

Lecture #2

Topic: The Pastoral Role, Curing of Souls

Reading: Novel cont'd; Eugene Peterson's article, "Curing Souls: The Forgotten Art"

What do you think about Faha? I chose this novel because it gives us a window into people's inner lives. The characters we meet are common AND complicated; intriguing...and full of longing...like the folks in our congregations. I know you are still making your way through this story. May I encourage you to imagine a pastoral conversation between Doady and Father Coffey? Imagine that you see Doady sitting in the pew after Mass is over and you ask after her. She tells you that her grandson dropped out of seminary – after he lost his mother to cancer. She wonders aloud if God is mad at her and her husband for taking Noe in as he tries to figure out what is next. Or, maybe she wonders aloud if God will punish Noe for giving up on the faith. How do you respond?

Last week, I asked you to consider how your vantage point (**calling and context**) affects what you see in people's lives. This week, I want to emphasize the **role** we have in people's lives. The care we offer to folks is different than the care they receive at the doctor's office, or in therapy, or even when they get a massage. When we care for and about them, they assume that we care *in the name of God*. That is a sacred privilege. We must always keep in mind how our context and calling – and our unique role – impacts how we care for people as pastors.

As the novel opens, Father Coffey is introduced as a "curate" of the parish in Faha. We might be familiar with the term, curator. In a museum, for example, curators have deep knowledge in a specialized area. They are trusted guides who can put exhibits together that help others learn and grow in the curator's area of knowledge. So, as a curate, what would be the specialized area of pastors? **The human soul.** (I'll say more about the soul in a bit.) I am coming to believe that the best gift I bring to the congregation I serve – a gift that no one else can bring in quite the same way – is to curate the landscape of the human soul.

A pastor who sees her role as a curate, one who has a specialized awareness of the inner life, has different priorities than a CEO or manager. As a curate of souls:

- preaching and teaching must receive adequate space, for this is where the inner landscape is illustrated for the congregation
- interpersonal caring becomes less about counseling and more about spiritual direction
- raising money becomes less about funding a budget and more about developing mature disciples who understand the discipline of generosity
- managing staff becomes less about supervision and more about helping them curate their own souls
- words of prophecy will naturally come from the curate because he/she has a vantage point that no one else has in quite the same way

As I researched the role of curate, I discovered that pastors have been called "cura of souls" for centuries. "Cura" is a Latin word and embraces two of our words, cure and care. Yes, that's right, for centuries the pastor's exclusive role was to care for people's souls, to care for their inner life. Imagine the inner life of Noe who watched his mother succumb to cancer and felt like he let her down. Many normal coming of age experiences were denied him. What does his exploration look like now? Imagine

the inner life of Noe's grandparents, raising 12 sons in a rural town and watching them grow up and leave home. Now they are wrestling with the advent of electricity when all they've ever known is life without it. Christy has a complex inner life too, as does Dr. Troy raising his three daughters alone. The souls in the novel are as layered and complicated as the souls we encounter each week in the churches we serve and to which we belong.

This week, you'll read more about the characters in the novel and what life brings their way. As you do, name the experiences in that novel that are also encountered in your congregation: death and dying, soothing angst with alcohol, unrequited love. Souls in our care know grief, betrayal, disappointment, love, desire, and pain. I ask you to notice these experiences in the novel because in a couple of weeks, I will ask you to write a theological reflection paper on the inner landscape of one of the characters in the novel. I will ask you to imagine that you encounter this character in the role of pastoral caregiver. Which scripture or scriptures you would share with them? If you were called upon to pray, how would you shape your prayer? How would you name boundary considerations, keeping a safe container for God to work in this situation? Finally, how would you name the movement from brokenness to wholeness? Theologically, we call this redemption. As pastors, we must always have a vision for what redemption looks like for the souls in our care.

The article by Eugene Peterson will illustrate our role as he names it, "Curer of Souls." Before you read his article, I want to offer a few thoughts about what is meant by the word, "soul." Thomas Merton authored a pivotal book in 1991 called, "Care of the Soul." Merton revived this concept of "soul" among doctors, therapists, chaplains and other caregiving professions. Strangely, it didn't rise to prominence among pastors at that time. We are discovering it 25 years hence and paying attention as he describes the human soul.

As pastoral caregivers, we know that human soulfulness has always been a part of the biblical language. Jesus says the greatest commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your *soul*, and with all your mind." He instructs his followers, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your *souls*." The Psalms are rich with language of our *soul* thirsting after God, never to be satisfied with anything less.

In his book, Merton says soul and spirit are not the same, but they work together when we are living at our best. He describes spirit as the expansive part of us (reaching for heaven), and soul as the grounded and deepest part of us.

Dallas Willard offers a more specific image of the human soul. According to Willard, our soul is what holds us together, what integrates us. The soul encompasses our will (our agency), our heart (our feelings/emotions), our mind (thoughts, reasoning), our body (our physical form).

Humans cannot exist without a soul. Willard says the role of the soul is to integrate all the parts of us, so you might say, without our soul we will *dis-integrate*. Sadly, our soul is often hidden or ignored by the attention we give to our will, our emotions, our thoughts, and our body. What a travesty because our soul is the precious container that allows us to live in the Imago Dei, the image of God.

As you set out on the work of getting to know the soul, both your own and the soul(s) of those in your care, Parker Palmer's image is the best. He says, "The soul is like a wild animal – tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy. It knows how to survive in hard places. But it is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out." He goes on to say that we must quietly wait, for the soul reveals itself in its own time.

My request this week: find a quiet place and wait. See if your soul will show up and speak. If you are blessed enough to hear your soul speak, ask it to show you around your inner life. Where are the pitfalls you never seem to see? What needs do you struggle to meet in healthy ways? What other souls in your life connect most deeply to your own? And, what has your soul been hearing from God lately?

If you are a person that quiets with a song, I will offer you a link on the lecture page for my go-to song when I need to wait and listen for my soul to speak. I am praying for you as you engage the work this week. I recognize the challenge it might present. Know this, a curator of souls cannot care for the souls of others if you have not first heard from your own.