

PASTORAL CARE

An
ESSENTIAL GUIDE

John Patton

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CHAPTER 1

Pastoral Wisdom

But where shall wisdom be found? and where is the place of understanding?
—Job 28:12 KJV

In the middle of the book of Job there is a break in the narrative. Job's plight and his friends' efforts to help him are left for a while, and instead there appears a poem about wisdom. It expresses poetically what the reader of Job already suspects—that the dialogue between Job and his friends can provide no satisfactory answer to his problem. Although some scholars have argued that this section of Job is a later addition to the narrative, others see it as integral to the book's structure. In either case, as evidenced by the ineffective efforts of Job's friends to care for him, the poem serves as a valuable reminder of the importance of developing some kind of pastoral wisdom.

Where can wisdom be found to deal with the human lostness that calls for pastoral care? Human beings can know and discover so many things in the world, but the wisdom to deal with the practical and painful situations in their own lives and in the lives of others involves a never-ending search. What kind of wisdom is essential in the care for human hurt? It certainly must include knowledge about pastoral care in general and about many of the particular situations that call for such care. Pastoral wisdom, however, includes more than knowledge about something. It involves the practical knowledge of how to do and to be. It involves being able to respond appropriately to situations calling for care, and,

sometimes most important, how who one is and what one represents is a part of that wisdom. Pastoral wisdom involves our knowing, being, and doing.

What Wisdom Is

Wisdom is commonly understood as the ability to make sound choices and good decisions. It is not something a person is born with. It comes from living, from making mistakes and learning from them. Wisdom is often thought of as a state of mind characterized by profound understanding and deep insight. Although it is often accompanied by intelligence and academic knowledge, that is not always necessary. In fact, wisdom can be found among relatively uneducated persons who have developed it through learning from their experience. A person who has wisdom is one who maintains a larger view of the situation to be addressed without losing sight of particularity and the intricacies of interrelationships within it. Thus wisdom involves the acceptance of complexity in a situation as matter-of-fact. This is demonstrated in the recognition that the relationships between persons and things are not always the same—that there is a messiness and disorder in life that must be dealt with.

The books of the Bible known as the Wisdom literature—Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes—can be a resource for developing both personal and pastoral wisdom. Many persons have turned to these books less frequently than others because they appear to be more about human relationships than about the relationship of God and humankind. There is less talk about God in them, more language that is not specifically religious. Thus, at first glance they may seem less inspiring than other books of the Bible.

Theologically, the Wisdom literature of the Bible seems more concerned with creation than redemption. Old Testament scholar Carol Newsom describes the Wisdom literature as affirming God's creative activity by which the orderliness and dependability of the world is achieved.¹ Human wisdom is having insight into this world in order to live successfully and harmoniously. Biblical wisdom affirms the goodness of creation and believes that the good life in a material sense is not in essential conflict with the good life

in the moral sense. The essence of such wisdom is to appreciate the relationship between one's acts and their consequences for oneself and for others. Wisdom is essentially concerned with the creation of a good life in the family, in the local community, and in the larger society. Pastoral care is also involved with these practical human concerns, assuming that persons' relationship with God is a part of them whether God is talked about or not.

It is the very human quality of these books, however, that offers important guidance for the ministry of pastoral care. The Wisdom literature of the Bible can remind pastors that more often than not pastoral care involves dealing with people who talk of practical, everyday problems more than they talk of God. Unlike other parts of ministry that involve teaching and preaching about God and religion, what is essential for pastoral care is familiarity and comfort with ordinary, secular language. The Bible's Wisdom literature and pastoral care are similar in their spending most of their time addressing the way things are in the world of everyday life. Wisdom in pastoral care involves learning to talk seriously about life with or without always having to talk about God.

Where Wisdom May Be Found

Knowing something about wisdom is an important part of developing it, and a book like this may serve as a guide. A more important part of developing pastoral wisdom, however, is experience in life. Wisdom for ministry begins in action, in doing ministry in the best way we know how, but developing the most effective wisdom for pastoral care requires a particular kind of experience. Just doing it is not enough to learn most effectively. The wisdom of caring emerges from bringing together three things: actually doing pastoral care; sharing what has happened in that ministry in a community of ministers; and reflecting on the meaning of those pastoral events and one's development in ministry within that community.

Two philosophers have said some things about experience that can be helpful in learning from it most effectively. The first one is Søren Kierkegaard in his criticism of philosophy's tendency to think instead of act. His concern was to move away from thinking

about what we do abstractly or from a distance. He wanted to restore the involvement of the person in what he or she thought and how he or she acted. Kierkegaard spoke of the power of an individual to forge his or her personality out of the events of life. The religious self for him was not a substance or permanent presence, but an ongoing task to be achieved.² Similarly, becoming a wise pastor is a continuing task for the minister.

Kierkegaard said that one becomes a genuine person by what one chooses to do and to be and through risking looking at oneself and one's choices. Becoming oneself is something to be won through the experiences of life. Kierkegaard's emphasis on personal involvement and the necessity of risk in looking at oneself and what one has done is an important guide for developing pastoral wisdom. There is always the risk of exposing our failures and inadequacy in this kind of self-examination, but action and risk of the self through examining what one does in ministry is an essential part of learning to be an effective pastor.

Pastoral wisdom is developed through action and reflection on that action, but it should be a particular kind of action—action in *relationship*. A more recent philosopher, John Macmurray, can be helpful here. He was convinced that looking at the self or individual alone was a problem for philosophy and the wrong place to start in understanding life. Like Kierkegaard he was convinced that the self is first a doer and only secondarily a thinker,³ but he emphasized the importance of relationship in the understanding of oneself and others.⁴ The individual thinker tends to isolate himself or herself in the thinking process, and thus tends to see theory and practice as separated from each other. Macmurray was convinced that it is through the practical encounter in relationship that real knowledge emerges. The other person is discovered both as the resistance to, and the support of what one does. The unity of persons in community is not a fusion of self but a unity of persons where each remains a distinct individual, but each realizes himself or herself in and through the other.⁵

Kierkegaard's and Macmurray's concerns together emphasize self-reflection on action within relationship as major contributors to the development of pastoral wisdom. The action of pastoral care takes place because of the convictions and concerns of the religious community, because of the relationships within that com-

munity, and in order to strengthen those relationships with those in some way estranged from that community. Thus, relationships within a community of faith support individual action and that action contributes to enriched and strengthened relationships within and beyond the immediate community. Action in ministry grows out of one's experience in relationship and is intended to facilitate further relationship.

As has already been suggested, there are three things that contribute to the development of wisdom in pastoral care: actually doing pastoral care; sharing what has happened in that ministry in a community of ministers; and reflecting on the meaning of those pastoral events and one's development in ministry within that community of other ministers. Although philosophers Kierkegaard and Macmurray, themselves thinkers, were critical of thinking separated from action or relationship, thinking is an essential part of pastoral wisdom. The thinking or interpretation of events that is involved in the development of pastoral wisdom, however, is different from abstract thought.

One of those who underscored this truth was psychologist Paul Pruyser, who was a major contributor to modern pastoral care. Pruyser brought action, relationship, and meaning together in what he called "transformational knowledge." This knowledge, he said, comes not from abstract theories but from practical engagements intended to produce change in the person to whom help is offered and in the person offering help. In such relationships, practitioners, pastors, and others often have to make innovative decisions, not infrequently by an intuitive wisdom. Gaining transformational knowledge always involves the "messy" aspects of human life, those things that can't be theorized about or worked out beforehand. These aspects of life, however, require as much thought as the more academic or controllable dimensions of life, and this thinking is most often done after action for help or change has taken place.⁶

Bringing together the contributions of these three thinkers—Kierkegaard, Macmurray, and Pruyser—to our understanding of the wisdom required for pastoral care, we can affirm that pastoral wisdom grows out of experiencing the changing dimensions of human life through the interrelationship of action, relationship, and meaning. The best place for the interaction of these components

of wisdom to take place is in a small group of colleagues in ministry where the often messy, personal, and necessarily confidential aspects of human life may be discussed freely. Talking about one's experiences in pastoral caring can simply be talking about what's happening to someone else—in effect, gossip—unless that conversation takes place in a community that has been intentionally formed to contribute to the care and the development of persons.

Pastoral reflection on action in ministry avoids objectifying others and emphasizes self-examination. It is a discussion of the pastoral self in relationship, a particular carer's action in ministry, an examination of the kind of relationship that grew out of that action, and a reflection of the meaning of that action and relationship to ministry and theology. Certainly, one can learn from one's experiences by reflecting on them alone, but the tendency there is simply to grade them as good or bad and avoid looking at the details of the situation. The observations of colleagues multiply the learning potential in a situation of ministry. Members of the group who have common commitment to ministry and openness to learning from their experience can support each other in looking realistically at what has happened and consider alternatives that are appropriate for the particular minister involved.

Although employing a consultant for a ministry group is not necessary, the wisdom that a consultant may bring is a valued addition to the group. A consultant is usually someone with more experience in ministry or more general experience in working with persons in groups. She may be a mental health practitioner, pastoral counselor, or specialist in organizational development. The consultant's value rests in her experience, knowledge of persons, groups, and leadership, and in being separate from the group of colleagues in the consultation experience. The consultant is employed to respond without any kind of personal involvement in the situation. She may know a great deal about similar situations, but unlike a supervisor who has some responsibility for what happens, the consultant can speak freely without concern for anything other than the person presenting the situation in the group.

What happens in this kind of group? A group like this is not simply involved in case studies that might be about any person or

situation in general. A member of the group presents a pastoral event or situation of ministry, such as the one described in the next section. The personal involvement of the person presenting the situation is an essential element in what can take place. The group is not just discussing a particular situation as one might talk about another person's life situation. It is concerned with learning from a situation in which one of its members has been involved. The group's focus is as much (or more) on the member and his or her development in ministry as it is on the situation itself. One of the valuable contributions of a skilled consultant is maintaining this focus. Otherwise there is a natural defensiveness that causes persons to externalize the situation rather than look at themselves.

An Illustration of How Pastoral Wisdom Can Be Found

A great deal more could be said theoretically about how wisdom in pastoral care may be found. What is most important is encouraging the minister to find or organize a group in which he or she can participate. Instead of saying more in general about such groups, however, it seems more valuable now to describe an action in ministry that might be dealt within such a group. The ministry situation that is described here is far from dramatic. In fact it is quite ordinary. Nevertheless, it is just that ordinariness that can best illustrate how group consultation about everyday pastoral events can offer insight about ministry and about oneself. The pastoral event described here is not intended to illustrate what is good pastoral care, but to present the kind of situation that can have great potential for developing pastoral wisdom.

One of the members of a ministry consultation group has been to visit an older adult in his church who has been hospitalized for respiratory problems. Her only daughter lives out of town with her family and has made several unsuccessful attempts to relocate her mother to an assisted living community near where the daughter lives. The mother, however, is insistent that she will not move away from where she lives now, away from her friends and her church. The conversation that the minister presented is something like this.

Pastor 1: How are you feeling today?

Mrs. M 1: Well, I am fine I guess. I am just an old woman with lots of health challenges and no one to take care of me.

P2: It was really good to meet your daughter.

M2: Yes, she lives three hours away and she really wants me to move closer to her, but you know, I grew up in this church. My parents and grandparents and their parents were members at this church, and we have a long history here in this community. None of my family ever moved away from this area, and I don't plan to be the first.

P3: Did I understand you to be saying that you are presently facing many health challenges? (He goes back to pick up what he missed earlier.)

M3: Yes, I am, but "S" is my only daughter, and the reason she has gone out there is to please her husband and she needs to come back to here. Everything is here for her. I have no one else to inherit the family property and I need someone to take care of me. Can you imagine me at this stage of my life trying to do groceries? I am so grateful to some friends at church who take me to the supermarket with them every week. But I can't always depend on people. I have a daughter and she needs to help me.

P4: I am sure that your daughter must feel torn between you and her husband.

M4: Well, if she is really torn she will come back to Atlanta. I took care of her father until his dying day, and she knows how I feel about family. She knows that I never wanted her to move so far away, and yet she is out there and I am here and not able to take care of myself.

P5: Has your daughter discussed the possibility of assisted living with you?

M5: Oh yes, she has, and I will have none of it. They tell me that in those places the nurses don't take care of you like your family can. They leave you all up to your own devices and I want my daughter to be here taking care of me.

P6: Do you have any friends who live in an assisted living community?

M6: No. My friends have children who will take care of them and be there for them. My only daughter needs to do just that.

P7: So how do you know about the kind of care that is given in the assisted living community?

M7: Oh, I hear lots of stories.

P8: Well, I hear lots of stories too about assisted living communities, but the stories I hear are such wonderful stories of making new friends, stories about learning new hobbies, stories about eating the right kind of food, stories about taking field trips to parks and gardens—those are just some of the stories I hear. Have you ever had the chance to go visit an assisted living community?

M8: No, I have not.

P9: When you are up to it do you think that you at least would go see what one looks like? Just to visit and see what they do and how other older adults like you are living in those communities. I could talk with your daughter about it and also arrange it if you would like me to.

M9: I guess it would not hurt to go see this place, but you need to talk to my daughter and see what she thinks. I am just so tired of trying to take care of myself and my daughter is not cooperating with me. I really need the help. This last incident was a close call, and I don't think that if I were alone I would have survived. I worry about that. Talk to her and see what she says.

P10: But you are willing to go visit an assisted living community?

M10: If it's all right with my daughter, yes.

What kind of pastoral wisdom can be learned from a situation such as this one? The first thing is that the minister was willing to present it. It is an ordinary, everyday, unremarkable event, but, perhaps only because it was time for him to share himself with his group, he presented it. In doing so he was able to learn something

about ministry and about his own style in pastoral care. The advantage of presenting specific, concrete events—even though they are somewhat distorted by memory—is that they bring pastoral experience back to life. Furthermore, that kind of presentation avoids the kind of distancing from one's experience that can occur when a situation is discussed only in generalities. A closer look at this pastoral encounter will reveal how much is going on in this ordinary conversation, and how it is always unfortunate to dismiss such an event with the preliminary judgment, "Not much really happened." The beginning of pastoral wisdom is noticing and describing.

In the beginning of this conversation, the parishioner answers the conventional, "How are you feeling today" with "Fine, I guess. I'm just an old woman with lots of health problems." The minister appropriately acknowledges meeting the woman's daughter for the first time, but in doing so ignores what his parishioner has said about herself. It's striking how much can be said about oneself in the two words, "I'm just. . . ." Those are words that ask the hearer to pay attention to the feeling behind them.

The parishioner uses the minister's comment about the daughter to get into the conflict between her and her daughter. He remembers that he missed the first opportunity to respond to his parishioner's health and goes back to it. This is one of the very good things about this pastoral conversation. The pastor seems to notice what he missed, goes back to it, and gives the parishioner a choice about which of the things mentioned she needs to talk about. The concern about her place in this community and the relationship with her daughter seems more pressing than her health, so that is where the conversation stays.

Although some members of the group might have raised a question with the minister about what he was feeling in the conversation before this point, at P4 either a group member or the consultant is likely to raise that question with something like this. "Did you really know what the daughter was feeling, or were you responding to something that you felt?" The minister might have acknowledged his discomfort or irritation at the church member's description of her situation and relationship to her daughter's family. His feeling might simply refer to the situation or to the parishioner herself or to something similar in his own life situa-