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Leaving Center Stage

Randy Harris

It is perhaps the most famous of all nonbiblical prayers—and the most convicting:

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;
Put me to doing, put me to suffering;
Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,
 exalted for you or brought low for you;
Let me be full, let me be empty;
Let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
 to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
 Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
 you are mine and I am yours.
So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth,
 let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen.

It is always interesting to reflect on which of the above lines from Wesley's covenant prayer are the most difficult to pray in faith. Given our addiction to stuff, there is the obvious candidate "let me have all things, let me have nothing." And our aversion to discomfort of every variety makes "put me to doing, put me to suffering" off-putting, to say the least.

But I am convinced that among ministers, especially preachers, the most difficult line may be "let me be employed for you or laid aside for you." Being "laid aside" is not exactly what we had in mind, particularly when that "laying aside" comes after decades of productive ministry. The unsettling truth is that most of us who have spent much of our lives on center stage struggle with the transition to an identity other than "The Preacher." It is the perils of this transition that I wish to address. To begin, I will consider the idea of "calling" and its relationship to the deeper concept of attending.

Calling

The notion of "calling," or vocation, is often misunderstood. "Calling," in the sense of one's lifework, is always an extension of our understanding of who we are as people of God—and always also a continuous alteration of that understanding. In other words, calling is far from fixed and immutable; it emerges and adapts as we attend to God. What should be unchanging is not our particular expression of ministry but our willingness to say yes to God at every moment, in every stage of life.

This is not the place to elaborate on the processes of discernment whereby we learn what to say yes to, but there are two crucial dimensions of discerning our calling that we need to emphasize. For who we are—our identity—has both a variable and a constant dimension.

Understanding Our Identity

Jean-Paul Sartre famously said that we form ourselves by the decisions we make in our lives. That is, there is no fundamental human nature or identity forced on us (other than the ability to make decisions). Rather, we become who we are by the choices we make. There is certainly some truth to Sartre's observation. This is the variable dimension of identity. Thus, in the spiritual context, we do not fully know who we are apart from our vocation. Especially for preachers, our calling becomes so deeply a part of our spiritual identity, it is hard to imagine who we are apart from it. I am not a person of God who just happens to preach; preaching is integral to the person of God I am (and have become). And the longer I am in this role, the more my role as preacher becomes inseparable from my understanding of who I am as a person of God. This is the variable dimension.

But this should not be the whole story. Our spiritual identity also has a constant dimension that is by no means exhausted by the particular ministry we are doing in a particular stage of life. Sartre (in his atheism) thought of this irreducible nub as freedom, or openness. Christian mystics describe it in different ways. The constant is the relationship with God that is wholly untouched by circumstances. Success or failure, health or illness, fame or total obscurity, great ministry or rocky soil—nothing has any impact on this deepest part of us, where the Holy Spirit and the kingdom of God reside. Martin Laird, in *Into the Silent Land*, captures this with the wonderful image of the mountain and the weather. The weather comes and goes (as do seasons in ministry), but the mountain remains. This is the constant dimension.

Herein lies the fundamental tension of the spiritual identity of the preacher. Our relationship with God must not be defined solely by our ministry role. Yet so often our ministry role is so enmeshed with our spiritual identity that it is difficult to distinguish who we would be as people of God if we did not have that role. After all, the role itself is based on our saying yes to God's call.

Deeper Challenges

Of course, this picture would not be complete without pointing out the elephant in the room. Our identification with our role as "The Preacher" is not just a matter of honoring our God-given calling. There are always some less-healthy aspects lurking about the recesses of our hearts. Our inability to admit these makes it all the more difficult to deal with them. So let us put them on the table.

Preaching is an adrenaline rush and ego boost like few things in the world. The sensation of having the audience "in the palms of our hands" is so thrilling that it is like the preacher's drug. We want more. It feels like a genuine spiritual experience.

More subtle (but more sinister) is the feeling we get when people (hopefully a lot of people) come to us after a sermon and tell us how good it was. Or better yet, how much it meant to them or made a difference in their lives. Or best of all, when a dear sister or brother comes to us and tells us about the lasting effect of something we preached years before! All of this validates our call, because we went into preaching to help people and transform lives and make a difference, and that is exactly what is happening! God is using us, working through us.

And all of this is conjoined with our perception (which is not altogether untrue) that our churches are dependent on our leadership and vision. *We* are at the center of what God is doing in our congregations. The church *needs* us and the gifts we bring.

Then there is the challenge of preparing a sermon. In our day of constant media exposure, when our congregations are continually bombarded with creative messages of every stripe, we can spend more time trying to figure out how to get our message heard than actually attending to God so we have something worth saying. This is the plight of the preacher in the early twenty-first century.

Making Space

Many ministers can testify to the “deficit” the ministerial life produces. For much of our careers, there is often more output than inflow, and we can hardly stay afloat spiritually. We desperately head off on retreat once a year to try to refill our wells. It is really difficult to be a deep resource of spiritual wisdom when the job keeps squeezing out the source of that wisdom.

Why do we pay preachers? I believe that what our congregations are buying is space. They are trying to provide ministers with sufficient space to be unusually attentive to God through prayer and Bible reading, and observation of our world. They then come to church in the hope that we will tell them what we have seen and heard. They want us to share with them what we have come to know that week, in the anticipation that because we have this space, we will have seen and heard things that they could not because of the demands of their jobs and lives.

But as all ministers know, there are far more demands on us than just paying attention to God. And in fact, prayer is often the activity that is most likely to get booted out of our demanding schedules. There are meetings to go to, and members to visit, and Bible studies to be conducted, and spiritual counsel to be given, and community projects to be engaged in. Not to mention the needs of our own families.

Then comes the opportunity to reset our lives and our spiritual identities—that moment in our careers when we (or our churches) decide we are no longer to be “The Preacher.” We transition to retirement. This is often a crisis moment, to be sure, but it is also full of possibility.

At last, we have reached that point where the demands recede and the major work of our lives is to simply attend to God—to look and listen and see what we can learn. This is in some ways not just the end of our ministry but “The End” of our ministry. It is the goal our whole life has been moving toward.

Sagacity

The new role for retiring ministers that I wish to argue for is *sagacity*. The word, hardly used in our times, is derived from *sage*. It carries the ideas of discernment, perceptiveness, and wisdom. Sagacity is both the final act in the life of maturity and the ultimate test of our relationship with God.

How shall we describe the maturity of being a sage, and how do we prepare for and enter into it? To use an economic metaphor, with a sage there is always more income than expenditure. This is that period of life when we spend far more time attending to God than we do telling what we have heard.

Now, at long last, we have the space to be fully attentive to God in ways that we have dreamed of but never really seemed to be able to pull off. As we leave center stage in our ministry, prayer takes center stage in our lives. We now wondrously discover that we have much to say but little need to say it. And in fact, our *presence* becomes our ministry. Our wisdom is available, but only as it is sought, and we now enjoy God.

But this transition is a genuine spiritual test. What does it say if we find ourselves totally unsuited to this new vocation? The fellowship of the saints is replete with stories of ministers who just can’t give up the role of being “The Preacher,” just as professional sports are full of stories of players who just can’t give up center stage when their skills no longer allow them to occupy that place.

At our best, our preaching ministry is an outgrowth of our relationship with God, not just the expression of our talent. If our talent (generally called “giftedness” in Christian circles, to spiritualize the concept) and the pleasure we take in it are the driving force in our ministry, we will find it almost impossible to transition graciously to anything else, because to give it up will mean to no longer know who we are as servants of God. But we are not first preachers. We are those who say yes to God.

And that is why this article is aimed only secondarily at preachers nearing retirement. It is certainly true that they can bless us immensely by entering into the ministry of sagacity. But it is to a much younger audience that I make my primary plea.

All ministry that is worthy of the name grows out of a relationship to God that is cultivated and nurtured by attending to God, by “practicing his presence.” Every blog, every sermon, every meeting, every counseling session is embedded there. The only way to step graciously into that time when sagacity will be

my primary task, and listening to God my way of life, is to start now, by saying no to the identity as “The Preacher” and saying yes to the call to be “one who attends to God”—first, foremost, and always.

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