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ETHICAL DECISIONS FACING THE PARISH PASTOR

Edward Hedlin

“Pastor, can I talk with you for a minute?” Now what?, we wonder. Who am I that I should be called upon to answer your problems?

There are days the plaintive words of the prophets seem reasonably relevant. Amos’ answer to Amaziah was that it was not his doing: “I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’ ” (Amos 7:14,15).¹ Perhaps Jonah’s one-way ticket out of trouble seems attractive some days. (For us it is done more respectably through accepting a call).

In all fairness our people may be tempted to echo Ahab’s feelings about Micaiah. “I hate him for he never prophesies good about me, but evil” (1 Kings 22:8).

Confronted with problem situations the question arises: Am I to straighten this out? It is well from time to time to have to face what our ministry is about. Certainly the area we may refer to as “ethical decisions” becomes a point where we are forced to face the issues of our ministry.

I

What is the role of the parish pastor? What should be done in sharing the trust of people; or in some cases, seeking to avoid being drawn into their situations on terms that would be untrue to the ministry?

Biblical imagery and hymnody use the picture of warfare in expressing the Christian life. In that picture the task in part of the pastor is to avoid giving aid and comfort to the enemy.

The real ethical issues for the pastor then lie in the handling of the Word of God which we have been called to teach and preach. Human nature being what it is we do not always clearly see what that Word is saying about our situation. Our listeners do not always hear what is said about theirs. The trick of the ear is to form that Word to what they would like it to say. There is always the wish to have a questionable position legitimized rather than being led to solutions. For us there is the temptation to be “nice guys” acceding to those wishes and doing what is least painful for the moment. It can be lonesome to hold true to the Word which needs to be heard.

We are called to present the law and the gospel; the difficulty is to rightly divide and bring them to the issue at hand. The gospel word can easily be spoken, but perhaps the word of promise cannot be heard because the person is not ready for it.

1. All Biblical quotations are taken from the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*.

The word of forgiveness may come too quickly if there has not been a facing of the need for repentance and time for amendment of life.

The law gives a sense of importance and power if we give way to the temptation to pound someone with it. It can instill a great sense of righteousness to be able to show others their wrongs, while at the same time reminding them of our rightness.

But law and gospel are not hammer and band-aid. They are given that all might “be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). How do we use them responsibly? It was our Lord’s way to use law when his hearers assumed they deserved gospel, and gospel when onlookers were sure law was called for. Again and again this will be our dilemma: Do we confront with the law or comfort with the Gospel? Here we have cause to sin boldly, but to trust Christ all the more boldly.

II

It seems that decision is present in every aspect of life. As a result the subtitle for this paper could be “why didn’t they teach this in seminary?” or “I wonder if that was the day I missed?”

In preparing this paper, I periodically jotted down some of the issues of our parish which had recently cropped up. This has served to give some framework to my reflections on ethical decisions the parish pastor may face.

Pogo, the comic strip character some years ago, called the hippie, ‘the fall-out of the population explosion’. The fall-out or drop-out of society is always with us, as is the question of how best to minister. The person on the other end of the phone asked, “Pastor, do you help people with personal problems?” The upshot of the conversation is that this is the opener in a request for money. The stories and requests are so varied, and often so interesting, that it becomes pointless to try separating truth from fiction. How then to deal with their needs; especially if all they have is wants—a dollar, two dollars, a tank of gas, and this is what they cling to with occasional references to their religiosity if that seems to be helpful. The pastor is by training and inclination a responder, with a wish to help which leaves a nagging feeling about entertaining angels unawares. At the same time the pastor wonders if Peter’s words to the beggar, “I have no silver or gold, but I give you what I have . . .” (Acts 3:6) don’t have some bearing on the encounter.

Medical issues are on the increase. It is no easy matter to meet family members when the wife has been asked by the doctor, “What shall we do with your husband? We can keep him alive, but it may not be much more than an existence.” It is the quandary which arises because medical science can do so much to prolong life, but cannot be certain what the existence will be. What do we do if the family which is asked to make some decision about life supports is not emotionally able to face such a decision? Certainly, as another wife said concerning life supports for her husband, you can have an intellectual understanding of the situation but there still is the heart to deal with.

To be invited into the struggles of those confronted with personal decisions of life and death is not a light matter. The conflicting emotions, the uncertainty, the feelings of guilt, all demand that one tread lightly, but surely.

Where life is involved, guilt has room to grow, when a mother has encouraged her

daughter to have an abortion it may have seemed a quick solution to a problem. The subsequent feelings of guilt are not so easy to handle. So the two ends of life bring into focus for us in the middle the question of what shall be our role in loving and caring.

III

The rites and ceremonies call for decision and offer possibility for conflict. It is safe to say that the majority of those who come to arrange for marriage are not as concerned with the pastoral agenda as they are with their own. The extremes are illustrated in two cases I experienced a few days apart last Christmas. One was a couple, both divorced, co-habiting, and with a goal of being married by December 31. His church was not prepared to meet his needs because of the divorce. Following a discussion of his situation and our practices, his comment was, "I never thought it would be so difficult to get married." He went elsewhere to see that his goal of December 31 was met.

Three days later it was a girl wondering if I would take on the task of straightening out and marrying her "tough cookie" sister who at 16 was living common-law with a twenty-two year old. She wanted her sister to come to someone who would talk about what marriage was. The sister, it seems, was content with her state. At least nothing more was heard from her.

These cases, as far as the pastors involvement is concerned, solved themselves very quickly. More difficult are those who come accepting a need for marriage preparation, but whose view of marriage is pretty much non-theological or at best hazily so. In these cases it is difficult to keep the couple from being evasive towards any spiritual considerations. How does one deal with them, while giving heed to the rubric of the marriage service, "No marriage shall be solemnized unless the Minister be convinced that God's blessing may properly be asked upon it"?²

Marriage, re-marriage, alternate arrangements pose problems of what can best be done in ministering to people who in so many cases have made such a confusion of life that they do not know how to pick up the pieces. These stories have a way of repeating themselves with family conflict, marriage breakdown, re-enactment in the next generation. Very often the pastor is not invited to assist in a solution, at least not until things are far advanced, and yet he still feels a responsibility.

The ministry of Word and Sacrament seems straightforward enough, but it constantly raises problems. How should one address the family that wishes baptism for their child, but does not grasp the extent of the commitment asked of them? To some it is a confusing thought to hear the instructions on the parental role, with the goal that the child "may lead a godly life until the day of Jesus Christ."³ There are times when there does not seem to be a lot of room between refusing the grace of God and making grace cheap.

If a child is brought from a neighboring parish because of some dissatisfaction

2. *Service Book and Hymnal*, The Lutheran Churches, 1958, p. 270.

3. *Lutheran Book of Worship*, Churches participating in the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, 1978, p. 121.

there, one faces another problem. The relationship to the pastor there, the family's place in the life of their own congregation, the fact that baptism is not to be in some kind of a vacuum apart from daily life in the community of God's people all become factors to be addressed. And if the baptism has not occurred some time later, whose fault is it?

There is always room for blame where the Word is taught. In our Confirmation program, which allows some flexibility in timing the confirming of faith, an annual Spring rite seems to be "if she isn't confirmed this Spring, she probably never will be." The pressure, as we see it, is not so much upon the pastor, as upon responsible instruction in the Christian faith, and the child's readiness to make public profession of their faith. No doubt the parents who see a specific goal in sight in carrying out their baptismal promise to provide for instruction in the Christian faith feels some pressure when the destination begins to fade in the distance.

The task of instructing the young has its uneasy moments in a day when moral certainties are in short supply. When youth express concern that they will not have the opportunity to grow old, how are we to be sympathetic to their feelings and fears? How do we share with them the hope which does not fail even in the face of the world's tremblings? There is much in their world to teach them that violence is a way of life, that evil is best met by force, and that love is an exploitive act. In this climate how do we lead in regard to what are ethical statements of our Lord, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39) and "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27,28).

IV

This seems to have offered only questions. It is not my task to speak of how we may have handled them, but I would say something of directions that are helpful. Years of preaching say it would not do to raise questions without some thought of where one can look for answers. Let us then be reminded of who we are and what we are called to do.

To consider the ethical issues in a parish can be very discouraging; there is no end to the problems. We need to remember that there are many more who find wholeness in life. In the forgiveness of sins they are joined together with others in a life of faith and service. Their loving and caring provide support and direction for the strugglers.

The pastor's time and attention are so often hemmed in by the disorders, which for some have become a way of life, that he needs to see the tranquility of others. Even more we need to see again the way in which God's grace is sufficient for those with real hurts to deal with.

The pastor generally is not the first person to minister in a community nor will he be the last. As a result we are not free to assume that we alone have the correct answers. There was value in the ministry of those who preceded us, whatever limitations, real or imagined, we may perceive. Our ego may respond to comparisons which are disparaging to the one who has left, but we do so at the peril of planting the seeds of a re-enactment upon our departure.

In like manner a good sense of pastoral ethics recommends that we are careful not

to place pitfalls before him who follows us. Expedience or personal opinion dare not lead into quick, easy solutions that will create difficulties for a successor.

What is the basis on which we make our judgments?

1. Faith. We are first of all people of faith. Christian ministry, in its broadest term, is based on our baptism, our membership in the family of God, our being joined to the death and resurrection of our Lord. We are called to be witnesses, not to some technique of life nor to some religious formula which says "Trust in the Lord and all will be well". It is a call to discipleship. It is an invitation to live out the implications of our baptism as a daily experience. As the Catechism says: "It means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever."⁴

2. Ordination Vows and Letter of Call. Our ordination vows give a focus to that which we are committed to do. My ordination service, as all others, spoke primarily to the call to a ministry of the Word and Sacraments and the teachings of the Confessions. It then went on: "That thou admonish thy hearers faithfully to a true repentance, and a holy life of love toward God and man; and That thou thyself make sincere endeavor to live according to the Word of God, so as to serve the Lord in truth as a right Shepherd of the flock entrusted to thee."⁵

Likewise, the Letter of Call which brought me to my present position stressed the place of the Word, Sacraments and Confessions in my ministry. As an expression of this it tells me to "Instruct the children of the parish in the Christian faith and teach them to observe all things Christ has commanded . . . Minister to all the members of the parish according to their particular needs and administer the means of grace to them".

After a number of housekeeping responsibilities of the parish it continued, "Strive in Word and deed to be a worthy example in Christian living, avoiding conduct which might endanger the faith of others."⁶

This all says that our use of the Means of Grace is directed to the goal of faith and to its expression in daily life. The whole arena of ethical decision is subject to this. It is a large and awesome task; one in which we are ever driven to trusting God's grace and his promise of forgiveness.

Perhaps the words of Luther's Sacristy Prayer are a fitting conclusion.

O Lord God, Thou hast made me a pastor and teacher in the Church. Thou seest how unfit I am to administer rightly this great and responsible office and had I been without Thy aid and counsel I would surely have ruined it all long ago. Therefore do I invoke Thee. How gladly do I desire to yield and consecrate my heart and mouth to this ministry. I desire to teach the congregation. I, too desire ever to learn and to keep Thy Word my constant companion and to meditate thereupon earnestly.

Use me as Thy instrument in Thy service. Only do not Thou forsake me, for if I am left to myself I will certainly bring it all to destruction. Amen.

4. Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, 1968 edition, p. 25.

5. *Altar Book*, 1915 Edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House), p. 133.

6. Letter of Call, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada.