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# Ministry Without Fear

KRISTER STENDAHL

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I worry a lot about speaking to you senior seminarians. I feel honored and moved by the occasion. I sense much of the feelings and the fears and the joys and the hopes, sometimes together and sometimes in clash, that are present in this room and in your branch of the church. It is the kind of situation in which it is difficult for anyone to speak who doesn't have to pay the price of staying and sweating it out. I will not give a very delightful and happy dinner speech, although, I guess, real humor is not to tell stories but to know that ultimately things are in the hands of God and hence one should not get too serious about oneself, not even about oneself as a theologian or a pastor.

As you move toward seeking ordination and taking up the role and call of pastors, you are perhaps as aware as I am of the fact that there is no other job in the world where the gap, the hiatus, the gulf between our aim and achievement is greater. The true pastor always fails; the lawyer wins some cases and loses some; the doctor heals some and he fails to heal others. But we sort of fail all the time. Our aim is to bring the whole world under the will and rule and grace of God in Christ, and we lose all the time. That gets on our nerves. That is why pastors are pretty difficult people to themselves and to one another and

to their wives. There are temptations and frustrations and fears in any work where the task is so big and the achievement so small. In a certain sense, if we place ourselves under God, we are preparing for *the* task of failure and shortcoming. Or one could say it this way: Pastors are difficult, since they see all the failures of their fellow pastors and they certainly do not want to fail as those men have done. They want to do better. If we see somebody "succeeding," then we often have the suspicion that he succeeded because he was somehow compromising the pure ministry and was falling for public relations tricks and power games. So it gets rather complicated: he who fails succeeds, and he who succeeds fails; it's somewhat the same as with humility—you know about the man who was so humble, and he was so happy that he was humble, and he was so sorry that he was happy that he was humble, and he was so happy that he was sorry that he was happy. This is what led Martin Luther to believe in the forgiveness of sins, or better said, the necessity thereof in order to keep his humanity and his sanity.

A recent study of theological students at Yale Divinity School indicates that among those theological students who had been active in athletics, the vast majority had been in types of athletics which were not team sports; very few had been football

players, where the submission and coordination of the team was part of the art. We become touchy with regard to the failures of others on whom we should depend.

Of course, as loyal Lutherans we should know better because we have so good a theology and we are so able to accept the sinfulness of man. There are some who even think that our message is to make sure that man knows himself to be a sinner. I always think of Jesus as a remarkable preacher because as far as I can see He never spent a single minute of His ministry trying to convince Pharisees that they were publicans or trying to convince the self-righteous that deep down they were sinners. He just went for the sinners, and out of His ministry came a change of crew in the work for the kingdom.

But we know that the ministry is really, in learned language, the eschatological life-style, which means living according to the kingdom in the world which is not ready for it yet. That's what it is about; that's what the church is about. To accept the invitation of Jesus to practice the life of the kingdom in the world that is not ready for it yet. And of course that will not work. To turn the other cheek is almost demoralizing for the world. To practice the rules of the kingdom in the world which is not yet ready is subversive and will always be subversive, and not even the most polished doctrine of the two kingdoms can bail us out. The two-kingdom theory, which has served well at times, is also a very dangerous doctrine—and that is true about all true doctrines. All true doctrines are like atomic power: there is a lot of "fallout." The doctrine of the two kingdoms tries to resolve and lift

us out of this tension and this failure and this being torn to pieces by the demands of the kingdom in the world which is not ready for it yet. In so doing it has often made men's consciences hard; it has become an excuse, as it takes away from the Gospel what I like to call the "eschatological itch," the itch for the kingdom. The pressure is off our concern for peace and women's rights and things of that kind as we have become too smart in manipulating the division between the kingdoms.

No, our calling is to be the guinea pigs of God in that kind of "Operation Head Start for the Kingdom" which the church is supposed to be. And that is not an easy or successful calling, for not even love works. There are people who like to preach that love always wins out, but I don't believe that. There are wonderful Sunday school stories about the mother who loved her prodigal son, and he was in and out of reform school and in and out of prison, more in than out, but her love continued and somehow, just before she died, according to the Sunday school story, her love got through to him and he started a new life. Hallelujah and thanks be to God, such things happen—in 5 percent of the cases. But in 95 percent of the cases love in this world loses, is trampled under foot, is not a very pragmatic device. I wish it were, but the world is a little grimmer than that; even the love of God in Jesus Christ on Calvary was defeated by men. And had not God started it all over again in the glorious resurrection, it would have been just plain defeated.

That is the world we live in. That is the kind of world in which one's calling is to be worked out. And if he is not

ready for its fears and its frustrations, then he is not ready. Similarly, there are the fears and frustrations of *change*. To many, change is such a threat since they expect the church to be the bastion of non-change in a changing world. It's interesting to know why parents send their sons and daughters to church-related schools. Do they send them there in order to get them back as true revolutionaries for Christ? No, they send them to church-related schools because they are supposed to be safer — safer in terms of sex and safer in terms of the thinking process. In the minds of many, the church has maneuvered itself into the realm of supplying security, supplying the only thing safe when everything else is uncertain. But good theology, good Lutheran theology, says that nothing else is ultimately safer than to be in the hands of God.

It is hard, sometimes even cruel, to be a true pastor and to work for change when somehow one feels that he is expected and is hired to supply the good old stuff, the only nonchanging thing. A preacher and pastor needs to learn something that St. Paul knew, namely, to have an eye not only for the continuity, for the way in which Scriptures have the answers, but also for what might be a radically new situation. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul discusses divorce and says, "Now on this very case of divorce I have a word from the Lord, and it says that we shouldn't have any of that." But then he goes on to say, "Now of course there are very complicated cases. As, for example, when one is a Christian and the other isn't." And he takes up a lot of other questions about special cases, and when he is asked certain specific questions, he says: "On that one

I have no word from the Lord." I think he was the last preacher in Christendom who had the guts to admit that. I mean this very seriously because almost anyone else would have taken the other route. He would have said, "Now from the Word of the Lord, it follows for this specific case that . . . ." And that's what we do, just as in the textbooks. But Paul said: Sorry, Jesus hadn't thought about this one, or at least there is nothing recorded about it. That is to say, he analyzed the problem and the question before him by spotting how it was different from rather than how it was similar to the case in the teaching of Jesus. That eye for the newness, for that in which something is really new, is something with which both historians and theologians have great difficulties. Somehow they feel that their craft should pay off. If one has studied history for years, of course he should have examples of exactly the same thing in the past so that he can solve the problem now. History should pay off, and so should Biblical studies and dogmatics. But Paul had had his mind blown by the newness in and through Christ; he was fascinated by discontinuity and newness. It did not frighten him. And thus he says that he has no word from the Lord, or that to this the Lord has nothing to say, or that he tries to give good advice hoping that the Spirit will guide him to say the right thing. He gambles with the Spirit. He uses the Spirit as one should use it, not as a kind of golden frame of authorization of one's petty thoughts but as a push toward gambling where one does not know.

We have to learn from Paul to recognize what is new in our problems, for the atom bomb is not just a bigger gun, and

the metropolis is not just a bigger village, and it might even be that the pill and other modern contraceptives are not just new forms of coitus interruptus that might have ramifications for Christian thinking about premarital sex. To have the eye for the newness and to have the freedom that comes from one's knowledge of history and Scriptures and tradition and to have that glorious freedom which Jesus demonstrates when He was caught in theological arguments with scribes and Pharisees of His time and He said, "Yes, Moses said that, but from the beginning it was not so" — that is the freedom which the Scriptures often give us as we cut through generations of accumulated thought.

Fears of failure, fears of change, fears of uncertainty and risk are what hold us back — fears and frustrations especially in a time when one doesn't really know or believe with simple clarity what the future is. Such fears and such frustrations lead to a climate of suspicion within the church. There are tensions in the church, and tensions in the church might be all right, because if we are really brothers, not brotherhood-banquet brothers, we need not always be nice to each other. Then the church is like a good home: home is the place where we dare to slam the doors and get angry because somehow there is sufficient elasticity of love to allow us to be just as nasty as we are. But let's admit that we are nasty, and not cover it up, and let's test the true brotherhood to see whether it has sufficient quality so as to absorb the shouting and the conflicts among us. A brotherhood cannot be called Christian if we dare not test how much we really love one another. Conflict and confrontation can be healthy things. They are signs

of true brotherhood, just as it is when our black brethren — if we even deserve the right to call blacks brethren — tear into us. They are the signs of what Martin Luther King expressed so well: "I want to be your brother, not your brother-in-law." Brotherhood, if it is true in Christ, can take a lot.

In this as in so many matters we can learn much from Paul. In a way, he was the most arrogant, self-assured religious fanatic among the people mentioned in the New Testament. He surely knew that he was right. He surely was self-assured. But do you remember how he handles his showdown with the various factions and factions, the various teachers and teachings in Corinth? He has an interesting argument in 1 Corinthians 3. He says, "I build with good material, and the others build with bad material, but we are not going to settle this now. When God's day comes, the work of those who haven't built with good material will be destroyed, but they themselves will be saved." He does not read his opponents out of the church. That's rather surprising, considering how strongly he felt about his teaching. But to do otherwise would overlook the past that the church is the church and not a society for promotion of doctrines. It would turn theology into ideology, as we say today. Thus he says, "I cannot speak to you as spiritual people. You behave like Greek philosophers arguing with one another in the marketplace. But this is the body of Christ; this is the church; and we have another style, one where we leave the judgment to God." And he even says, "I am convinced that I am right, but that doesn't make me ultimately justified in

the eyes of the Lord, and the ultimate judgment I leave to him." (1 Cor. 4:4-5)

Now that is a *style* — to use a cool word for a hot thing — which perhaps is for us today. The church, as has been said already, is something else than a doctrinal or ideological society. There is a mystery which allows us to be together in the name of Christ, while in the world we see many things differently.

Somehow the world has a vague feeling that that is so. Somehow the world knows that, and that is why "the world" as expressed by *Newsweek* or whatever, is not as silly or superficial or secular as we on the inside are inclined to think once our foibles make the media. The world has the hope that the church will somehow have within it the power to settle its controversies in a style of love and compassion which does not mean disregard for the seriousness of opinion. That is why the world always feels so let down when there is lack of compassion in the church. Everybody knows that our witness to Christ is much more influential by what we do and how we handle our affairs than by 60,000 orthodox sermons.

Fear and frustration is what drives us the wrong way — the fear of failure, the fear of change, the fear of insecurity. Fears are what make us do the wrong thing. But the fear of fears — and that is the crisis of the church today if I understand it right — is something we hardly dare to speak about, because it's too basic. It is the crisis of faith, and not just little questions about virgin birth and real presence and the nature of the ministry and the number of days it took God to create the world. Doubt in the true sense is not a question about various dogmas — "Can

I accept this one or that one?" The real question is whether there is enough faith in the church — on the basic level. And I beg to guess that also in this seminary class, although we hesitate to speak about it, somewhere lurking deep down is, just as in the rest of the church, a basic crisis of faith. I happen to believe that one of the reasons is that our seminaries and our theologians have for quite a long period practiced vainly what I like to call "theology in the indirect discourse." The concern for firsthand experience of God has been called either pietism or psychologizing. Of course Concordia Seminary may be better than a lot of other seminaries, but when the straight question is asked, "What do you think about God, about man, about salvation . . . ?" theologians and pastors have fallen into the habit of talking about what the Christian or the Lutheran view is or what Luther said or what the Biblical view is. When we are pressed by the request, "I want to know what *you* say," we are often at a loss. We have learned to hide behind Scripture and tradition. "But what do *you* think?"

The time has come and is coming big to the American church today for new attention to and new seriousness about firsthand religious experience. The time has come for both more interest and more honesty in telling it as it is, in terms of what we really experience and believe. If I read the signs right, then we need and will get a new will to listen to firsthand religious experience and to have theologians and pastors speaking more honestly out of their experience rather than out of Scripture and tradition.

This will drive us to a deeper piety and to more meditation. It is a shame that the

campuses of this land have to import gurus from India to teach transcendental meditation and other fancy things, with or without drugs. If one ever wanted to see that the church has not done its job, he can detect it when the hunger for religious experience is such that people have to go that far to find anybody who is serious enough about such experiences. The life of prayer, the life of meditation, harder work on prayer and piety, and straight speaking about what we actually feel and believe have to come back to us. Otherwise our whole church will dry up. To be a Lutheran pastor is not to ask what is the Lutheran teaching about something; that turns our faith into an ideology. It is not to ask if one sounds Lutheran enough in his sermons. If that were the question, we could have sermons made by computers, with the Scriptures and the Confessions as the input and the Holy Spirit or the synodical officials or the seminary faculty as the programmers. But theology, both academic and practical, both in professorial lectures and in pastoral sermons, is a creative task, an art, ever new and ever renewed by the Spirit as it blows over the chaos of our own knowledge and experience and urges us to tell the truth. And Lutheran theology is to be judged by how deeply the Word of God and the priceless insights of our Confessions are digested by us and have by grace become second nature to us as we act and speak and think. Only so can we become creative in our ministry, for creativity demands freedom. Only so can we speak out of *our* experience, out of *our* faith, for soon one cannot hide any longer behind the notes he has taken about other people's faith, be it even Luther's own faith. We

can think of Luther in many ways, but one of the best ways to understand Luther is to see how he was one of those who had the guts to speak up and say that what he had learned from his confessions and from the way in which he had been brought up was not true to his experience. It just was not the way it was. It was not where it was. Luther had the courage to call the bluff, the courage and power to scrap secondhand religious language as stifling and untrue to his experience.

Thus, my plea is a very strange one — and one which I have come to lately because I speak out of the needs of my soul, as well as (I think) out of the needs of the church. I would like to plead with you to be very honest to your own religious experience. I am reminded of the story of David and Goliath. When David went out to meet Goliath, Saul offered him his armor so that he could really fight his mighty opponent, but little David said, "No, I'd better take just my sling." As I think of the church and as I listen to theologians and to preachers and as I read statements of the church, I hear a lot of the rattling of that big rusty armor of Saul. There are too few who are willing to take the risks with God on their side as David did. To speak out of one's own experiences of faith might not sound so impressive, but there is no substitute for truth and authenticity.

In the period of doing "theology in the indirect discourse" Lutheran theologians were highly in demand, for Luther is one of the greatest producers of theology worth studying and quoting. But we cannot go on forever just quoting. The time has come for us to speak out of our experience.

**MINISTRY WITHOUT FEAR**

I urge you to be authentic in your witness, even if it sounds ten times more naive than the best sermon that you finally managed to get into powerful style for a homiletics class. To be authentic in your ministry, let Scripture and tradition shape you and soak you, but let the words be yours. Only so can they be the vehicle and the

living witness, and if that is so and you are not caught in something oversize, then you are a child of God. Nothing is more important for a pastor in all the glories of his ministry than to be and remain a child of God.

Cambridge, Mass.