

Falling Off a Log

Wed Nov 10, 2021

My Dear Shepherds,

Pastoring reminds me of logrolling. Logrolling started in the late 1800s with lumberjacks who learned to walk on floating, rolling logs in order to break up [logjams](#), a pastoral task if ever there was one. It wasn't long before things got competitive, two guys fast-footing on either end of the same log till one was dumped into the river. I've never tried that sport, but I know what it is to feel like I can't move my feet any faster and I'm about to lose my balance and go under. Competitive logrolling is not for shepherds.

For 22 years I pastored a modest-sized church in a tony northern suburb of Chicago. One day I got wind that Willow Creek Community Church, the mega-est of them all, was going to plant yet another campus, this one just two miles away. I literally got sick to my stomach. My wife urged me to think kingdom thoughts, but it wasn't working. The megachurch on the other end of the log was about to dump me. I just knew it. Competition is the COVID of pastoral life.

The only competition early church pastors faced was with heretics, not with each other. Nonetheless, a sense of inadequacy goes way back to Timothy. Consider Paul's admonition to him as remedy for our own toxic competitiveness:

For this reason [your sincere faith] I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. (2 Tim. 1:6-7)

Trying to keep up with the Parsons invariably pits us against someone else's gifts or efforts. Such mimicry doesn't bear fruit. Remember how Pharaoh's sorcerers tried to match Moses' miraculous signs? We can come dangerously close to that.

To regain your balance, remember your call and the fiery gift of God bestowed upon you. That gift, already aglow within you, is the starter flame for any ministry God has for you. It is still as much a free gift as the grace of salvation itself. Instead of competing, rekindle your confidence in God's calling.

Evidently, timidity (cowardice, lost confidence) tamps down the spark of God's gift within us. I felt like a 98-pound weakling compared to the visionary pastors or the big, growing churches. (On the other hand, feeling superior to other pastors and churches smothers God's flame just as surely.)

To fan God's gift into flame is to draw on these tripartite gifts of the Holy Spirit: *power, love, and self-discipline*. They are the antivenom for the snakebite of ministry competition.

Power is the Christlike authority to make disciples wherever we're sent. We do not need to be better than any other pastor or bigger than any other congregation to do what the Lord calls us to do.

Love re-personalizes ministry minimized by metrics. The pursuit of the big win always diminishes relationships; it's [the Bobby Knight problem](#). Love is the kingdom's North Star and the Lord's language.

Self-discipline, or sound judgment, regains the mind of Christ addled when ministry becomes a frantic effort to keep your balance, and reorients us to easily forgotten kingdom values like "the least of these" and "servant of all."

Freed from the smothering curse of comparison, you can attend to the Spirit-directed relationships, skills, and strategies that will walk your flock along the paths of righteousness. What's more, there is the relief of finding sure footing in God's grace. It's as easy as falling off a log.

Be ye glad!

Lee Eclov

Logrolling and Logjams

Wed, Nov 3, 2021

My Dear Shepherds,

You may not have given much thought to logrolling, so let me enlighten you. In the late 1800s, when logging took off as a major industry in America, logs cut in remote forests were floated down rivers to sawmill towns. All those thousands of logs frequently jammed, so men were hired to walk out on the logs to break them up. But if they were to stay dry (not to mention, alive) they had to learn to walk on spinning logs while they worked—to "roll the logs."

Every pastor is well-acquainted with ministry logjams. Like the time a cell tower company approached us with a lucrative offer to hide their equipment in a new steeple they'd build for us. That created a logjam in our leadership. Another time a decision about a part-time staff position got fouled up in personalities. A logjam.

In a [Leadership Journal interview](#) 25 years ago, M. Craig Barnes told about a brouhaha he faced over whether or not to put "a little coffee stand in the narthex." Ushers threatened to quit en masse. A task force met for eight weeks! Barnes was asked, "What does such a distraction do to your soul?" He replied, "It's like being nibbled to death by a duck." That's a logjam.

You can find a lot of leadership guidance for breaking up church logjams but not so much on helping you keep your head above water when they happen. Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy,

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. (1 Tim. 4:12)

Setting an example is fairly easy until ministry gets messed up, and it is a rare week when something isn't messed up somewhere. When the mess happens, rest assured people are watching you. That's to be expected. In fact, it's part of discipleship. Pastoring by example is like logrolling.

Set an example in speech. Don't complain. Speak the truth in love. Don't gossip. Explain Scripture in order to light their path forward. Remember what Jesus said, "the mouth speaks what the heart is full of," so get alone with God to fill your heart with grace, seasoned with salt.

Set an example in conduct. First, behave "in a manner worthy of the gospel." Exercise self-control, which is where the Holy Spirit stands ready to help in your weakness. Sometimes the Good Shepherd leads his people on paths of righteousness by having us walk ahead of them. Whatever you do, don't sin!

Set an example in love. Wash feet and "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another. ... Forgive as the Lord forgave you." All of those self-sacrificing virtues cost you something, all the more when the pressure is on.

Set an example in faith. No challenge your church faces can be met without trusting God beyond your personal comfort zone. Your people may revert to business books or personal preferences for solutions, so your job is to help them see by your example what trusting God looks like. Show them how to pray, listen, and obey God.

Set an example in purity. Moral purity isn't only about sex. When facing leadership challenges, purity means you don't manipulate people and you're not a hypocrite, pretending godliness to get your own way. Purity means working with all the lights on.

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. (1 Tim. 4:15)

Be ye glad!

Lee Eclov

Admiration II: 'Vicar of Large Things'

Wed Oct 27, 2021

My Dear Shepherds,

A friend, Andy, sent me an [intriguing poem](#) by the Welsh poet and pastor, R. S. Thomas, that begins,

I was vicar of large things

in a small parish.

Andy, who pastors in a little Minnesota burg of 300 people, reads that poem every week. His wife framed it for his study. He likes it, he says, "because it speaks against the desire for great things in a great place." I admire him and so many other pastors like him who see the "large things" where they serve, regardless of whether their parish is big or small.

By “large things” the poet seemed to have in mind the deep matters of the souls in his flock, “depths in some of them I shrank back from” Sometimes, because a person is silent or inarticulate, we do not see how deeply they know God or how deeply they want him.

But Thomas also said, “Their eyes looked at me and were the remains of flowers on an old grave.” Andy told me of spending an afternoon riding a combine with a farmer in his church. “We would share something vulnerable,” he wrote, “and then quickly go back to weather, sports, politics, anything less uncomfortable than grief, sorrow, God.” Large things in deep wells.

Thomas wrote, “I was there, I felt, to blow on ashes that were too long cold.” Can you picture a Boy Scout rubbing two sticks together over dry leaves, puffing away in hopes of a wee flame? Pastoring is long, slow, painstaking work. Sometimes, it feels like the fire has died and we’re supposed to blow on these ashes and get it started. Maybe too little, too late. I admire pastors who are doing that.

One more vivid image:

... the draught

out of their empty places

came whistling so that I wrapped

myself in the heavier clothing

of my calling, speaking of light and love

in the thickening shadows of their kitchens.

Andy says his calling “is what sustains me when I feel like I’m just preaching and visiting and praying and thinking how is this week different from last week or last year.” He is young, well-educated, and could surely leave the soybean fields for the suburbs, but he wants to be where he is. He sought the small parish, in fact. “I lean on the fact that God has called me to be a pastor. He called me to pastor here, and I’m going to do that until he calls me somewhere else (and I’m not looking to go).” I admire him.

A small parish is not a nobler assignment than a large one. The grass often seems greener in the other shepherd’s pasture. Small church pastors would be surprised how many of their colleagues in large churches would like to change places with them. Whatever the size of your church, I admire you who push against the pressures of “running a church” so that you can find space to care for souls.

Our calling is “speaking of light and love,” those vast truths found in Christ which we pour into the deep wells of our people’s souls. I don’t mean the complexities of theology that we sometimes drag into sermons but the *deep* things—the beauty of holiness, faith like a little child’s, the kingdom as tiny as a mustard seed and more valuable than a pearl, the Father and his servants who rejoice over one sinner come home, and the mystery long hidden and now made plain, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

With great admiration,

Lee Eclov