

One New Book for the Preacher

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OPEN SECRETS: A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY THROUGH A COUNTRY CHURCH
by Richard Lischer. New York: Doubleday, 2001. 243 pages.

This engaging book is a beautifully written pastoral autobiography and story of faith of a Lutheran pastor. It is an account of the powerful formative influence of a first church on the life and times of not only the newly ordained pastor and his family but also those parishioners he was called to serve in that three year arranged marriage. "When you pull up to your first church, it's a moment of truth, like the first glimpse of a spouse in an arranged marriage"(8). That pastor, Richard Lischer, is now a professor of preaching at Duke University Divinity School. He narrates his story and offers his readers insightful reflections on his first call to a country church in southern Illinois. But the story captures as well "The Secret History" and the "Slow Boat to Cana" that led this young boy to seek his parents' approval for the "noble" (15) vocation of pastor, a special purpose he never doubted (21).

Lischer was a "lifer" in the old German system that the Lutheran church arranged for the education of its clergy. His preparation consisted of high school and two years of college, where he was exposed to a heavy dose of the classics before he completed college and seminary. Anyone who experienced the Roman Catholic Church in the pre-Vatican II era or attended a minor seminary system such as the one in which Lischer enrolled will find this an accurate and fascinating account of those days long abandoned. These important chapters serve as a prelude to his first formal appointment to pastoral ministry. A young man formed in a classically structured Lutheran model of education, Lischer later rebelled against "the aridity of religious orthodoxy" in the tumultuous sixties. "A new spirit—and an inevitable split—was moving through the church"(38). He ends the chapter on his long seminary formation with these poignant thoughts:

After years of grooming, we were no longer sure what it meant to be a *pastor* or if we wanted to be one. Whatever it was that once called us and shaped our spirits now eluded us. Reluctant voyagers, we had neither the imagination nor the courage to jumpship. (38)

We should be glad that he stayed the course. After his formal installation, a necessary ritual before he could begin his ministry, the new pastor's first week brought a "tumble of pastoral duties" (57). It is precisely in and through that multitude of duties, events, and persons in the life of this rural community that the young pastor learned through trial and error "to engage their world" (74). At the same time, he discovered that ministry was the prime source of his spirituality. This is so because people mediate the saving presence of Christ. It is therefore through the people of New Cana that Lischer makes sense of his life from that ministry (238). He realized that he was placed into a community of stories and storytellers. His early sense of superiority

and resentment gave way to an attention to and appreciation of the history of the people past and present who claimed New Cana as their spiritual home and welcomed him as their pastor.

As Lischer describes his encounters with his congregants, we glean from his reflections golden nuggets for living pastoral life and ministry. These reflections, rooted in the persons and events of his ministry, are particularly helpful to men and women preparing for a life of ordained service in the Church. At the same time, his honest and humorous account will also resonate with all pastors of all churches who lead congregational families. His spiritual journey belongs therefore not only to the past but also to the present. His account makes it easy for those with similar experiences to make his story their own. He shares life experiences of sickness, death, dysfunctional families, substance abuse, domestic violence, and teen pregnancy that are part of the life realities of every church family. He captures universal truths about the dynamics of parish life in a rural community: “redeemed and unredeemed gossip” (95ff); the demons unleashed with “changes in the church,” e.g. moving or removing church furnishings and introducing contemporary church music (88ff). Lischer could have written a treatise on pastoral theology using his experiences as instances of guiding the uninitiated, but he preferred instead to write with affection and gratitude about his parents, wife, and children, and especially the people of New Cana who shaped and formed him into a pastor and teacher.

But what I enjoyed most were the pastoral theological insights and understandings woven into Lischer’s narrative of his life and ministry at New Cana. They rang true as believers grapple and wrestle with the profound mysteries of the Christian faith: the trinity, baptism, the real presence at the Eucharist, the word of God in scripture, the preached word, sin, evangelization, and prayer. For example, he addresses the doctrine of the Trinity in this manner: “We are only able to love each other because the Father loves the Son through the Holy Spirit. We want to be with one another as friends, lovers, and neighbors for the same reason. That’s not an argument that would appeal to most theologians, but that’s what the Trinity meant for us” (81). On the Eucharist he says: “Paul warned his readers in Corinth to “discern the body,” which means to see Jesus’ body in a new way. Not as a miracle of physics occurring in the elements, but as a miracle of community in which atoms of solitude are re-created into new families and friends. Christianity is a body religion. I had only begun to discern it”(71). On sin: “These sessions helped me understand the classic interpretation of sin as *absence*. Their acts of infidelity had created real hurt, but everything they did to each other seemed to emerge from a mysterious vacuum that had somehow slipped in between them, an absolute void into which love and decency had disappeared like dead stars into a black hole”(122). His narrative opens up many opportunities to see truths of the faith formulated in new ways out of the lives of the people he served. It is a different language from that of the discipline of theological study.

The spiritual life is best described with the metaphor of a journey because it is a process, a pilgrimage that is never finished. What is so remarkable about Lischer’s autobiographical account of the years leading to and the experience of his first pastorate is that in telling his story so well, without idealization and romantization, but with humor and humility, he invites his readers to read and name for themselves their own journeys of faith. What he teaches us is the truth that the spiritual journey is primarily a journey of relationships, a journey in which a person grows closer to or

farther from God in and through the other. People instinctively think of a spiritual journey as an intrapersonal project, a trip into themselves, and an inner journey of exploration. But Lischer's journey through a country church is not just intrapersonal, it is interpersonal in that the people and places of New Cana deepen and strengthen their relationships with God and others as well as themselves. Above all, we are taught to love the journey itself and not where it will take us next. Lischer brings his story of vocational origins and pastoral and theological formation to his first pastorate, which becomes the foundation for rest of his narrative as a "spiritual journey through a country church." In the final chapter, aptly entitled "The Company of Pilgrims," he explicitly names what is at the heart of *Open Secrets*:

Our journey in Cana was Pilgrims's journey, if not to the Heavenly City, at least toward the fullest expression of the life that has been give us....I saw the glory of God many times where I least expected it. (232)

We should all look forward to the sequel.