presence when idolatries are stark and the demonic very real? The question is understandable; I have tried to be sympathetic to the faithfulness and fears underlying it and I have felt its challenge personally in these years as General Minister and President.

To be sure, there are times and circumstances when the allure of the pastoral over the prophetic has been used to rationalize timidity or a lack of courage, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer once described as the “heroic extrication from the affair of the day.” And, likewise, there are times and circumstances when the allure of the prophetic over the pastoral masks a certain arrogance, an indifference to the very real need of those in our care. I suspect each of us here has fallen into one or both of these traps; we need to guard against both tendencies. Meanwhile, the cautions don’t take away from the real sense of pastoral dilemma you and I sometimes feel. Deep attentiveness to the Word of God and to the needs of those in our care do seem, at times, to tug us in differing directions.

In the end, however, this has always seemed to me to be a false choice, a reduction of ministry to a set of roles that one puts on at the appointed and appropriate hour, only to be removed when that particular task is done: pastor, prophet, teacher, confessor, Bible scholar, pastoral theologian, preacher, counselor, administrator, worship leader, fund raiser, conflict mediator, youth group advisor – the list goes on and on! I love the story told by Marilyn Robinson in her novel *Gilead* about John Ames getting a call from a parishioner with an urgent problem very early in the morning. She was recently widowed. Worrying that grief had taken hold in drastic ways, he went immediately to see her. It turns out the problem was with the sink in her new cottage. Hot water was coming out of the cold tap, and cold water was coming out of the hot tap. Ames suggested that she simply learn to live with this anomaly but it was clear that she would not accommodate herself to such patent mediocrity. So Ames found some pliers

and switched the H and the C on the taps to make them coincide with the temperature of the water emanating from each. The widow mumbled about how this would have to do until she could get a real plumber!

Given the range of pastoral roles, I think most of us live with the lurking suspicion that we are little more than Jacks and Jills of all trades and master or mistress of none. This can be reinforced by the format of our own *UCC Ministerial Profile* form which asks our references to pick twelve qualities or tasks at which we excel from a long list of desirable professional traits. Does the fact that someone failed to note some suggest that we are deficient in these areas? Not only can this be pretty demoralizing, it also represents a fundamentally flawed way of thinking about ministry. To use a theological analogy, like the Trinitarian heresy called “Modalism,” we diminish ministry when we reduce it to a set of roles, or modes of activity which come and go as need or ability require. One is always prophet and pastor just as God is always and at once Father/Mother, Son/Child, and Holy Spirit. To put it another way, can we think of these and other dimensions of ministry as *identity* rather than *role*, dimensions that are woven together in an integrated whole so that vocation is not simply the sum total of our roles, which may from time to time conflict, but rather the integrated expression of an pastoral identity?

Today and tomorrow I want to explore four dimensions of our pastoral vocation or identity: the pastor as pontiff, the pastor as prophet, the pastor as poet, and the pastor as promise. You’ll note that each of these four dimensions is subsumed under the common identity or vocation of pastor. That is, all four are inherent and integral parts of the rich fabric of the pastoral office which means we can’t and shouldn’t dissect out of our ministry a distinct role called pastor sometimes reduced to care giver, consoler, hand-holder, embracer, visitor, accompanier. We are all pastors, called to live out an integrated identity in pontifical, prophetic, poetic, and promissory ways.

A second note, and really a caution, is to remind ourselves that this vocation, as the World Council of Church’s Faith and Order paper *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* reminds us, is always expressed in personal, collegial, and communal ways. The very notion of a *General Association* reminds us of the essentially collegial dimension of our vocation. The fact that this venerable body, albeit in evolving ways, has remained a

feature of our life together for three centuries is testimony to this critical dimension of our ministries. Against all the seduction of isolation and “lone-rangerism,” there is something essentially shared. We colleagues are in this together. But let us not forget, we also bring with us the communities which have called us and which we serve.

Donald Hall, the New England poet-laureate and member of one of our congregations in New Hampshire, reminds us of this in a way that only a lay person can do, balancing deference and admonition delicately together:

Between our house and Danbury Village, South Danbury is another disappearing town, whose remaining identity resides mostly in the white clapboard church that my great-grandparents helped to start after the Civil War. When we moved here nine years ago we decided that *they* – probably the dead – would expect us to go to church. . . . Warily we dragged ourselves there the first Sunday; the second Sunday we went less warily; within a few weeks we got there early. Let me not go into theology. Let me mention that our minister – Jack Jensen from Kansas City and Yale Divinity, who teaches at Colby-Sawyer College nearby – the first Sunday quoted Rainer Maria Rilke. Although the allusion pleased us, it was not excerpts from German poets that turned us into deacons. It started with community, and extended itself to communion. One side of the church, which Jane calls the gene pool, shares a couple of great-grandparents, but the true community is an extraordinary interconnectedness. We cover much social territory – age, occupation, politics, tone deafness – and we are also connected to the community of the dead, who lie in the graveyard up the road, and to the unborn. Funerals, weddings and baptisms mark sensible boundaries, (*Here at Eagle Pond*, 1990, pp. 4-5).

Now presumably if Jack Jensen had been an idiot, or a raving fundamentalist, or an arrogant ego-maniac, Donald and Jane might have never given the second Sunday a chance. But his important role was not self-referential, but rather a bridge into a larger and deeper community whose ultimate destination is communion. And that leads me to my first theme: The pastor as pontiff.

## The Pastor as Pontiff

Admittedly, the use of the word “pontiff” is an odd choice for this gathering of United Church of Christ pastors in decidedly Congregational territory. This ancient title, associated with the Bishop of Rome or the Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, is not going to enter the ecclesiastical lexicon of the UCC anytime soon (notwithstanding the papal red shoes I was given at my farewell in Grand Rapids!) Jonathan Edwards’ father-in-law, Samuel Stoddard, might have been dubbed “the Pope of Northampton,” but I’ve never heard anyone else in our tribe titled in such a way, except in derision. Nevertheless, the literal meaning of the word is “bridge-builder,” and it is to that evocative theme that I want us to attend.

Horace Bushnell once said in a sermon, “Our range of life is so walled in by the respectability of our associations, that what is on the other side of the wall is very much a world unknown,” (quoted in Gary Dorrien, *The Making of Modern Liberal Theology*, vol. 1). Our lives are always, and in various ways, demarcated by borders. Some of these borders are, of course, necessary for good health and for respectful relationships. We speak of this today as “having good boundaries.” Robert Frost was on to this in his famous poem, “Mending Fences.”

. . . . The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.

Here the stone wall is not so much a protective barrier as it is a meeting place. Indeed, the poet is prompted to famously suggest, “Good fences make good neighbors.” There may be something peculiarly New England about this. Donald Hall’s describes New England as a “weird mixture of permitted solitude and strong society.” Wise pontiffs respect some borders and do not bridge them carelessly, lest needed solitude no longer be permitted or available, and society grow weak under the relentless vulnerability of encounter.

But faithful pontiffs also regularly lead their flock to the fences, the borders, where enriching and healing encounter takes place and fences become meeting places rather than bulwarks against enemies, real or imagined. World's unknown, to use Bushnell's phrase, often become world's imagined in highly caricatured ways where walls allow for fear, suspicion and, ultimately, aggression. This is particularly true when Bushnell's "respectability" blind us to our own prejudices and shortcomings. Consider: a black Harvard professor and a white Cambridge police officer. Consider, a black prophetic preacher and a bewildered and shocked cable news addicted nation. Consider, a "wise Latina judge" and a white Southern senator convinced of his ultimate neutrality in all things. Consider, a Catholic ethnic enclave and its new Muslim neighbors. Consider, blue collar teens and Latino day laborers on Long Island. Consider, the all-American family and the little boy next door with two Dads. Pontiffs will regularly take their congregations to these border places where sacred encounters lead to sacred conversations and perhaps even mutual transformation. Here, as the poet suggests, borders are not obliterated. But in tending and mending them they take on a new vocation of "neighbor-creating."

It can be painful, tricky business, this walking along borders, far from the safe centers of our own property and propriety. Listen again to Frost:

To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance;  
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.

Scripture is laden with boundary crossing, often profoundly subversive of those who want nothing of neighborliness. Jesus and the woman at the well. Jesus and Zaccheaus. Jesus and the man born blind. And, perhaps most poignantly, the waiting Father and the prodigal son who race toward one another at that meeting place between the far country and home. The list goes on and on. Border moments when bridges become possible among neighbors. The Gospel, the Good News itself is all about the divine Pontiff who bridges heaven and earth in an event called incarnation. "In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, God has come to us and shared our common

lot.” We are not really called to be “pasteurs sans frontieres” to borrow the metaphor from Doctors Without Borders. But it is our peculiar vocation to walk the fences with neighbors on the other side, engaged in the common task of mending.

Of course, there are times when borders grow demonic, places of domination rather than demarcation. To visit the West Bank is to feel the oppression of walls and borders, heavily armed, closed, sometimes towering over communities. Here we feel what Frost blurts out, “something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down!” Along our southern border a new fence is growing, replacing an older, more porous fence. South of San Diego an old metal fence was once all that separated Mexico and the United States. A park had been built near the ocean where people from both sides could come. Fathers could reach through and touch their infants. Lovers could reach through and embrace. At times the sacrament was shared through the gaps in this fence and neighborliness was experienced. Today a new fence keeps everyone away from this “Friendship Park.” Black uniformed border patrols roar along access roads on all terrain vehicles wearing menacing black visored helmets, warning all away from the place and the possibility of neighbor contact. Some borders are evil and call for prophetic pontiffs who will give voice to that which wants them down, indeed to the One who wants them down!

In the former West Berlin, near the old Templehof airport, there is a monument to the Berlin airlift which kept West Berlin fed during the emerging cold war blockade. Several parallel concrete arches rise in a delicate sweep toward the east, ending as the eye follows their trajectory toward freedom. Hundreds of miles away, in Bonn, an identical set of arches rise to meet them. The Wall is gone, in some places even being reconstructed in order to have enough artifact left for appropriate memorials. Hundreds of kilometers of cold war border have now been turned into a bike trail. Visitors to Berlin would have a hard time today distinguishing between east and west. Yet this airlift monument remains, an enduring reminder of that dimension of the human spirit that wants walls down, and of the power of pontiffs to be ministers of reconciliation.

United Church of Christ ministers tend to do a good job of being pontiffs in these senses, taking congregations to border places for encounter and neighbor-making, taking down walls that have grown demonic and dangerous to our nation’s and world’s soul.

We see this in the readiness of our pastors to give leadership to ecumenical councils, coalitions, and initiatives. We see this in the great interest our churches and conferences have in developing global partnerships with Christians in other parts of the world. We see this in various border ministries in the Southwest. We see this in the openness of our pastors to deep interaction with colleagues of other faiths. We see this in the openness to sacred conversations on race. Pastor pontiffs abound in these bridge building, border crossing ministries of our church.

There is, however, another pontifical role that seems to come to us with more challenge. I speak here of the sacramental nature of our ministry, guiding our people toward those boundary places where heaven touches earth and the ordinary becomes the vehicle for the extraordinary. The spare and stark white walls of our New England sanctuaries, stripped of icon and image, once intended to remove any distraction from the Word of God, a Word that made God so present as to be palpably felt beneath the raised pulpits that dwarfed even the pastor. Here heaven's boundary was to be nearly obliterated, and the weight of the Word bore down both to crush and to redeem, to console and to terrify. Sacraments, the means of grace, were guarded, protected, literally fenced. They were approached as if fenced with an electric charge. They were gates across ultimate boundaries that were not to be crossed lightly yet which were to be entered through with the profoundest of joy.

I do not suggest a return to Puritan sensibilities or aesthetics. But in far too many places the words that once conveyed the Word have grown superficial, programmatic, didactic, even sentimental. Even the sacraments are treated with a casualness draining them of heaven's fullness. Could it be that this world has grown so respectable for us, with our secularity and our professional entitlement and our middle class contentment, that we have grown indifferent to what lies on the other side, a world to us unknown? Pastor pontiffs know that in Word and Sacrament we draw to the very edge of an ultimate boundary and that here we glimpse and hear and taste the very Realm of God that is to be our home, a place populated by the saints who have gone before us. What if we stepped into the pulpit, or reached into the font, or stood at the Table believing that here we have taken our people to the mending wall where the Neighbor above all neighbors will be met? How would that change our ministries? How would that change our people?

During my first year of ministry in Cheshire, I drove down Rt. 10 to attend the Lyman Beecher lectures at Yale delivered by that preeminent preacher Gardner C. Taylor of Brooklyn. I still remember the ominous yet thrilling chill as he challenged and gifted us in his closing words:

It is a great privilege, I believe the very highest on earth, to be called to the preaching of this Gospel. You will not hold me condemned for pressing upon you the privilege of our calling with an experience which occurred recently in my own ministry. On a fall day and under a gently weeping sky, we laid the body of Deacon William Clapp in its grave. I have never in all of these years known a person who received the Gospel more eagerly and gladly than William Clapp. Also, he was to me what an old Creole preacher in my youth characterized as a “member and friend.

I stood with his daughter in the intensive care room of one of New York’s hospitals on what proved to be the next to last day of his life. By then he was comatose, but she told me of how he spoke in his last rational moments of his love of the church and its time of worship. She said that the last thing he said was, “I wish I could hear him preach one more time.” Now, no preacher has of himself or herself anything of real significance to say to anyone who is within the view of the swelling of Jordan. But there is a Gospel and you are privileged to be summoned to declare it. It can stand people on their feet for the living of their days. And, also – what a privilege, almost too precious too be mentioned – it may be that the Gospel which you preach will then steady some poor pilgrims as they come to where the bridgeless river is and some of them, feeling the spray of Jordan misting in the face, just might thank God as they cross the river that He made you a preacher, (*How Shall They Preach*, pp. 93-94)

Pontiffs for the “bridgeless river,” indeed, even as we are prophet, poet, and promise.

## The Pastor as Prophet

One of the books I have found myself returning to again and again over three decades of ministry is Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Prophets*, and in particular to his reflections on divine pathos. Here we find a link between pontiff and prophet: "The divine pathos," says Heschel, "is like a bridge over the abyss that separates man from God," (*The Prophets*, p. 229). More than anything else, a prophetic consciousness represents a profound sensitivity to God's vulnerable presence among us. In a foundational passage, Heschel writes,

To the prophet. . . God does not reveal himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world. He does not simply command and expect obedience; He is also moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath. He is not conceived as judging the world in detachment. He reacts in an intimate and subjective manner, and thus determines the value of events. Quite obviously in the biblical view, man's deeds may move [God], affect [God], grieve [God] or, on the other hand, gladden and please [God]. This notion that God can be intimately affected, that He possesses not merely intelligence and will, but also pathos, basically defines the prophetic consciousness of God, (pp. 224-225).

To put it in a word: "God is concerned about the world and shares in its fate," (p. 225). Perhaps nowhere in scripture do we see this more poignantly than in the book of Hosea where the message to Israel must be lived out in the humiliation of the prophet himself through the betrayal of Gomer. Prophecy is not just a word to announce, but a life to live with all of its tragedy and pain, joy and ecstasy. To be the prophet is to take into our bodies the pathos of God embodied in Christ.

David Duncombe was the chaplain at Yale Medical School when I was a student; he taught a course for divinity, medical, and law students on issues related to chronic illness. Like many professors, he had an important impact on me, but then his life and ministry took some difficult turns and we lost touch for a long time. Two years ago I accompanied David in Washington, D.C. as part of an event sponsored by Jubilee USA, an ecumenical effort to advocate for debt relief for the world's most impoverished

nations. At age 79 David was embarking on a forty day fast – no food, only water – during which time he would visit congressional offices to encourage passage of legislation that would increase the level of debt relief. Toward the end of his fast, I was with David again in Washington. By this time he was in a wheelchair. “As I visit the offices, and get to know the staff,” he told me, “they see me grow more and more emaciated and weak, and it gives them a powerful image of the impact of hunger in the world.” One congressman seemed shocked he would do this. Why? “This week,” David said, “we will commemorate the anniversary of 9/11. It is important that we do this, and remember the 3,000 who died in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. But who will remember the 18,000 who die each day in sub Saharan Africa from hunger? Who will read their names in public events?”

“God is concerned about the world and shares in its fate. This is the essence,” said Heschel, “of God’s moral nature; His willingness to be intimately involved in [human history], (*The Prophets*, p. 225). Listen to one more insight from the great rabbi:

Prophecy is a reminder that what obtains between God and man is not a contract but a covenant. Anterior to the covenant is love, the love of the fathers, and what obtains between God and Israel must be understood, not as a legal, but as a personal relationship, as participation, involvement, tension. God’s life interacts with the life of the people. To live in the covenant is to partake of the fellowship of God and His people. Biblical religion is not what man does with his solitariness, but rather what man does with God’s concern for all men, (*The Prophets*, p. 230).

The prophet is the pontiff, the bridge that in Scripture is the covenant – “I shall be your God and you shall be my people,” a covenant of responsibility rather than exceptionalism (something today’s neo-cons need to reflect upon). At another point in his writings Heschel speaks of “moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.” God’s moral grandeur is made possible by the spiritual audacity to tie the divine to the human. Humanity’s spiritual audacity is the courageous way toward the moral grandeur God desires. Pathos – human and divine – is the meeting place from which audacious words of truth, judgment, and healing flow forth in the service of moral grandeur.

Bill Coffin often said, and I'm paraphrasing here, that you can get away with almost anything in terms of prophetic utterance, as long as your congregation knows that you love them. Bill was right about this as he was right about so many things, but this love can never be a narrow love, a love that allows for indifference to the world that God loves and which claims God's deepest concern. Narrow love will always trump the courage to speak the Word that needs speaking. To love our congregations is not to protect them from God, but to remind them that before God they share in the world's fate, a fate that implies both love and judgment, mercy and wrath.

In one of the more compelling passages in *Gilead*, the narrator, John Ames is tormented by the sermon he didn't preach. It was 1918. America had entered the Great War and, along with this, was reeling under the deadly assault of the Spanish Influenza. As Ames put it, "there was terrible death, right here in Iowa." He told the parents that their sons had been spared. They took it to mean they were spared the gruesome trenches of the Western front. "But what I really meant was that they were spared the act of killing. So," Ames goes on,

I wrote a sermon about it. I said, or I meant to say, that these deaths were rescuing foolish young men from the consequences of their own ignorance and courage, that the Lord was gathering them in before they could go off and commit murder against their brothers. And I said that their deaths were a sign and a warning to the rest of us that the desire for war would bring the consequences of war, because there is no ocean big enough to protect us from the Lord's judgment when we decide to hammer our plowshares into swords and our pruning hooks into spears, in contempt of the will and the grace of God.

It was quite a sermon, I believe. . . . But my courage failed, because I knew the only people at church would be a few old women who were already about as sad and apprehensive as they could stand to be and no more approving of the war than I was. And they were there even though I might have been contagious. I seemed ridiculous to myself for imagining I could thunder from the pulpit in those circumstances, and I dropped that sermon in the stove and preached on the Parable of the Lost Sheep. I wish I had kept it, because I meant every word. It might have been the only sermon I wouldn't mind answering for in the next

world. And I burned it. But Mirabelle Mercer was not Pontius Pilate, and she was not Woodrow Wilson, either, (Marilyn Robinson, *Gilead*, pp. 42-43).

The pathos of the prophet is the profound tension between attentiveness to the demanding word of God and the demanding needs of God's people.

The year before I was ordained, Baptist historian Clarence Goen, professor at Wesley Seminary, wrote these words:

Our churches are so comfortably domesticated in the American culture that they can operate with little sense of tension or contradiction between what they are doing as Christians and what they stand for as Americans. That is to say, our Christianity has been so accommodated to the prevailing culture that we have practically telescoped the mission of the church into the purposes of the nation, (Clifford Goen in Mark Burrows, ed., *Prophetic Memory for the Contemporary Church*, pp. 288-289).

Could we claim to have altered this portrait in the thirty years plus of some of our ministries? Have we loved our people so much we that we found we couldn't bear to say painful things to them? Or have we loved them too little to say necessary things to them? Have we been ready to embody the wounds and starvation of our world? Did we even write the sermon before we burned it? Would our nation's soul have been better off if more of us had said, "Not God bless America, but God damn America?" When we consider the Christian community in Iraq, now almost destroyed, or the sectarian violence that was unleashed on the innocent, or the young men and women killed and maimed, struggling with PTS, or the atrocities of Abu Grahیب and Guantanamo, it seems to me that we will have much to answer for. And, I fear, it will not be because we loved our people too much, but because we loved too little.

Pathos is always risk, and risk always demands courage. Thus the importance of a collegial understanding of the pastor as prophet. Dietrich Bonhoeffer left behind a letter that was to have been read to the pastors of the Confessing Church in the even that the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler and end the war had been successful. Obviously the letter was never read, but it does speak to us about the prophetic challenge and its collegial dimension:

We call you to order your lives anew. We have suffered long enough from the desire of individuals to go their own way and separate themselves from their brothers [and sisters]. That was not the spirit of Jesus, but the spirit of individualism, indolence, and defiance. To a great extent it has done serious harm to our preaching. Pastors cannot perform the duties of their office alone. They need their brothers [; they need their sisters]. . . . We impose on each of you the sacred duty to be available to your brother [and sister] for this ministry. We ask you to come together to pray as you prepare your sermons and to help one another find the proper words, (in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 124).

To help one another find the proper words.

At our best we find these words together. But when they are uttered, they are uttered in the solitude of our pulpit. Prophecy is not for panel presentations. We may join colleagues in shared statements or petitions or even press conferences. But even then we must take responsibility ourselves, never hiding behind our polity or our position. Over the years I have used a phrase which attempts to name the tension we face between the call of our ministry and the seduction of our culture: Respectable religion and evangelical courage. The priesthood of respectable religion cherishes the cultural privileges of our upper middle class world, the social entrée our Ivy League M.Div's provide. You can see the priests of respectable religion lingering around the edges of the society pages in *The New York Times*, marrying off the elites on various gold coasts, cherishing their brief mention in the nation's newspaper of record.

Consider, by way of contrast, one of my predecessors in Cheshire, the Rev. J. Herbert Bainton, father of Roland Bainton of Yale fame. Herbert served for twenty years in a pastorate lovingly remembered and deeply respected. But in late 1940 Bainton, watching the storm clouds of war slowly envelope the American public, resigned his pastorate. He was a pacifist and was convinced that his ministry would not fit the more bellicose spirit of the coming age. Bainton was sufficiently loved by his parish that he probably could have weathered the storm. But I suspect the prospect of quieting his speech, perhaps even of burning the best sermon he'd ever written, was more than he could bear. Evangelical courage.

The good news is that less and less of the world of respectable religion is interested in having the likes of us for their priests these days. We may still minister in the white steepled meeting houses of our town greens that sniff of social status and community privilege. But respectable religion has drifted away from us, often to the industrial looking auditoriums on the outskirts of town, a source of deep pain and dislocation to be sure, but perhaps of opportunity as well. For rather than grief and lament, it liberates us to serve the pastorate of evangelical courage. The dislocation is not yet complete, this ecclesial disestablishment. The yearning for Egypt and its fleshpots remains and can still be found here and there, especially in our New England environs. And we cannot abandon those who inhabit that old world or privilege, either. Their restless souls still yearn for peace, their desire to honor God and love neighbor is often sincere, their aspiration toward moral living remains a convincing compass. In a conversation with one of our Fairfield County pastors last fall I asked about the impact of the financial collapse on the employment of his Wall Street members. He told me it was hard to tell. He suspected some had lost jobs, but were too ashamed to share that news with him or the congregation. Here is an invitation to profound and powerful ministry.

But here our motivation is not to touch the hem of the economic and political princes and trade our comforting silence for the occasional invitation to the White House or the Yale Club. Reinhold Niebuhr, in one of his magnificent little reflections in the book, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, captures the pastoral struggle.

Spoke tonight at the Churchmen's Club of [a particular fellowship]. The good bishop who introduced me was careful to disavow all my opinions before I uttered them. He assured the brethren, however, that I would make them think. . . . The chairman declares in effect, "Here is a harebrained fellow who talks nonsense. But we are Christian gentlemen who can listen with patience and sympathy to even the most impossible opinions." It is just a device to destroy the force of a message and to protect the sensitive souls who might be rudely shocked by a religious message which came in conflict with their interests and prejudices. . . . There is something pathetic about the timidity of the religious leader who is always afraid of what an honest message on controversial issues might do to his organization. . . . I suppose religion in its most vital form does make men

indifferent to popular approval. The apostle Paul averred that it was a small thing to be judged of men because he was seeking the approval of God. In a genuinely religious soul faith does seem to operate in that way. . . . But the average man fashions his standards in the light of prevailing customs and opinions. It could hardly be expected that every religious leader would be filled with prophetic ardor and heedless courage. Many good men are naturally cautious. But it does seem that the unique resource of religion ought to give at least a touch of daring to the religious community and the religious leader (Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, pp. 86-87).

A touch of daring. Niebuhr wrote this in 1926 amid the industrial turmoil of the burgeoning automotive industry. Yet few among us can avoid the unpleasant feeling that he is speaking directly to us.

To read Niebuhr along side of the fictional John Ames in his struggling Iowa parish in the midst of the influenza epidemic and the crusader mentality of the War to End all Wars, is to sense the awesomeness and anguish of the pastor's prophetic vocation. We hear the great lines of the hymn, "the faith that leads us onward, the fear that holds us back, our will to dare great things for God, the courage that we lack. . . . On all the judgment of the Cross falls heavy, sure, and clear." Prophecy can grow arrogant; its exercise exceedingly self-referential. It can and often does demonstrate the very sort of prejudices we seek to expose. But none of that rescues us from its demands. Here Heschel's concept of divine pathos helps us, for it turns our reference toward God who, in turn, is deeply, passionately attentive to the earth. In another set of Beecher lectures, Davie Napier titled his reflections on the Elijah narrative, *Word of God, Word of Earth*. The implications for our ministry are clear: attentiveness to the Word of God and to the cries of the earth provides the true measure of the ministry of the pastor as prophet. Love of God apart from a love for the earth leads to damaging fundamentalism. Love of the earth apart from love for God leads to all manner of accommodation.

In the lobby of the church offices of the Evangelical Church of the Rhineland there is a magnificent sculpture commemorating the Barmen Declaration which was affirmed in nearby Barmen Wuppertal. Out of a bronze base emerge figures. The majority are uniform and uniformed, standing in lockstep, facing one direction, their

hands outstretched in the Nazi salute. Behind them, a small group huddles together, men and women, old and young, gathered with their backs to the others around an enormous open book: “Jesus Christ, the One Word of God we are to hear, trust, and obey in life and in death.” We rightly honor this document and its act of confession. Yet even here, an obsession only with the Word of God – Karl Barth was one of the principle drafters – reveals the limitation: Nowhere in the Barmen Declaration is the plight of the Jews addressed or challenged. Word of God *and* Word of earth.

Today the pastor as prophet is the church’s guide on the journey of liberation, often against its will, from the cultural captivity to respectable religion, toward the demanding joy of evangelical faith. Walter Brueggemann puts it plainly:

Unevenly, but decisively, the long sojourn of the Christian religion as the established cultus of the Western world has almost spent itself. Although pockets of “Christendom” persist, and the temptation to religious hegemony and triumphalism is perennial, the process of Christian disestablishment seems likely to continue. . . . The Holy Spirit, and not the *esprit* of an allegedly Christian society is already, and will increasingly be known to be, the generative Source of life and faith in the post-Christendom church (Walter Brueggemann, *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context*, pp. 14-15).

Those of us whose ministry has been encompassed by the unfolding of this liberating process know well the agony of its birth pangs. But those of us who have not shirked our vocation as prophets, who have entered into the divine pathos it expresses, have had the enormous privilege of being its herald and midwives.

## The Pastor as Poet

In a recent collection of short stories published after his death, John Updike reflects on the religious pieties of the Pennsylvania of his childhood and the New England of his maturity. In this particular story, clearly autobiographical in its origins, David, the narrator, is attending his first high school reunion outside of Updike's own hometown of Reading, Pennsylvania. There he encounters an ageing fellow classmate too ill to attend the celebrations.

Mamie tried to tell them about her suffering. "At times I've felt a little impatient with the Lord, but then I'm ashamed of myself. He doesn't give you more than He gives you strength to bear." In theistic Pennsylvania, David realized, people developed philosophies. Where he lived now, an unrestricted atheism left people to suffer with the mute, recessive stoicism of animals. The more intelligent they were, the less they had to say in extremis, (John Updike, *My Father's Tears and Other Stories*, p. 39).

There is something quite homespun and familiar to us in Mamie's piety, evoking the contours of countless pastoral visits we can each recall. The philosophies people develop wouldn't always or even often pass the close reading of the theologian or the critical analysis of the biblical scholar. How many of us have smiled in a superior sort of way.

And yet. I don't mean to compare New England negatively to Pennsylvania. I've been a pastor in both places and each has its comforts and its challenge. The point here is not cultural comparison, but the very honest assessment of the impact of "an unrestricted atheism" in our society. Mamie had a framework of meaning within which to place her own suffering. We may flinch at her assumption that God gives us suffering, but her conviction that "God will also give you strength to bear" has sustained her. She has developed a philosophy, formed and shaped by years "practicing" her faith – prayer, the reading of scripture, the attending to Word and Sacrament. Her suffering may not be easy, in fact, it may be excruciating. Despair no doubt intrudes and threatens to overwhelm. But she has a religious imagination that enables her to suffer with more than "the mute, recessive stoicism of animals." We've seen it over and over again among our parishioners, and frequently have come to regret our condescending smiles in the face of sustaining pieties. It is to this religious imagination that the pastor as poet attends.

The loss of a shaping and scripting narrative is an ominous fact of life in North American culture. My colleague and friend, Mark Hansen, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, likes to tell a humorous but true story to make the point. Sitting on a plane shortly after take off, Mark heard a flight attendant get on the speaker to apologize for a lapse in catering that meant there would be no fresh water on board for the duration of the flight. Mark, wearing a clerical collar and cross, motioned for her to come to his seat. “You know,” he said, “if you bring me all those little bottles of wine you have in your cart, I’m pretty sure I could make enough water for all of us.” She looked at him blankly and said, “Father, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

To be sure, religion that is invasive and invading, either assaulting in its foolish certitudes or sentimental in its false consolations, leads many to abandon the deeper mysteries and scripting narratives. Alienated by pieties that abuse the earth and its creatures or that exclude the vulnerable, and by theologies that mock reason and demean the intellect, many have become functional, if not ideological atheists. Now atheism has its own fundamentalists. But for most, there is simply an absence of “philosophy” born of disappointment, disaffection, or more aggressive forms of alienation. Not angry rejection, but relentless slippage. Early prophets of this cultural trend were drawn to Shakespeare’s rumination on autumn:

That time of year thou mayest in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruin’d choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

Stripped of faith’s foliage, doxology grows silent, and all that is left is a kind of addictive consumption that commodifies everything – workers, sexual partners, the earth itself. Christmas has become shopping, Easter reduced to bunny rabbits. And Good Friday, well it is simply a much ignored bewilderment. Absent a “philosophy,” to use Updike’s terms, we are left with little more in the face of life’s challenge than the mute stoicism of the animals. Was there ever a time when the poet is needed more?

The task is formidable. Joseph Sittler, esteemed Lutheran theologian of the last generation, names the responsibility of the theologian or, for our purposes, the poet pastor, while at the same time acknowledging the challenge:

The poor man, unless he be a hod-carrier for a closed tradition or have a human soul carved of alabaster, will be alive and responsible to a double vocation: a vocation to work at the task of Christian theology, and a vocation to citizenship in the twentieth century. The first vocation binds [the theologian] to history, history in general and ecclesiastical history in particular. In obedience to this first vocation he must always look back and look down with responsibility, with gratitude, and in complete teachableness. In obedience to his second vocation (and this vocation is from God, too – for he was born a man on earth before he was called to a professorship on a theological faculty), he must look his day full in the face, participate in the joyous thud of ideas in collision, listen to its multiple voices, become a creature of its vitalities and torments. But as a man of this day he cannot avoid coming to terms with the fact that what he has to communicate is so radically strange to the symbolical mentality of his time that he can scarce find hooks to hang it on, allusions to convey it with, or a matrix of association to bear it forth, (Joseph Sittler, *Evocations of Grace*, pp. 21-22).

In helping us make sense of the world and of our place in it, the pastor poet is also and always the pastor prophet and pastor pontiff. Sittler reminds us that the vocation is far more than the manicure of our own souls or the development of an esoteric grammar for an insider's narrative. No, we must look our day full in the face. But there is also something to which we look back and look down with responsibility, with gratitude and in complete teachableness. It is the great Tradition of the church through the ages to which each of our traditions points. Here are the hooks, the allusions, the associations. And it is to this that the pastor poet attends.

In an essay titled, "A Fresh Performance and a Failed Script," Walter Brueggemann says that "the best procedures of liturgy, preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and diaconal work all belong to the act of rescripting. Only such scripting permits new performances of obedience and praise in the world." He then goes on to suggest that we may "imagine a great renewal among the baptized. We may reverse the imagery: While

the media, the market, and the furies of technological reason seek to induct us into new scripts of autonomy and brutality, our hands are practiced and, willy-nilly, revert to our best script of baptism,” (Walter Brueggemann, *The Word that Redescribes the World*, p. 56). Of course, like any script, it needs to be rehearsed, practiced. And here is where the work of the pastor poet is crucial.

Few of us can or will be poets in the literal or literary sense. I use the term somewhat loosely to describe the vocation of nurturing a religious imagination that can rescript for each generation the narratives of creation and grace, sin and redemption, narratives that can restore texture and intrigue, mystery and translucence to a world otherwise opaque and flat. Increasingly this poetic task of nurturing a rescripting imagination is focused on practices of faith that include things like Sabbath keeping, prayer, meditation, labyrinth, lectio divina, hymn singing, etc. The recovery of these practices among Protestants is certainly one of the more encouraging trends to note in recent years. But the central opportunity for the pastor poet to rescript a biblically shaped narrative is in the liturgy. Here, I suggest, we have much work to do!

The liturgy of the Orthodox tradition opens with the priest’s announcement, “Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.” Icon and incense, bread and cup invite the worshipper toward the horizon of God’s promised realm and to membership in the triune community of God. The liturgy situates the believer, not in an alternative universe, but in the actual world that God is in the business of revealing. This emergent world, we believe, *is* the real world, rather than the world our culture seduces and tricks us into accepting. Admittedly, our spare meeting houses and stripped down Reformed liturgies make this poetic task somewhat challenging. The friendly “good morning” that greets the worshipper intends, to be sure, a warm expression of hospitality, but it often feels borrowed from the everyday script, inviting us into congregational community perhaps, but not into the triune community of God’s new and liberating realm. Even worse, the inevitable announcements begin a torrent of words that further obscure the Word, words now voiced not only from the pulpit but projected on the walls.

Yet the poet pastor, even in our Protestant – Reformed tradition, is not without resources. We could begin our worship evoking the promises of our baptism that identify

us as blessed children of God, disciples of Christ, members of the church whose lives are defined, shaped and scripted by grace. In this grace we are neither a violated commodity nor a violating consumer, but a holy child. We could work to transform the passing of the peace from a mini-fellowship hour into a powerful sign of reconciliation enacted in Christ and lived out through the Spirit. In this reconciliation relationships are transformed from paradigms of suspicious exchange and greedy competition to models of mutuality and forbearance. We could make our sacraments present more frequently and engagingly, with water, bread, and cup communicating deep Presence for judgment and grace. In these events the Holy becomes real through incarnated mystery and we are transported by the Spirit from the limiting confines of a singular time and space to the expansive world of the communion of saints. We could announce the Word in ways that insert congregations into the great story from Creation to New Creation rather than simply imparting information or calling the troops to the next crusade. In this listening we are shaped for holy living rather than grim existence. We could turn collections into offerings, reminding ourselves that life is about gratitude rather than obligation, delight rather than duty. And we could cultivate a careful and grateful listening to the real poetry of scripture and hymns, enabling all to participate in the rhythms and cadences binding us to the church and its narrative through the ages. Poet pastors rescript the church's imagination by the dramatic presentation of the ancient narrative in Word, Font, and Table.

This rescripting is a critical task for the church, and not just because of the "unrestricted atheism" Updike alerts us to. The public square is not so much naked as it is crammed with competing narratives that seduce and tempt. Sociologists like to speak of the religious world today as a "spiritual marketplace," but in fact the marketplace is filled with powerful and alluring voices having little to do with the Spirit, hawking their often violent and excluding narratives of blood and soil. William Cavanaugh, a Roman Catholic theologian, has published a study of the Catholic Church in Chile during the years of the Pinochet regime. With the arresting title, *Torture and Eucharist*, Cavanaugh chronicles the failure of the church's narrative to counter the state's narrative: "Torture is the imagination of the state, the Eucharist is the imagination of the church," (p. 229). To visit the prisons where the political prisoners were tortured, and to listen to their shocking

stories as I was privileged to do outside of Santiago two years ago, is to see the power of narratives to destroy, and of the demonic capacity of false poets to manipulate and terrorize. Cavanaugh continues:

Where torture is an anti-liturgy for the realization of the state's power on the bodies of others, Eucharist is the liturgical realization of Christ's suffering and redemptive body in the bodies of His followers. Torture creates fearful and isolated bodies, bodies docile to the purposes of the regime; the Eucharist effects the body of Christ, a body marked by resistance to worldly power. Torture creates victims; Eucharist creates witnesses, martyrs. Isolation is overcome in the Eucharist by the building of a communal body which resists the state's attempts to disappear it, (Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, p. 206).

The coup that killed President Allende and brought Pinochet and his henchmen generals to power occurred on September 11, 1973. That historical footnote serves as its own small challenge to the narrative that has been relentlessly seducing us in the United States since September 11, 2001. With all of its horror, and without diminishing the pain that so many experienced, including some in our own churches, that event could have encouraged an imagination grounded in deep solidarity with a world that has known countless September 11's, a shared vulnerability with peoples around the globe and in our own communities who have never felt secure. The violence that terrorizes innocents everywhere else in the world suddenly had breached our defenses, our privilege. And in shock and, let's be honest, filled with a good deal of American exceptionalism and self-absorption, "our" September 11 became the singular one that "changed the world."

And our poet leaders? Did they script a narrative of new solidarity? Of shared vulnerability? No, the poets Cheney and Bush traded on fear to manipulate and seduce us into a narrative that reclaims privilege at almost any cost to others. Our own liturgies of torture at Abu Grahیب, Bagram, and Guantanamo, our own unholy processions of secret rendition, the lies that launched a war of liberation that has become a war of seemingly endless death, all have sprung from a demonic narrative that was sold to a populace whose spiritual narrative had either been distorted by the religious right or proved insufficiently captivating to provoke meaningful resistance. I remember being in Berlin on September 11, 2001, watching the BBC. The one image of religion that was shown

was of a mega-church, its chancel festooned with enormous American flags. It was eerie and frightening to watch this spectacle in a place not far removed from its own seduction to a narrative of blood and soil.

Walter Brueggemann tells us that it is the responsibility of the prophet “to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only one thinkable,” (*The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 40). Brueggemann speaks of this as the “prophetic imagination.” But the conjuring and proposing is the task of the poet. Who was able to give voice to the reality that bread and cup is not for international embargos depriving Iraqi children of good, but for sharing with the children, that oil is not for greed and security, but for anointing and for healing, and that water is not for protected shipping lanes, but for cleansing, forgiveness, and life? On the day we launched our invasion and occupation of Iraq, your colleagues gathered in the Amistad Chapel for prayer and lament. We sang these words:

This is my song, O God of all the nations,  
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.  
This is my home, the country where my heart is;  
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;  
But other hearts in other lands are beating,  
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.  
My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,  
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine.  
But other lands have sunlight, too, and clover,  
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.  
O hear my song, O God of all the nations,  
A song of peace for their land and for mine. (Lloyd Stone, 1934)

Think what we've witnessed since. How we've missed the voice of the poet, and her narratives of peace!

Poet pastors help us imagine holy narratives that can sustain resistance to evil, that provide “philosophies” in extremis. Ultimately they help us know who we are. “A Christian,” writes Sittler,

is a person whose life is centrally gripped by the reality of God, and who has come to see the reality of this God most clearly in that fully God-grasped man, Jesus. This being grasped by God is never complete, and the Christian's life, in thought, word, or deed, is never fully obedient to this having-been grasped. But the Christian knows his life ought to be, and this "ought to be" is for him forever a gift of grace, a judgment, an allure, and an incompleteness. In this grace, under this judgment, troubled toward the better by this allure, and simultaneously repentant and joyful in this incompleteness, he is always in motion: "I press on, hoping to take hold of that for which Christ once took hold of me." (Sittler, *Evocations of Grace*, pp. 202-203).

Here is the deeply personal, yet profoundly corporate narrative to which the poet pastor constantly calls us, troubling us toward the better with the Gospel's allure. It is the narrative of God's promise. And ultimately it is this promise that the pastor as pontiff, prophet, and poet is called to embody.

## **The Pastor as Promise**

The delightful movie “Chocolat” portrayed a small French town under the oppressive domination of a mayor and a young priest who viewed any kind of joyful expression, public exuberance, or loving delight as licentious display and dangerous perversion. The town lived in a state of perpetual gloom with moral perfection a relentless demand and an unattainable goal. Until, that is, an attractive, vivacious young woman with a mysterious past arrives and opens up a chocolate shop. She and her shop are everything the mayor and the young priest are not: expressive, boisterous, seductive, extravagant, sexy, alluring. Her overt joy in life enrages the mayor and frightens the priest who conspire together to close her shop and exile her from the town. For a time she prevails gloriously, and even though she leaves the town in the end after a set of tragedies, one senses that things will never be the same in this little village. The promise of grace has been tasted, literally in her chocolate confections, not to mention her love for life, and there is little appetite now for the bland, even grim, perfection once served by the mayor and the priest.

Pastors are haunted by expectations of perfection, often their own not to mention others. This runs from the trivial to the profoundly serious, compounded by the fact that, at least from my own anecdotal experience, many pastors grew up eager to please and even more eager for praise. And what attracts both better than perfection. Parsonage life provides its own kind of exposure to congregational evaluations of moral behavior, child-rearing practices, and even hygiene. Changing spousal roles have created their own disruption in the area of familial expectations, not to mention how to figure out what do to with gay or lesbian couples and their families in the manse. Pastors may enjoy more personal privacy and space than those of former generations, but it is still a public role with high expectations. We all sense demanding standards to which we must somehow live up. As a result, many of us preach grace but live a kind of works righteousness that saps our spirits and undermines our proclamation.

The very public scandal of clergy sexual abuse and our growing awareness of the damage this does to the vulnerable has prompted a whole series of important measures aimed at protecting members of our congregations and communities from predators. Behavior that was once winked at – “boys will be boys” – is now appropriately subject to

the church's discipline and, in some cases, the courts' adjudication. The sad consequence of this very necessary correction in our shared life is that we tend to give far more attention in places like our Association church and ministry committees to ensuring that bad things don't happen rather than cultivating joy and excellence among our clergy. It's revealing, and not very laudable, that in many places the only mandated continuing education for us is "boundary training." I fully support boundary training, but I do wish we could find a different name for it. What immediately comes to mind is teaching your pet dog how not to cross the invisible fence! And that not so subtly reinforces notions of moral perfection as the standard for our ministries.

This is not to suggest that we celebrate and promote moral *imperfection*! We've probably made far more of the virtue of "woundedness" than Henri Nouwen ever intended in his famous book, *The Wounded Healer*. But what if we were to replace the embodiment of perfection with the embodiment of promise, and viewed ourselves not so much the exemplars of high moral behavior as the embodiment of the Gospel's high promise? What our congregations need to experience in their pastors is not perfection, but forgiveness, justice, joy, and hope. And not just the teaching of these things, but the embodiment of them.

God promises forgiveness. In our *Statement of Faith* we pair this promise with "fullness of grace," implying a kind of generosity of spirit that can embrace the other in spite of the inevitable disappointments and betrayals of life. Pastors need not only to announce this from the pulpit, but live it in their lives. John Ames, the pastor of Marilyn Robinson's fictional Gilead, has a close clergy friend named Boughton. Boughton's son, Jack, is a grave disappointment to his father. Abandoning his home, he went off to the city where he fathered and then abandoned a child. In Robinson's more recent novel, *Home*, Jack returns to be with his sister and father as Rev. Boughton is dying, a poignant and beautiful reflection on forgiveness given, withheld, received, and rejected. But in *Gilead* Rev. Ames speaks of the glorious promise of forgiveness that he would like to see his old friend express:

And old Boughton, if he could stand up out of his chair, out of his decrepitude and crankiness and sorrow and limitation, would abandon all those handsome children of his, mild and confident as they are, and follow after that one son whom he has

never known, whom he has favored as one does a wound, and he would protect him as a father cannot, defend him with a strength he does not have, sustain him with a bounty beyond any resource he could ever dream of having. If Boughton could be himself, he would utterly pardon every transgression, past, resent, and to come, whether or not it was a transgression in fact or his to pardon. He would be that extravagant. That is a thing I would love to see, (Marilyn Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 238).

Yes, it is a thing we would love to see. Pastors embody this promise when, first of all, they demonstrate a capacity to forgive themselves for the ways they have betrayed or disappointed others. No small feat for most of us!

The paradigmatic portrayal of this in Scripture is, of course, the Parable of the Waiting Parent. The eagerness to forgive is seen in the Father, going out toward the far country long before the prodigal returns, scanning the horizon for the son who is lost. The passion to forgive is seen in the Father, embracing the son before the son even has the chance to voice his confession. Rembrandt's famous portrait, beautifully exegeted in one of Nouwen's other books, captures this intimate moment powerfully. But there, in the shadows, stands the older brother, a mask of disapproval and complaint on his face for grace bestowed promiscuously, undeserved, unmerited. He is the good son, the one who strove to be perfect and who, in his own mind, has come pretty close to achieving it! Why is this love being wasted, like the ointment lavished on Jesus' feet by the devoted woman at Bethany before his death? The church is populated with older brothers, and often we are among them, eager to enforce consequences rather than demonstrating forgiveness. The pastor as promise begins her day remembering her baptism, and in the ancient morning liturgy recalls Zechariah's words of John which become a kind of vocation for us: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before God to prepare God's ways; to give knowledge of salvation to the people by the forgiveness of their sins. . . , to give light to those who sit in night and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace," (Luke 1.76-79). The pastor as promise embodies forgiveness.

The Gospel also promises justice. The final liturgy of the monastic hours gives Mary the last word: *Magnificat*. The low lifted high, the proud scattered, the hungry fed

good things, the rich sent empty away. Good news to the poor, release to the captives, freedom for the oppressed. The pastor as prophet announces and advocates, judges and exposes. The pastor as poet lures and attracts, in Sittler's words, "troubles us toward the better." The pastor as promise is just and acts justly. Legalistic notions of perfection yield to patterns of justice in which right relationships and the relinquishing of patterns of domination that oppress grow more and more evident. The ordering of church life will reflect justice, and the style of relating to the congregation will embody justice. Preoccupation with power, privilege, prestige, the cultivation of favorites for the sake of personal gain or financial profit – all of this undermines justice.

This year we celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. One of his legacies to us is a nuanced perspective on the meaning of law. Law's first use, taught Calvin, was to reveal to us our sin and demonstrate our need for grace. Law's second use is to restrain evil and to protect the vulnerable. But the law's third use is to be a kind of mentor, teacher, or guide leading us toward holy living personally and corporately. Here is God providing the path toward justice in spite of our sin and in spite of the reality of evil. Here is God providing structures of human relationship – family, church, civil society – that have the capacity for justice. It is this understanding of law that, in a phrase from Marilyn Robinson, can make us receptive and responsive to "the imperatives of moral refinement," (in Peter Laarman, ed., *Getting on Message: Challenging the Christian Right from the Heart of the Gospel*, p. 11). The Reformed tradition reminds us that the world is not only in need of that refinement, but that it also has, to a significant degree, the capacity to embody it. Justice is not only for the next world, but for this world. Lutherans are right to warn us against an arrogance that assumes the kingdom is ours to create. But Lutherans are wrong when, taken to extremes, their two kingdoms relegates the possibility for justice to another realm, and to other actors altogether. God promises justice, and the pastor as promise not only seeks to promote justice, but to be just as well.

And the pastor as promise is joyful. Here it is critical to note the distinction between what we call happiness and what the Bible describes as joy. Happiness tends to ebb and flow with the circumstances of our lives. Happiness in the face of death, disappointment, betrayal, overwhelming challenge is not only unrealistic, it is likely a

product of denial or even self-deception. Jesus comes not to bring happiness, but joy. His prayer is that his joy may be in us, and be complete, not with any guarantee that we will be happy. America's founders betrayed their Deist philosophy rather than Christian moorings when they enshrined "the pursuit of happiness" alongside of life and liberty as one of trinity of "inalienable rights." What they did understand, correctly I think, is that happiness is something pursued and is, therefore, both attainable and elusive. As a result it is always either something frustratingly just out of reach, or something frighteningly easy to lose. It is sobering to consider that while the pursuit of happiness may be a right, happiness itself, at least in our nation's civil religion, is not.

As a result, it would be both unrealistic, and in a sense un-Christian, for the pastor as promise to embody happiness. For what the Gospel promises is joy. This joy is not an attainment, but a gift. It is something we receive rather than grasp after. Joy does not depend on the ebb and flow of life's exhilarating or exhausting events. Joy, in fact, is not incompatible with unhappiness. In Hebrews we read of Jesus "who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross," (Hebrews 12.2)! I have often lamented over the number of pastors I encounter who, when asked, "How are you?" respond with grumpy pride, "Oh, I'm busy. I'm so busy." That may be true. But is that how we ought to be defined or, even worse, to present ourselves? The pastor as promise embodies joy. She may and will experience the profound tragedies of life. He will often find that professional reach has exceeded grasp, that ministry is marked more by disappointment than success. In some cases faithfulness to the pontifical, prophetic, and poetic tasks will lead to very real crosses. Pathos and pain often accompany the pastor who seeks to love as God loves.

But if we simply mirror an unhappy world, grasping at happiness, what does it profit? And how does that reflect the Gospel and its promises we are called to announce? Many years ago I read a haunting essay by Elie Wiesel about Isaac, the ancient survivor whose encounter with a father about to sacrifice him evokes, for Wiesel, the experience of those who survived the flames of this century's Holocaust:

Why was the most tragic of our ancestors named Isaac, a name which evokes and signifies laughter? Here is why. As the first survivor, he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair and

entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter. Isaac, of course, never freed himself from the traumatizing scenes that violated his youth; the holocaust had marked him and continued to haunt him forever. Yet he remained capable of laughter. And in spite of everything, he did laugh, (Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, p. 97).

In spite of all, to laugh. The pastor as promise embodies joy.

And the pastor as promise embodies hope. A number of years ago I had the privilege of visiting our Mennonite partners in Colombia, Ricardo Escivia and the leaders of the Mennonite Church. This is a relationship that has been important to Connecticut, and many of you have met these colleagues. Our visit began in a classroom of the Central Mennonite Church in Bogota. These were hard days for peace and justice advocates in Colombia. Government troops, and paramilitary groups on the left and the right had been fighting for decades. One sensed that ideological commitments had long since yielded to struggles for power and pure mercenary greed. Meanwhile, “Plan Colombia” was the United States’ response, with its own economic and political self-interest helping to further militarize the conflict. Pastors and peasants were being kidnapped and killed in intimidation tactics aimed at control over land and resources. In other words, the situation had been, was, and would be for years to come, bleak.

In these situations I have become accustomed to beginning my visit with dreary briefings, chilling reports, and usually requests for financial assistance. Our hosts, however, began our visit with a Bible study. The text they chose has stayed with me: “Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart,” (2 Corinthians 4.1). The Mennonite Church in Colombia is small, a modest and to some extent marginal branch of the minority Protestant community. It never knew itself as “the Mainline!” Its capacity to influence the global politics holding Colombia hostage to unending violence and intimidation is minimal. Yet this is the message they wanted me to see: “We do not lose heart. . . .” Paul goes on, “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 Corinthians 4.7). The pastor as promise embodies hope. Do you believe that? Our friend John Ames of Gilead reminds us of experiences we all have had that I think tend to confirm this: “That’s the strangest thing about this life, about

being in the ministry. People change the subject when they see you coming. And then sometimes those very same people come into your study and tell you the most remarkable things,” (Marilyn Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 6). The only way to explain this, I think, is that pastors embody promise – forgiveness, justice, joy and hope – amid the pain and doubt and despair of this world.

### **Closing Words**

Pontiff. Prophet. Poet. Promise. It is, in the end, a blessed vocation for the ministry of blessing. Blessed because it is possible only as a gift - nurtured, practiced, disciplined to be sure, but given, not attained. Blessing, because that is all we are called to be, nothing more, nothing less. It is this reciprocal vocation – blessed and blessing – that pastors are called to express in pontifical, prophetic, poetic, and promissorial ways. Henry Harbaugh of the German Reformed Church, a leader in the Mercersburg movement, puts it beautifully in a post communion prayer found in his book for confirmands called *The Golden Censer*, and it is with his words that I close:

O God who is eternal salvation and inestimable blessedness; grant to all your servants, we pray you, that we who have received things holy and blessed may be enabled to be holy and blessed evermore.

