

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

Ethics for the Ordained and the Communities That Call Them

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I woke up this morning and realized what I'm after in these reflections is the relationship of vulnerability and care for pastors. We are both called to care for the vulnerable and become vulnerable in that caring. I didn't rework the manuscript on this short notice, but thought you may find it helpful to know that this is the emerging focus.

The most cherished good in nearly twenty-seven years of ordained service is the concrete glimpses of God in the ordinary, every day, particular, human relationships of life. If ethics is the pursuit of the good, I'll start with "Calling humans into the service of God and God's people is good." I would say it is not only good, but also the most profound, necessary and unlikely experience of God revealed in Israel and Christ Jesus. Necessary because at the center of biblical faith we see God involved in relationships with all of creation. Profound, because at the center of Christian faith, God becomes human in Jesus. And I really want any of you who may be considering the call to hear that it is essential and good for you to be human in this calling.

I also said unlikely because God in the earthly or human is so easily missed. It's not like when you get ordained you get a particular set of spectacles that allows you to see God in the human. And what's worse, you do not get any kind of aura that allows your community to see God in you. An ordained pastor gets daily practice in encountering humans and serving their interpretations of who God is. . . .and communities get daily practice at receiving these interpretations from another human. That's exactly what's happening at this moment.

I really believe this about God in the human—God is most fully God when in relationship with humanity. And humans are most fully human and alive and available to receive and give life when in relationship to God and one another. Calling humans into the service of God, into this particular relationship, is good.

And yet, as we all know, being human is to be limited in time, space, perspective, insight, perception. Yes limited, AND frankly warped in perspective, insight, perception. Our mis-steps, mis-takes cause genuine misery. Pastors are not immune to human stupidity, pride, hypocrisy and it injures communities as community brokenness inflicts misery on pastors. I could not count the number of times I've told God in my prayers, "Using humans is a bad idea!" I could be more specific "Using ME is a bad idea!"

So the working title became Ethics for the Ordained: the good, the bad. . .and yes, I feel constrained to say, the ugly. It's good that humans are called. It's bad that humans are called. And what on earth are we going to say about the ugly.

For the last few decades churches have confronted significant data about egregious, abusive offenses by clergy. While the most publicized are often sexual offenses, the offences include devastating financial crimes, malpractice and other betrayals of trust that have been enormously damaging. What's more, it has become clear that institutions across denominations have failed to deal with these affronts in ways that serve safety in churches and agencies. Perpetrators have been overlooked, in some cases moved along to other positions within the church. Too often professional misconduct has been excused with glib, "Everyone makes mistakes" or "All are sinful after all."

One of my questions is how to be clear about this ugliness without being overwhelmed by it. I see two dangers: one is further repressing or ignoring the truth about what has happened. The second is being preoccupied by it: warping the whole practice of ministry in an effort to somehow secure safety. For example, this includes questions of touch or of being alone with someone. Some pastors are being coached never to touch or never to be alone with a person. . .to meet in a coffee shop or some other public place. This has some validity, but strikes me as significantly fear based. I think of my widowed mother recovering from surgery and how this boundary would doom her to isolation.

A second question is how to help communities think about this systemically. It's easy to blame. There are times and ways that perpetrating pastors, their victims, their bishops all make big targets. How do we think about ethical discernment in community in ways that help us see our own vulnerability and brokenness and the ways we function that make others vulnerable? How do communities recognize and work through their expectations of pastors, claiming necessary and reliable integrity without unreasonable, unattainable demands?

In essence, the ethical dilemma I am posing is that being human is both essential to the living and serving the Gospel . . .and destructive of it. I so appreciated Dr. Jungling's clarity two weeks ago in distinguishing ethics in our relationship with God and with neighbor. With God, it will always and ever be God's faithfulness, God's grace, God's promise for the broken. Amen. With humans we have to talk about it. As she said, Christian ethics has the freedom of grace with which to begin. Were it not for the freedom of the Gospel, the conundrums may well be too overwhelming or threatening even to express.

Visions and Expectations of Ordained and Rostered Leaders of the Church currently guides the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in its consideration of clergy and conduct. Thankfully, it is clear that this church does not expect pastors to be perfect. I need to return the favor and say I do not expect such a document to be perfect. In my estimation the most important part of the document is the way it clarifies that to be ordained is not a right, or something that can be self determined, but happens in relationship, a call of God mediated through a community of faith. This honors that the

focus of ministry is the neighbor, the other. Much like Dr. Jungling's lecture, it sets the conversation communally and that is important.

The document affirms both that humanness is vitally important and the God's grace is essential in living with that humanness. I quote:

Ordained ministers fulfill the calling of the pastoral office not only by what they do in carrying out certain tasks, but also in who they are. . . . Pastoral identity is not one of moral or spiritual perfection. It is, instead, the living out of the good news that one is justified by God's grace and thus called to live out that grace in daily life.^[1]

The document then attempts to clarify behaviors. Many of these definitions are obvious. And when conduct has been breached the processes seek repentance and restoration. This clarity, these boundaries are helpful. I do not read boundaries here that are as reactive as banning all touch or private, isolated conversation.

What I think is missing is guidance for Christian communities in trying to talk about what is helpful, acceptable, moral. As I've alluded above, even if our documents do not require it, legal counsel is advising very restrictive practice. Do not be alone. Do not touch. Do not be friends with parishioners. It is the height of irony that at the same time such boundaries are freely asserted, the latest publication out of Duke Divinity School on pastoral excellence uses "holy friendship" as its guiding metaphor.

Do you hear what I'm saying about being able to be honest and clear about the ugliness that has happened and must be prevented. . . . without reactively absolutizing boundaries? We need to be attentive to protecting people, but do we not also need freedom to care?

Karen Lebacqz, an ethicist at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, challenges the way boundaries are dominating the conversation at the moment. She writes,

Boundaries language reflects the underlying assumptions of autonomy, which looms large in American culture. When we confuse autonomy with freedom, we assume that we can live happily while isolated and disconnected from others. By contrast, to be in the body of Christ is to believe that we are deeply connected to others.^[2]

Lebacqz proposes permeable boundaries. That's a little oxymoronic—if it's permeable is it really a boundary? It is also wonderfully organic and relational. And it changes the question from whether something is allowable independent of a particular situation to is it helpful in this relationship at this time? If we'd call it a membrane, a permeable membrane, instead of a boundary perhaps our friends in cellular biology can help us as they've helped us with systems thinking.

How do we serve and participate in the vulnerability of all of us in community and care? I'll close with a very modest proposal around awareness and engagement. Pay attention

to oneself and to one another. Pay attention especially to one another. I know too well the capacity to delude ourselves—so we need each other to help us be attentive.

And then engage. The simple question, “Are you OK?” Perhaps better, “Is this helpful for you?” I know from both sides of pastoral relationships—both giving and receiving care—that touch is powerfully full of care and utterly fraught with potential for misunderstanding. To be able to engage—to talk about what touch means to each person and for whose benefit it is offered, is crucial. If it cannot be talked about, how will we know it serves relationship, if it is ethical?

I remember attending a “boundaries awareness workshop” several years ago. Afterwards I thought to myself, I keep hoping I’ll learn something, some way to be, some clarity about what to do that will keep me from being vulnerable. What I keep learning is that the most important thing to learn is that you *are* vulnerable. So pay attention. And engage help and feedback when you need it. And remember, ministry is undergirded not by your diligence or purity, but the promise of God which frees you to be human.

I’ll close autobiographically. I have been vulnerable: taken on too much, let myself get too tired. And I have made more mistakes than we could count. I am more grateful than I can say to serve in a community where people notice. In preparing this, I was trying to remember what people have said to me. It’s something about the way they said my name. Paul. Paul. The irony of redemption is that these engagements, this ethical candor about what was wrong has not been condemning—it has been freeing and blessing both of the gift of being human and God’s profound, if confounding, insistence on using humans, real live, mixed, utterly human humans for the work of ministry.

Postscript

For those of us who are helped by narrative descriptions, the fiction of Marilynne Robinson has explored pastoral ethos more as thoroughly as anything I’ve read. I did not include these illustrations in the lecture because of time, but I add them here as narrative description of the good and bad of humans in pastoral relationships.

In her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson explores the ethos of being a pastor as thoroughly as anything I have read. I’m grateful for hundreds of beautiful illustrations of the gifts of being human in ordained service of God and God’s people.

Pastor John Ames, a congregational pastor in Gilead, Iowa writes a letter to his young son that is an expanded reflection of his life. Consider this story as an example of the sacred glimpses ministry gives. Pastor Ames is reflecting on an encounter with a young couple strolling down the street.

The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of

luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair and her dress as if she were a little bit disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. I don't know why I thought of that now, except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash. I wish I had paid more attention to it. . . This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it.³

Last year Marilynne Robinson published a second novel about Gilead, Ia. This one is called *Home*. It is basically the same story as her first, but this time it is told from the point of view of Jack Boughton. Jack is named for John Ames, is his godson, the son of his best friend and the Presbyterian pastor in town and is a troubled, alcoholic renegade. We know from *Gilead* that John Ames has struggled to bless Jack. This time we hear from Jack how painful and difficult the relationship has been. The books together are a marvelous study in perspective. Without even knowing it, Pr. Ames has been demeaning, demoralizing, shaming. Told with amazing grace and insight, you hear and feel the anguish of humans failing one other.

^[1] *Visions and Expectations for Ordained and Rostered Ministers* available at <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements-in-Process/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Current-Policy/Vision-and-Expectations-Ordained.aspx>

^[2] Karen Lebacqz and Joseph D. Driskill, *Ethics and Spiritual Care* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) 52.
³ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2004)

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

SERVING THE BANQUET - On **Mon., March 2nd**, we again have the privilege of serving the Banquet (the local downtown soup kitchen.) There will be two shifts - one for food prep, and one for serving. The afternoon shift runs from about 2-4 pm, and the serving shift starts about 5:15 pm. There is a sign-up sheet on the Narthex table.

CHAIR OF MORAL VALUES SERIES - "*Ethics in the Academic Disciplines*" series begins on Feb. 9th and continues on Mondays through Mar. 16th. The preachers will represent various departments on campus. There will be a panel discussion to wrap up this series on Mar. 19th.

SPRING BREAK SERVICE TRIP - Registration is beginning for the spring break service trip to flood-plagued Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Students will be leaving on Monday morning, March 23 and returning on Friday evening, March 27. Students will be staying in a local church and doing renovation/clean-up from the June 2008 flood. The cost of the trip is \$100 and it includes 2 meals/day and transportation to and from Cedar Rapids.

A Tetnus shot is recommended but not required. The chapel is willing to pay for gas if anyone is willing to drive to Cedar Rapids and back (about 5-5.5 hours)

CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Wednesday (25 th)	ASH WEDNESDAY Holy Communion, 10 am - Pr. Paul; imposition of ashes
Friday (27 th)	Worship, 10 am - Kaylene Leaver, Sr. Spkr.
Sunday (1 st)	Dist. Schol. Worship - 9 am - Pr. Paul Worship, 11 am - Charlie Bahnson, 09
Monday (2 nd)	Worship, 10 am - CMV series, Jetty Duffy-Matzner, Chem.
Tuesday (3 rd)	Roman Catholic Mass, 10 am - Fr. Jim Mason