The dangers of providing pastoral care

Woundedness is the predictable price we pay for being sent on outrageous assignments by Jesus.

William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas in conversation

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Willimon: When I graduated from Yale Divinity School and headed back to South Carolina Methodism, I thought I was entering a war. Some of the young pastors who had talked me into ministry were run out of the church before I got to join them. I was immature and didn't know much about pastoral ministry, but I knew that you could get hurt doing it.

Hauerwas: When I left Yale, I was lucky to get a job teaching at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, where the Lutherans were easy to get along with. Though the '60s had their challenges, we at least thought that ministry was worth the trouble.

Willimon: Young and reckless, accustomed to unsafe behavior, I was unintimidated—even invigorated—by Luther's dictum that the sermon is like the surgeon's scalpel. Ministry puts the church in pain by telling the truth it's been avoiding.

Years later, as a bishop, I became troubled that many contemporary pastors aspired only to be obsequious pastoral caregivers and hand-holders—the pastor as the empathetic helping healer who goes for the low-hanging fruit by encouraging people to display and then lick their wounds.

Hauerwas: You were right to be troubled. The pastor is supposed to be a truth teller who helps the baptized grow up and survive as Christians. Pastoral care is supposed to be the work of the whole church.

Both as an academic discipline and as a practice, pastoral care has become obsessed with the personal wounds of people in advanced industrial societies who have discovered that their lives lack meaning. "What did you expect?" I want to ask these people. "Quit taking yourselves so seriously. Enjoy having your narcissism defeated by being drawn into the church's eschatological mission to witness to Christ's cross and resurrection." That's care worthy of the name Christian.

Willimon: At the beginning of the pandemic, you said to me, "I feel sorry for pastors who attempt to care for people who think dying is optional, an injustice inflicted upon them by bad luck."

Hauerwas: Right. Pastoral care helps people see the gift that as followers of Jesus we've got good work to do that is so much more important than ourselves. The only good to come from this pandemic is to rescue some pastors by giving their congregations loss and pain worthy of the ministrations of the church, rather than the bourgeois concerns that have come to preoccupy the White mainline church in recent years.

Willimon: Lacking theological governance and guidance, pastors are tempted to give people encouragement to be even more self-concerned than they already are before they come to church. The trouble starts in seminary. There's an overemphasis there on self-care, keeping sabbath, and finding emotional support, as if that's the purpose of the church and its ministry. Better than self-care is responding to the call to care about what Christ cares about.

Hauerwas: That's why I have little sympathy for clergy who present themselves as a member of the "helping professions." Such pastors are using people in pain to legitimate their ministry. Pastoral care has become so important because it's the last socially approved activity of pastors.

Willimon: Years ago you warned us pastors that we lack protection from the omnivorous demands of those whom we presume to help: "To be a pastor today is to risk being nibbled to death by ducks."

Hauerwas: Yep. A bite here and a little bite there, and before they know it they have lost an arm. No wonder many who start out wanting to help often end up violently disliking those they are allegedly helping, realizing that they have given their lives to egoistic people who have no responsibilities other than those placed upon them by their self-absorption.

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Willimon: It's hard to avoid alienation between the helpers and the helped. As a young pastor, I had to admit my resentment of the alcoholics in my congregation who resisted my earnest attempts to cure them. Their inability to be healed called into question all the hours I had expended attempting to help them and impugned my self-image as a caring, competent healer who was good at fixing things.

Finally I got the gumption to call on three recovering alcoholics in my congregation to form a team to provide care for those in the congregation with addictions. "We know more about alcoholism than you," they said. "We'll handle this."

My own need to be needed had unintentionally robbed them of their baptismal vocations.

Hauerwas: Pastoral care functions can be so consuming for pastors. When parishioners are at their most vulnerable, of course they appreciate someone caring about their crisis. When the crisis ends, they sometimes excommunicate those who have been present during the crisis because they fear we have seen them when they were so vulnerable. That makes community formation tough.

Willimon: That's surely why I found that some of my most effective pastoral care interactions—when I really helped someone to see the truth of their situation—often

resulted in the person avoiding eye contact with me for the rest of my tenure in that congregation.

Hauerwas: Pastoral care is about the upbuilding of the church by the transformation of our lives, which happens when we're given good work to do for God and others. Good work frees us from the self-centeredness created by the hurts we cherish. Vocation is more to be desired than victimhood.

Willimon: I've told seminarians that ministry defined as "meeting people's needs" is dangerous in a society where the more affluent and privileged among us have solved with a credit card most of our biblical needs like food, housing, and clothing. So we move on to assuaging personal needs the Bible doesn't give a rip about—meaning making, a purpose-driven life, balance, freedom from anxiety, or a sense of personal well-being. Fulfillment of desire becomes elevated to the level of need, and need gets jacked up to the status of a right.

Because my desires are a bottomless pit, no wonder so many clergy become exhausted rushing about in service to my right to be cared for. Running errands for the anxiously affluent is hardly worth a life.

Hauerwas: Woundedness is part of the price we pay for being human. Because human affliction has no end, in a world that doesn't have time for the wounded, the pastor who leads with, "Where does it hurt?" risks being overwhelmed by people and their pain.

Willimon: Maybe we preachers ought to be up-front that woundedness is the predictable price we pay for being sent on outrageous assignments by Jesus.

Hauerwas: Contemporary pastoral care's troubles began when seminary faculties divided the pastoral and the prophetic tasks of the church. Both truth telling and caregiving are necessary for the church to be the church. To produce people who care for the dying in a culture like ours becomes a prophetic act. Christians who tell the truth require care because violence is the way the world responds to the truth of Christ.

If in a hundred years Christians are identified as people who do not kill their children or the elderly, we will have done well in our pastoral care. We live in a culture where compassion is sometimes used as an excuse to be killers and liars. Words like *care*, *love*, and *compassion* can be self-deceptive when not disciplined and driven by our

theological commitments.

Willimon: When I polled preachers for a book I did on preaching to confront racism, a major reason my fellow White preachers gave for not talking about race from the pulpit was, in effect, “I love and care about my people so much that I don’t want to risk adding to their woundedness.”

Better than self-care is to answer the call to care about what Christ cares about.

Hauerwas: Self-deception is contagious. Many congregations are a conspiracy of niceness, a community that lives under a covenant that says, “I promise never to tell you the truth about you if you will do the same for me.”

Willimon: Years ago, in *Worship as Pastoral Care*, I argued that our primary act of congregational care is not only counseling; it’s baptism and Eucharist. These sacramental acts redefine what it means to be wounded. They force our pain to go public. Worse even than death, says baptism, is an unsummoned life. Every time the church baptizes, it enacts the countercultural word that my most pressing need is to have something more important to do with my life than my life.

To all who brag, “I would do anything for my family,” the communitarian Eucharist proclaims, “That’s not good enough for Jesus.” When we worship God, the individual is critiqued by the communal, the prophetic and pastoral meet, and the Trinity teaches us the joy of living our lives out of our control. In his resurrection, Christ forever defeated our fantasies that life is under our control.

Hauerwas: Of all the ministerial practices, pastoral care may be the most corrupted by the modern North American psychological culture’s promise of self-control. People are encouraged to believe that the purpose of being born is to be free to self-construct your life as you please. Eventually, the burden of self-fabrication becomes unbearable. They find it impossible to choose their way into a life worth living.

When people expect their pastor to help them display and then heal their wounds, the Christian faith is reduced to a technique for gaining control over your life so you can be happy. I hope their pastor would ask, “Why would you come to me for that?”

Willimon: Like I need pastoral assistance to be even more willfully self-concerned? The church is the field hospital where those who, having been wounded by their participation in Christ’s mission, are bandaged up so they can be sent right back into

the front lines of the battle.

I sometimes think that contemporary North American Christians are so beset by personal psychological problems because the church has failed to give us any assignment more interesting than the care of our own souls. Jesus is the hard part of pastoral care.

Hauerwas: Church is where Christians have themselves—wounds and all—caught up in an ongoing narrative that reflects God's glory in the world. That glory is manifest in the existence of a people who have been storied by a gracious God so that they might reclaim the pastoral office as an expression of the work of the Holy Spirit. That's why if you turn to the section of the Book of Common Prayer identified as the "Pastoral Offices," you find a prayer like "For the Sanctification of Illness."

Willimon: Let's hear it.

Hauerwas: "Sanctify, O Lord, the sickness of your servant N., that the sense of her weakness may add strength to her faith and seriousness to her repentance; and grant that she may live with you in everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Willimon: That my sickness can be sanctified by God as a means of my salvation, and that the weakness imposed by my illness can be an opportunity to hear the truth, turn toward God, and live my life out of my control—these thoughts are so radically countercultural that it's hard to see how we could have thought them without their being forced upon us by God and the church. In singing the songs, telling the stories, praying the church's prayers, and bearing witness that God, not nations, rules the world, we are being cared for—by being given something to do that's more interesting than us or our wounds.

Hauerwas: Whether there is a discipline of pastoral care or pastoral theology matters little. What matters is that we show the world what it looks like for wounded people to care for one another in the name of that wound called "the Christ."

Christians' lives would be less complicated, less painful, more under our control, and safer if Christ had not cared for us by commandeering us for his mission. But they wouldn't be the lives intended for us by God.

Willimon: If you're sick, you get a moral free pass. Who expects sick, unhappy people in pain to be faithful or truthful?

Hauerwas: Jesus, that's who. After Christ's resurrection there's always a possibility that people's pain, unhappiness, and loneliness are signs that the Holy Spirit is working on them to teach them that they were made for more.

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Willimon: "What's the biggest pastoral care challenge that you face in your congregation?" I once asked a pastor in Angola.

"Aside from the need for adequate food, they want help living with those who hate them because they are Christians. They need support for resisting the temptation to revenge."

Hauerwas: So we both worry that what passes for pastoral care may be little more than boring, bourgeois accommodation of the gospel. Who wants to give your life to that? The church doesn't say to the world, "We care more than you do." Our care is in the name of Christ. Which is why it's so risky and adventuresome.

Willimon: Salvation must never be severed from vocation any more than care is to be practiced apart from our calling. A parishioner once said to me, "I'm lying in this bed, not sure if I'm going to make it out of this alive, frightened and worried, and Jesus has the nerve to waltz in here and suggest that I ought to single-handedly fund the church's food ministry? As sick as I am, I thought, others should be looking after me, not my looking after them."

"And how did Jesus respond?" I asked her.

"As far as I can tell, he said, 'I don't care. What did you think you were getting into when you were baptized?'"

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