

The Parish Desert and My Ordinary Self

By William L. Mangrum

Abbot Joseph asked Abbot Pastor: Tell me how I can become a monk. The elder replied: If you want to have rest here in this life and also in the next, in every conflict with another say: Who am I? And judge no one.¹

A long decade into my pastoral calling I chucked away the manuals, journals, books and conference announcements promising better skills, modern techniques, and relevant programs for ministers. I had tried many of them, studied most of them, and found all of them wanting. Thin and snappy, bright and expensive, these products were long on promise but short on delivery. Like an endless succession of self-promoting consultants with their surveys and inventories, these gadgets and widgets and instruments took my money, filled my shelves, and frustrated my people.

Others smarter and wiser had warned me of these hawkers-of-success. Just around the time of my ordination, an older pastor advised what it took me ten years of parish ministry to confirm on my own. Compassionately but critically my friend said, “Throw away every book you own on being a pastor. They’re worthless. Instead, get everything you can by Wendell Berry. Read ’em. Read his essays and poetry. Read his stories.”

“Is he a pastor?” I asked. “He’s a good farmer,” Gene answered; “he loves his land. When Berry says ‘farm’ you read ‘parish.’ When Berry says ‘farmer’ you think ‘pastor.’” Specifically, I was to read an essay, “The Unsettling of America,” about the demise of family farming under the surging assault of agribusiness.² Gene concluded, “Berry teaches more about being a pastor than any pastoral manuals written this century.”

This fellow Presbyterian minister who had planted his own congregation and farmed it for nearly thirty years was right, of course. And, I half-way did as he counseled. I read Berry. I learned a great deal from him. I copied passages into my journals, quoted him to parishioners, and recommended his books to other pastors.

All the while, though, I was a fraud. In spite of good counsel, I couldn’t ditch the glossy pastoral-pornography I perused for taking the edge off my anxiety about being just me. Conferences and workshops were my main distraction. I routinely cruised events in distant cities lured by promises of success in ministry. The rush I craved was the feeling that I was in “the know,” on the cutting edge, current. Book-a-month selections on scientific approaches to ministry also got my money. Slick ads in Christian magazines – centerfolds for pastors – seduced me again and again. Though I served a small congregation in a rural historic village, tall-steeple pastors impressed me. Flash and pop. Light and sound. Power-point and download. I was envious. These folks, I was convinced, would help me do it right on my farm.

The problem, of course, was this. I was farming my small truck-farm as if I were the CEO of a multi-national agribusiness. Bigger tractors. Heavier

William L. Mangrum received an ITMS Shannon Fellowship in 2006 for his work on Thomas Merton’s *Thoughts in Solitude*. He formerly served as pastor of Mendocino Presbyterian Church, Mendocino, CA and on staff at St. Francis in the Fields Episcopal Church, Louisville, KY; he is now Senior Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Durango, CO.



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equipment. More chemicals. Efficiency and professionalism and technology. Pump the programs full of steroids and the church will grow. Buy a power-point and people will come. Throw out the hymnal and they will sing. Amuse them Sunday after Sunday and they will worship. Well, it didn't work out that way. Not at all. It was disastrous. Not that anyone else knew it. Mostly, my folks were pleased. They liked being contemporary and relevant. The latest, most sophisticated approaches in Christian ministry made them happy.

I wasn't happy, though. The more I tried to pump my congregation with programs and plans and projects, the worse I felt. I wasn't pastoring; I was managing. I wasn't praying; I was planning. I wasn't guiding souls; I was setting production goals and scrutinizing budgets and overseeing publicity campaigns. I was good at the business of being a churchman but I wasn't a pastor.

On the day it came clear to me that in spite of my calling and several good years of theological education and several more of church work I actually wasn't any closer to being a pastor than when I had started out in the parish a decade earlier, I fell apart. The sky drained to black. Suddenly, it was as if I was dropped into a vast, trackless wilderness *sans* compass. In fact, though I hadn't stumbled from my desk any further than the oversize winged-back chair in my study I was, nevertheless, afoot in the desert.

In introducing *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Thomas Merton redresses an error frequently made when considering the wilderness flight (*fuga*) of ancient Christians. From a comfortable stretch of fifteen hundred years, the assumption is this: the desert lured people questing after extraordinary spiritual adventures. Likewise, it is surmised those who stayed behind settled for life in a most ordinary, mundane sort of way. We fancy the desert then – as many imagine the monastery and the pulpit today – was exclusively for the super-spiritual. Desert, cloister, pulpit – these venues are for the really, really spiritual. Merely ordinary Christians live in ordinary places.

The rule was quite the opposite. Some folks did fly to the wilderness with a burning desire to become larger-than-sun stars shining down on less sophisticated souls. But these megalomaniacs and narcissists got it wrong. These would-be spiritual athletes carried the world within their bosom as the normative measure against which they compared their sacrifices. They changed location but not horizon. They aimed to triumph over the world. Alas, though they traveled deep into the deserts of Egypt, Arabia, and Palestine, they were still of the world because they could never stop measuring themselves against that which they boasted of leaving. Inevitably, they went mad. Their journey, Merton notes, spiraled downward, their lives becoming a vicious cycle of “self-contemplation, and self-comparison with the negative standard of the world [they] had abandoned” (*WD* 22).

Merton wrote of the reasons I became a pastor and the ensuing madness, the depression, into which I descended. I recognized the navel-gazing and peer-envy he described. I left the world to become better than the world but held within me the world as my opponent. In my youth charismatic leaders had dared me to sacrifice and risk with their own tales of spiritual adventure. I wanted to be like them, to accomplish something great for God. On first inspection, such motives aren't bad. Unfortunately, most of the greatness we pastors aim at when thus challenged has little to do with God. Mostly it is about impressing good-looking, athletic youth leaders by losing ourselves so as to become like them.

However, the Christians who survived among the rocks and dunes wanted only to be themselves. They fled conversation to avoid comparisons. They sought freedom from measuring greatness. They sought “their *ordinary* selves, and to forget a world that divided them from themselves” (*WD* 23). They knew themselves called to be no more than themselves but never less than their own true selves. They grasped this as the truly great feat of the Christian life. The simple ones ceased to look upon others at all except compassionately and without condemnation. However, they looked only and always on their

own souls with tears of rebuke and reproof (*WD* 70-71). Among the desert Mothers and Fathers the rule was “have humility . . . and judge not another” (*WD* 27). Their oft-repeated injunction to “despise no one, condemn no one, rebuke no one” (*WD* 40) took aim directly at the pervasive human proclivity for justifying oneself by “condemning others” (*WD* 71).

Furthermore, the elders also knew that in order to become and remain themselves, they required the harsh simplicity of the desert. “What the Fathers [and Mothers] sought most of all,” writes Merton, “was their own true self, in Christ. And in order to do this, they had to reject completely the false, formal self, fabricated under social compulsion in ‘the world’” (*WD* 5-6). There was no other reason “for seeking solitude . . . for leaving the world” for the desert (*WD* 23).

Likewise, I learned, there could be no other reason for ending the cycle of ministerial conferences and seminars designed to make me a better pastor. There was no other reason for canceling my subscriptions to professional journals promising success in ministry if only I would adopt the means and practices of the successful few. For me, there could be no other reason for forswearing all comparisons and vowing silence than this: that I should learn to be – though I am a pastor – only my true, ordinary self.

I left the conference circuit and stopped reading slick Christian magazines. Not because I am better than those called to these ministries nor because I have nothing more to learn about pastoral ministry. My flight is not born of “proud contempt” (*WD* 5). Rather, I left the professionalized culture of ministry for the same reason fourth-century Christians fled the cities in favor of simple living in caves and mud huts. I left to become ordinary. When I am surrounded by hordes of pastors “criticizing everything” older than today (*WD* 47), I miss the only voice I must hear and follow if I am to become my plain, true self.

No longer do I aspire to spiritual greatness. I have no urges to spectacular doings for God. Rather, I want to be me: true to my own nature and true to my particular calling. I want to be a truck-farmer, not a CEO. When for purposes of comparing and contrasting and measuring my success over the world I carry within the multiple voices of agribusiness-type-pastors on parish management, I am overwhelmed. I lose my bearings. I buy chemicals I don’t need. I try things I know in advance won’t work. I poison the soil and foul the streams while forcing increased production. I make a mess of it.

So, I quit. I bowed out. I entered the silence. I left the world of clerical professionals and sought desert solitude in my small parish. I am not a professional. I am an ordinary pastor. I must farm my parish. When a decision needs to be made locally, here, on this plot of land, I only ask: Who am I? And, I judge no one.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960) 63; subsequent references will be cited as “*WD*” parenthetically in the text.
2. This is the title essay of Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 3-14.