Homiletical ICU: How Chaplaincy Has Crafted My Preaching

by
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I have no dearth of fruitful memories generated by my experiences as a hospital chaplain intern and resident. One afternoon I had a heartfelt conversation with a patient's husband. His frustration was evident as he divulged in trust the depth of his wife's medical condition. I could tell that he was beat, tired physically, emotionally, and even spiritually. As often happens with families in hospitals, this husband was at his wit's end with trying to meet the needs of his spouse and with learning how best to assist in caring for her. The couple attended a charismatic Christian church out of state and had connections with a pastor of their same denomination locally. This pastor had come by to visit multiple times, which benefitted the couple at first, but eventually the visits only exacerbated the husband's spiritual pain. I had my suspicions why, but I asked him to share as he was willing and able. He said that the pastor listened to his agony but wasn't very comforting. Apparently the pastor didn't have much to say except that "God will never put more on you than you can bear." This aggravated the husband to no end. "That is *not* helping," he said with a strong glare. "Who does God think I am, Superman?"

Since that encounter I have never viewed 1 Corinthians 10:13 with the same eyes. In fact, this is one of my many experiences as a chaplain that has impacted not only how I encounter scriptures but also how I approach the preaching process as a whole. Standing with people in the midst of sickness and death, answerless inquiries, and static faith naturally shifted my personal Christian faith and my understanding of faith more broadly. Whereas, for example, I once trumpeted familiar Christian clichés like "God will never put more on you than you can bear," "I am too blessed to be stressed," "[God] may not come when you want Him, but He'll be there right on time," and even "God is good all the time, and all the time God is good," I now find myself more reserved and attentive to the perspectives of the people to whom we might want to give these as answers. Ministerial education is often so focused on knowing and articulating answers; my time in hospitals has altered my aim to welcoming and appreciating questions. Chaplaincy has led me to stand face-to-face with the frailties and pains of life and, like Moses before the burning bush, I have not since been the same.

There are ways my preaching has been touched by chaplaincy, and I will share a few of them here. It is my hope that at the very least readers will know that compassion is not to be exhibited only in immediate contact with suffering but rather also in the way Scripture is addressed and proclaimed. Ideally readers will generate some of their own experiences and draw upon them to craft an attentive, compassionate, broader theology of preaching. I intend this to speak not only to professional Christian kerygmatists, but to the entire household of faith, the priesthood of *all believers.* After all, we are all charged with loving one another as Christ loved us.

I have already alluded to the first way chaplaincy has changed my preaching: *it has fostered a greater attention to the dangers of certain scriptures and of the clichés we often generate from them.* Let us return briefly to 1Cor 10:13, the verse from which our husband's pastor articulated the well-known maxim, "God will never put more on you than you can bear." More accurate is the New Revised Standard Version's (NRSV) translation of the verse: "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that

you will be able to endure it." At first glance it may seem that the maxim is completely in line with the verse from which it is derived; I am inclined to agree.

However, that means that the dangers inherent in quoting this verse to someone in distress are also present in quoting the maxim. Pastoral caregivers (and chaplains especially) learn very early that people experience pain, agony, grief, despair, and a wealth of other feelings and, more importantly, that each person's experience is uniquely their own. In this sense, cognitive dissonance arises as pastoral wisdom seems to clash with Scripture. As chaplains we are to treat everyone as a unique individual and as if their feelings are real because they are experiencing them. Grief is extremely personal and in fact it sometimes involves an appropriate selfishness. To say that someone's pain is the same everyone else experiences is to effectively slap them in the face as an individual. Many might disdainfully respond to the lack of respect toward their feelings.

Furthermore, quoting this verse may effectively bypass the fact that someone may *not* be experiencing God as faithful—if they are experiencing God at all! The sense of God's absence is very real when difficulties come, even for people of faith.[1] Asserting God's faithfulness at the expense of truly hearing someone's experience of God's absence is detrimental to the pastoral enterprise. This is critical because many of us think of a minister's role is to defend God at all costs; contrarily, a chaplain understands her role to be accompanying those in pain, even if they feel apart from God.

The maxim that "God will not put more on you than you can bear" comes from the next part of the verse: "[God] will not allow you to be tested beyond your strength." As I said, this seems to make perfect sense. But danger lurks. Recall "Who does God think I am, Superman?" Again, one must be mindful of *what people experience* in their time of pain. Naturally, such people may feel their challenge is in fact beyond what they can handle. Giving them a cliché such as this one may provide less comfort and more angst. Such a cliché bypasses honoring the person's feelings in favor of upholding a long-held truth, and that may do more harm than good. The husband, for example, did not benefit from hearing that "God will not put more on you than you can bear." He needed someone to listen to the anguish behind his words.

I must say that these are potential dangers only. There is no guarantee that someone will receive the verse or the maxim in a way that ends up being detrimental. To be sure, many patients will appreciate being reminded of God's faithfulness and that there is nothing they face that is beyond their capability by God's grace. As a chaplain one must be aware that words can be received in a multitude of ways, therefore the chaplain must use the best wisdom they have.

Nonetheless, any potential danger ought to be enough to engender genuine caution, if not reconsideration. This is why I began to look for the inherent pastoral dangers in scriptural texts. In the time I spend contemplating how to preach a passage—or *if* to preach a passage—I consider with gravity all the ways my exegesis of the text might be received (to the best of my ability). My hope is always to deliver a constructive word without creating my own bitter not-Supermans. It is true that completely avoiding the risk of doing harm or bypassing someone's feelings is an asymptotic aim at best. Yet it is worth undertaking. Now more than ever I realize how much valuable ministry is missed because of loyalty to clichés and scriptures that may not be appropriate for the current situation.

Not unrelated is a second way my work as a chaplain has impacted my preaching, namely, *I consider the unheard voices* in the text much like I would consider the unheard voices

[1] We might consider, for example, the book of Lamentations or even Jesus' cry of abandonment on the Cross moments before his death.

in the room. I have visited many families both in and outside of their loved one's hospital room. In visiting families, chaplains are taught to mind the group dynamics and nonverbal expression. When I walk into a room, for example, I am making multifaceted mental notes: how many are present and what appears to be their relationship to each other and the patient, who seems to be the spokesperson or leader, what is the mood in the room (which can be indicated by how much conversation takes place or the dimness of lighting, among other indicators), what are the spatial relationships among those present, what is the age range, in what way is each person grieving (if they are grieving), who seems supported and who seems isolated, what is the general body language and are there any persons whose body language stands out from the rest, and a wealth of other considerations. In addition to these, I am paying special attention to who is talking and who is silent (or, to who openly shares that they are struggling and who curtly asserts that they are "fine"). All of these notes are made silently with families typically unaware that they are being read "between the lines." A chaplain knows that it may be the quiet person that is hurting the most, bottling in feelings, or is generally overwhelmed resulting in a type of expressive aphasia. Thus we keep an eye on them and make sure to let them know that we see them and their pain also. This is not so foreign to us in hindsight, as many ministers will confirm how many parishioners suffer in silence.

It is often easier to mind the most vocal persons than to utilize the patience necessary for serving the silent. My work as a chaplain helped me to not only cultivate that patience and other skills, but to look at family situations more broadly. When a grandmother dies, for example, I know not to solely attend to the mourning adult children at the bedside but also to offer comfort to the grandchild sitting alone in silence in the corner. How does he feel at this moment? How might he describe what just happened? If he is in the corner or with his back turned to his family, why is that? He is obviously grieving *his* loss in *his own* way;[2] if asked, what would he say? I no longer assume that the voices I hear are the only voices available. Perhaps there are others, many muffled by their own grief or other circumstances.

Knowing this, I turn to Holy Scripture with a broader perspective, and this is particularly true with biblical narrative. Let us briefly consider a familiar passage, Luke 17:11-19, wherein Jesus heals ten lepers. One of the ten (a Samaritan) turned back before fulfilling Jesus' command praising God in a loud voice and subsequently prostrating himself at Jesus' feet. Jesus asked about the absence of the other nine and then dismissed the Samaritan with praise for his faith. Many of us have read this passage for years understanding "the thankless nine" as ungrateful, selfish, or a host of other negative descriptors. But their voices are not heard. What would *they* say about the event? How would they feel upon realizing that people assumed their motivations without asking them? Or, suppose they came to church but kept quiet because they were embarrassed, they knew how everybody felt about them and they wanted to speak up but felt they couldn't. …*their voices are not heard.* Therefore, I approach Scripture with a mindfulness quite similar to that with which I encounter a troubled family: who here is isolated or in silence? We are eternally grateful to African American, feminist, and other methods of biblical scholarship for helping us consider the voices unheard.

A sermon is an appropriate time to give a voice to the voiceless or at least to make public that there are perspectives yet unheard. Sometimes the shyest church member will thank the minister for giving voice to what he could not say himself. My work as a chaplain has made me

[2] It is important to know that grief is very individual, even when experienced alongside others. Thus it is important to treat everyone's experience as uniquely their own and to attend to it with compassion.

more sensitive to the voices and perspectives I do not hear, and this has in turn opened up preaching and other ministerial gold mines in the depths of our sacred canon.

Finally, I offer a third way chaplaincy has benefitted my preaching, not unrelated to the second. I try to *make explicit the reality and depth of struggle*, spiritual and otherwise. This might come across as paradoxical at first. One might ask a reasonable question: Why is there a need to acknowledge struggle? Everybody is already quite aware that adversity and anguish exist. I find this to be a reasonable question and I hope to address it.

First, I reflect on an observation I made during my early time in divinity school. I noticed that although the suffering and death of Jesus is for most African Americans the lynchpin of the Christian kerygma, one can hardly attend a Good Friday service without hearing about Christ's resurrection (which, technically, is to be celebrated on Easter Sunday and not mentioned before then). Upon further reflection I recognized that funeral services typically emphasize Heaven or resurrection and try to downplay the loss that death has just cast upon the family and wider community. Despite my agreement that the empty tomb is the foundational Christian narrative, upon my pondering I recognized that grief was rarely acknowledged, let alone encouraged. Although our faith has a built in day to remember a loss, we skirt around it: Friday had been deemed "good" long ago, so the opportunity to highlight the trauma and tragedy of Jesus' lynching was all but completely taken. I wondered, can we address Good Friday and Holy Saturday in their own right, in their confusion and anguish? Can we acknowledge and sit with the pain we experience in all loss, especially death? I realized then, as I do now, that people dance around pain and struggle like second-graders playing hopscotch avoiding the forbidden square. Pain and difficulty are aspects of life that we know exist yet we generally try to avoid. I can imagine two strangers on the street walking headstrong on a collision course. They acknowledge each other, technically, but the acknowledgment is only just enough to go around each other. They each know the other exists yet they give minimal recognition and choose avoidance over the pain of a collision. Then they continue on as if nothing happened.

It is a chaplain's duty to not only be aware of a person attempting to rush past their pain but to kindly and compassionately stop them in their tracks and redirect them toward it, for only in facing one's pain can they move through—not past—it. This endeavor requires a chaplain to be well in tune with his or her own pain(s) first so that they do not cause harm when certain buttons are pushed, and chaplain training is extensively geared toward knowing oneself.[3] Ironically, this is one instance where an old cliché might do us some good: "no cross, no crown." Only after bearing one's cross can the crown be obtained. I am reminded of a treasured hymn, "Be Still, My Soul," wherein the hymn-writer says, "Bear patiently the cross of grief and pain." Struggle needs to be made explicit because too often we give it minimal recognition, if any.

Sometimes the issue is not with acknowledging struggle but rather with being authentic about what the struggle is. Countless patients of mine have found it impossible to admit that they are angry at themselves, family, friends, or even God. The latter is extremely important, particularly in the context of this current work. Chaplains are trained to make spiritual assessments, which are spiritual diagnoses of patients (and sometimes families) regarding loci of faith-related anguish. Anger toward God or the sense that God has abandoned the person surely ranks among chaplains' most often heard sources of spiritual pain. Often times anger toward God is the "elephant in the room" around which we dance as well. What is more, well-meaning families or loved ones often initiate this dancing due to their own discomfort with the elephant.[4]

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[3] Ministers of *all* types, especially pastors, would benefit from this type of training as well.

[4] This is also something a chaplain is trained to be aware of.

A chaplain is trained to utilize empathy and appropriate statements to arouse these authentic feelings, but they are hard to unearth. At the very least, a chaplain is to let the patient know that whatever they are feeling—even anger toward God—is valid and that it is okay (or even beneficial) to be authentic with themselves and God about those feelings.

All this is why I aim to preach with a candid recognition of spiritual struggle and pain. This is also a reason I tend to favor scriptures from the Hebrew Bible, as many of them exhibit a raw authenticity toward God unfound in the New Testament. Lamentations, Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes are but a few examples of raw expression par excellence. Consider, for example, Psalm 60 wherein an individual (most likely the king) expresses the lament of an entire nation following a political catastrophe that gets interpreted as a spiritual crisis. This psalm might be theologically troubling for many Christians because in it the psalmist explicitly holds God responsible for the destruction. Although the tail of the psalm (v. 12) articulates faith that proves resilient at the last instant, the jewel of this psalm is how well it expresses the multifarious emotions that a king (and nation) experience in tragedy. Psalm 60 is an example of faith that shows itself true, indeed, but not until the anger and pain pour from the devastated king's lips. This and many examples show that Scripture itself not only recognizes pain and struggle but also recognizes how crises in human life can feel like crises of a spiritual nature.

If the Bible is so authentic about such struggle, it would behoove those of us who proclaim its riches to imitate this authenticity. Yet we cannot do so if we continue to be honest about struggle in personal pastoral encounters while sidestepping the issue from the pulpit. A sermon is perhaps the best opportunity to inform the faithful that their struggles, whatever they may be, are not only real but accepted. Much like the silent sufferers to whom I alluded above, there are plenty of people in our congregations who feel that only certain of their feelings are "acceptable Christian emotions" (such as sadness) while others (such as anger) are thought to have no place in the Christian life. In preaching I aim to normalize many of the feelings that come along with the ups and downs of life. Chaplaincy, due to its fierce self-exploration and discernment of feelings, has crafted my preaching to do just that.

In summary, chaplaincy has crafted my preaching in at least three ways: First, it has generated attentiveness to the dangers of certain scriptures and clichés; second, it has taught me to mind unheard voices; and third, it has helped me acknowledge and healthily address struggle and pain, including those of a spiritual bent. Thus my training and experience as a chaplain, along with my seminary education, has opened the Holy Scriptures in a way I had never imagined. I can boast a pastoral toolbox comprised of more than "He may not come when you want Him" and "He'll never put more on you than you can bear." I am now better able to assess which tool is appropriate for which person and circumstance. I am a more attentive listener and a more authentic preacher, and it seems that both have been a blessing to friends, family, and others blessed by God's ministry through me. Who would have thought that my experiences as a chaplain in the ICU would gift me a new heart for my ministry to the world?