

Protagonist Corner

Lifting the Right Leg

Howard H. Gordon, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church, Little Rock, Arkansas

I think it was Sartre who said it is impossible for a cleric to be anticleric. We clerics in mainline denominations need to take the idea to heart as we are forced to struggle with the divestment of cultural position and power. We become anticleric in our lust after the trappings of the culture.

In an ecumenical gathering a Lutheran pastor was making fun of the caricature of Lutheran pastors on “Prairie Home Companion.” Their clothes don’t quite match their pocket protectors. Their Hush Puppies are just a shade off, and they seem to be about a half beat off the rhythm of life around them. We all laughed. But as the conversation became serious about our position in the city, and with our congregation, it was the universal conclusion that the Lutheran pastors still had more of the old-fashioned moral authority that the rest of us had lost. They knew who they were. It is an ethnic thing to a large extent that in many ways has made them immune to cultural trappings. But they do have the moral authority.

We have forgotten who we are. Not in our theological pronouncements but in terms of how we live our lives. The historic quiet, humble, dignity of ministers who have chosen a genteel poverty as a way of life and are somewhat out of step with the driving forces of society has been replaced with the professionalism and drive for power and money that produces a Webster Hubbell.

The threat to the integrity of the ministry is not the Jim Bakkers or the Jimmy Swaggarts, all of us have that in us; rather, it is the chaplain to the senate or the minister who accepts country club membership as part of the call that defines who we are. We are clerics who have forgotten what it means to be a cleric. Our lives are run by cultural rules reinforced by an ecclesiastical bureaucracy that judges success by the amount of salary, the size of congregation, the cultural status of the city rather than faithfulness to a call and righteousness of style of life.

A very successful minister who was later to become a seminary president told me that it was necessary, if I were to be a successful minister, to drive an appropriate car, belong to appropriate clubs, demand an appropriate salary, and have the appropriate number of suits. When I asked why, I was told that when you went into the boardrooms of the power of our society to call them to prophetic accountability you had to be part of their lives. Yet, after the prophetic pronouncement, the CEO would look at his fellow club member, wearing acceptable tribal dress, knowing that they shared the same car dealer, and wink and say, “I know you are just doing your job like I am doing mine. Need the money. Need the power. See you on the back nine.” There would be no prophetic movement.

The anticleric mood of the people today is growing because we have lost our traditions. You don’t have to squint very hard to make all of the mainline ministers, male and female, look alike. It would be very nice to run into a Methodist who reflects the Wesleys or a Presbyterian who would remind one of Witherspoon. I yearn to meet an Anglican like Peter Sellers’s Reverend Smallwood in the movie “Heavens Above.”

The need to be part of the very society that we are called to witness to has caused us to reflect the culture and to desire its power rather than to exist somehow slightly off center or marginally in our individual traditions. Wesley was not part of the acceptable society. The Scotch-Irish Presbyterians plagued the sensitivities of the English governor of Georgia and insulted the Anglican missionary Woodmason in prerevolutionary upland South Carolina. Now we are the governor and consider ourselves the missionary. The slave mimics the slave owner.

The answer to the dilemma rests in deciding which text speaks to the human and cleric condition of this age. In the 1960's when we were marching in the streets, the texts of Exodus spoke loudly to us. The defeat of Pharaoh and the establishment of the promised land by the powerful hand of our God was the word. We crossed the river and discovered, not the life of faithfulness, but the pleasures of the palace.

The people of God chose a king and instituted the policies that any graduate school of business faculty would be proud of, and God used Cyrus to send the people into exile. Into exile. The nation of our cultural power is gone. The temple of our economic well-being is destroyed. People who don't know about Joseph quote Joseph and think it is their idea. The power of God is a dim memory.

Clergy cross denominational lines as easily as we cross state lines. The distinctiveness of our traditions are lost and the culture begins to define us rather than our historical callings. For clerics in exile the call from scripture is the holiness code for the priest. No longer do we seek the heady call of the prophet to stand in the street and proclaim the word of the Lord and afterwards to spend time at our fellow prophet's mountain retreat home telling each other how prophetic we are.

Fulfilling the priestly functions of offering the peculiar thing is what the God of history is calling us to do. The Israelites were called to celebrate agrarian festivals in the New York City of the times, to celebrate the conquest of the holy land while in defeat, to celebrate the Passover while generations died in exile.

We are called to put water on our children, watch them get lost in the drug culture or lose their minds in the mindless education system, and say that they belong to God. We are called to take a little bread and a little grape juice and say that we have fed the people while they starve in front of the 120-channel TV or are sucked dry in front of a computer terminal hooked to the big board on Wall Street. We are called to offer the preaching of the Word of God as the alternative to a weekend in Branson with Boxcar Willie. The one thing that strikes me as being desperately lacking in the foreign society in which we Christians live is joy, the simple joy of living. There is a lot of compulsive recreation from drugs to twin piano bars, but true laughter is not heard very often.

The sacraments, preaching, and the disciplined gathering for worship will not put us in the meetings on top of the bank buildings but they do offer a nourishment and sustenance to a people who are being torn apart and starved to death. It will enable them to survive, faithfully, the marginalization and being out of step in Babylon.

Mr. Pollock was a young banker in the coalfields of West Virginia in the late 1890's. As a young boy I liked to listen to the stories old Mr. Pollock would tell of the times in which he lived. As he and his wife got older, Mrs. Pollock developed trouble with her right leg. Mr. Pollock was a true gentleman. After he had opened the door of the car for his wife he would bend down and lift her leg into the car.

One day after Mrs. Pollock had had tea for her now very old friends, Mr. Pollock offered to drive one of them home. He opened the car door for his wife's friend and

then, being polite, bent down and lifted her leg into the car.

The world has a lot of trouble in its right leg. None of the high-powered technology and economic schemes is going to solve it. The solution is in clerics who are just a little bit out of it, who embarrass themselves and the world by being gentle and doing the culturally inappropriate things of sacraments, preaching, and worship.

As a genetic Presbyterian minister, I don't think I want to be a Lutheran pastor, but I think we all want to be holy priests in exile with God's chosen and loved people.