Portrait of a pastor: Mysteries and blessings

by Martin B. Copenhaver in the May 17, 2005 issue

It seems as if all the pastors I know either have read Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* or claim that it is on the top of the pile of books they intend to read. Pastors—myself among them—love the book. Some of the reasons are obvious. The novel is beautifully written, a spare meditation on the ways in which grace insinuates itself into the most unlikely settings, like a worn little town in Iowa or the relationship between a father and son. Also, the narrator, John Ames, is a pastor, and Robinson has made him a sympathetic character.

In a recent radio interview, Robinson mentioned that she gets a lot of mail from pastors, and the interviewer asked why that might be so. Robinson replied: "I think one of the main reasons is because ministers and priests are very used to being described in the most unflattering terms in literature, and they are quite pleased . . . to find that I have made a character who is likable, positive, intelligent, not a hypocrite."

All of that is true, but clearly there are other reasons why pastors are drawn to this novel. For one, Robinson obviously understands what it is like to be a pastor. She depicts the pastoral life, in all of its vagaries and quiet drama, with a keen eye and such depth of understanding that it is not surprising to learn she is a deacon in her Congregational church in Iowa. Without lapsing into sentimentality, she conveys a pastor's peculiar way of construing the world, revealing throughout the novel some of the reasons those who are called to this vocation can feel strangely blessed by it.

The book is in the form of a long letter from a pastor in his mid-70s to his seven-year-old son. Aware that he is dying, John Ames says that he is writing the letter because he wants to tell his son some things that he never had an opportunity to tell him or that his son will only be able to appreciate when he is older. In a sense the letter is his last will and testament, his testimony.

Almost from the first page pastors can tell that they are in the company of a novelist who knows a great deal about their lives. As he stands on the edge of the mystery of death himself, Ames remembers when he was a young pastor and people would ask him what death is like. They would “hold on to my hands and look into my eyes with their old milky eyes, as if they knew I knew and they were going to make me tell them.” Indeed, when you are a pastor, people seem to expect you to know the unknowable, as if you should be as much an expert on God as appliance salespeople are on the products they are pitching.

Later Ames describes passing a group of “rascally young fellows” who work in the local garage. They are holding cigarettes in grease-stained hands and laughing “in that wicked way they have.” When they see the pastor coming, they abruptly stifle their laughter. Ames comments: “That’s the strangest thing about this life, about being in the ministry. People change the subject when they see you coming. And then sometimes those very same people come into your study and tell you the most remarkable things.” That scene, and Ames’s wistful comment, capture well both the distance and the intimacy inherent in the pastoral vocation.

Ames calculates that if all the sermons he has delivered during his lifetime were bound in books, they would total 225 volumes, “which puts me up there with Augustine and Calvin for quantity.” He is convinced, however, that his best sermon is one he never delivered. He wrote it during the Great War when many people in Iowa were dying of influenza. The young men who succumbed to the disease, he wrote, were actually being spared a far worse fate. The Lord “was gathering them in before they could go off and commit murder against their brothers.” Many years later this sermon is still bold and bright in Ames’s memory, and he still believes in its message. He could not bring himself to deliver it, however, because he knew that the only people who would hear it were the beleaguered folk, mostly old women, who were already “as sad and apprehensive as they could stand to be and no more approving of the war than I was.” This is a phenomenon that every pastor has experienced, what Reinhold Niebuhr described as “the difficulty one finds in telling unpleasant truths to people whom one has learned to love.”

Craig Dykstra has described pastors’ way of perceiving and relating to the world as “the pastoral imagination,” which both requires and shapes a particular way of construing what is going on around the pastor. It is not a single ability, but a confluence of abilities that enables pastors to live and lead at the intersection of the Christian story and the life of a community of faith. Pastors perceive and interpret to

others how the Christian story illumines the lives of the people, as well as how the lives of the people illumine the Christian story.

This is the peculiar perspective Robinson captures through her narrator. Ames recalls a time when his father, also a pastor, was helping men tear down a church that had been destroyed by fire. Ames was too young to help, but he watched the purposeful activity with the fascination that young people sometimes have for adult rituals in which they are not yet permitted to participate. During a brief break in the work, Ames's father brings him a biscuit, giving it to him with hands covered with soot. Ames refers to it as communion and writes, "It seems to me much of life was comprehended in that moment." At another point Ames remembers watching his own son and a friend play in a sprinkler, and it is an occasion for a reflection on baptism. These biblical allusions are not merely dragged in to enrich the narrative. Rather, they flow through the narrative quite naturally because Robinson understands the ways in which the Christian story and the stories of individuals' lives are finally the same.

The pastoral imagination develops in confinement. It is anchored in text, font and table, and in a particular community of faith. What is sometimes experienced as confinement, however, provides a distinctive rootedness. Over time there can grow a depth of relationship, not only with people but also with God. Ames obviously admires, and in some ways even envies, his brother Edward, who is a professor. Edward studied abroad, and his mind ranges widely over the world of ideas. By contrast, Ames stays in the same small town, serving the same small cluster of Christians. Ames exhibits a depth of engagement with those around him and the kind of wisdom that can arise from such engagement over time. He comments: "One great benefit of a religious vocation is that it helps you concentrate. . . . If I have any wisdom to offer, this is a fair part of it." Indeed, the pastoral imagination is a particular form of concentration, a way of focusing one's attention on the mysterious movement of the Spirit both in the grand story and in the simple gesture, and especially in the interplay between the two. This pastoral imagination is too multitextured to be thought of as an expertise, so often it looks more like wisdom.

Sprinkled through Robinson's narrative are affirmations of the pastoral vocation. Ames speaks of the "privilege" of encountering people in circumstances of such holy intimacy that "I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them." At one point he turns self-conscious, telling his son: "I don't wish to be urging the ministry on you, but there are some advantages to it you might not know to take account of if I did

not point them out."

One advantage of the ministry that Ames points out repeatedly is the privilege of being the one who offers blessings, particularly the blessing conferred in baptism. Ames writes that immediately after he baptized the woman who would later become his wife, "I felt like asking her, 'What have I done? What does it mean?' That was a question that came to me often, not because I felt less than certain I had done something that did mean something, but because no matter how much I thought and read and prayed, I felt outside the mystery of it."

Indeed, to be a pastor at such moments is not unlike being a midwife, invited into the presence of a mystery and in some way to take part in it. It is a joy simply to be present at a birth. It is something more—a real privilege—to play a part, however small or incidental. We who are pastors feel outside the mystery in which we participate because we cannot control it or even understand it fully. Nevertheless, to offer a blessing is to feel blessed oneself, to be caught up in the echo of grace.

Ames goes on to assure his son that he does not "have to be a minister to confer blessing. You are simply much more likely to find yourself in that position. It's a thing people expect of you." Indeed, much of the latter half of the novel is an account of Ames's struggle with what is expected of him in relation to his namesake, John Ames Boughton, or Jack, whom he would rather curse than bless. Jack is the son of Ames's best friend. At one point Ames writes to his own son about his nemesis: "He could knock me down the stairs and I would have worked out the theology for forgiving him before I reached the bottom. But if he harmed you in the slightest way, I'm afraid theology would fail me." When Jack begins to confess some of the things he has done while he was away from home, the old pastor struggles to listen with a compassionate ear, his soul tossed between his feelings of dislike and the obligations of his vocation.

As Jack prepares to leave town again, Ames says to him, "The thing I would like, actually, is to bless you." Jack is surprised by the request. Perhaps Ames is surprised, too. But if you are a pastor, it is what you do. You get to offer blessings. Sometimes you *have* to offer blessings. Ames writes to his son, "Well, anyway, I told him it was an honor to bless him. And that was also absolutely true. In fact I'd have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment." Before Jack departs, Ames says to him, "We all love you, you know."

Sometimes as a pastor you are given a privileged glimpse of the holy mystery of God’s grace, not because you understand it, and certainly not because you reflect it in your own life, but because you are expected to offer blessings and gestures of love to those you find unlovable. The act of blessing puts you in a place where God is apt to draw near, and sometimes you find that love, or something very much like it, has taken up residence in your heart. When the presence of God touches such a moment, both the one blessed and the one offering the blessing are given a gift. Marilynne Robinson obviously understands that, as she does so much else about the pastoral life.