

Chapter Three

PUBLIC GRACE

A COUPLE who visited our church the first Sunday of January almost didn't come back. Half the church was out of town that holiday weekend. We had no worship team. Just one pianist and me to lead worship. It was old school, the way church services were when I was a kid. The couple who visited that day told me later that they weren't sure they wanted to go to a church where the pastor did everything. Can't say as I blame them, but I'm glad they stayed.

Gifted and godly people bring their worship arts to our churches, and we're all the richer for them. They give us new voices and new eyes. Pastors are better off, too, for not having to carry the full load of leading. However, there are parts of a worship service to which no one else brings quite the same touch as the shepherd of the flock.

Pastors whose only Sunday morning assignment is preaching are missing something, and so are their people. Shepherds who follow near to Jesus have an instinct about His sheep that affects the way they do things. It isn't that pastors know God better than others who lead worship; but perhaps we know the people better. A good pastor carries a deep sense of people's burdens and failings and, I hope, the Good Shepherd's instinct for grace.

Years ago I read an article in the *Chicago Tribune* about a pep rally that the new head of the Chicago Sewers Department called for his workers. The headline said, "City tries to pump up its crews down under." You'd have thought the new boss was Joel Osteen. "Winning is not a sometimes thing," he shouted. "It's an all-the-time thing!" And the eight hundred people in the Plumbers Union Hall cheered enthusiastically.

IT DELIGHTS THE FATHER WHEN WE GIVE PEOPLE A GOLD STAR NOW AND THEN.

Sometimes I look out over the congregation on Sunday morning and think about the dirty, difficult places God's people must work every week. Some offices, of course, are filthier than sewers.

Some schools are darker than underground tunnels. Some families are toxic. A lot of Christians spend their week trying to keep the gunk off their hearts, trying to keep their souls from smelling like a cesspool. Good shepherds know. We think about where people have come from when they come to worship. If we are thoughtful, that will nuance how we grace what we do in the service. As my friend Brandon put it, “There is a degree of intimate knowing that a pastor brings.”

Here are some worship assignments that pastors should be able to do with a unique touch.

Human Moments

Announcements feel like a bother. They can seem like billboards hiding the scenery of worship. But the announcement slot is a good time to remember that our congregation is a family. It delights the Father when we give people a gold star now and then, and the announcements are a good time to do that. “It’s Joyce and Lowell’s fiftieth wedding anniversary this week. Thank you for your example to us all!” And the church applauded. “School is starting. Would all our teachers, school staff, and home-schoolers stand? Let me take a minute and pray for you.” “It is so good to see Jack here today. He’s been out sick for a long time. Welcome home, Jack.” “Today is Veteran’s Day. Let’s recognize all who are here who have served our country.” Other worship leaders can honor these people, of course, but it is special to them when their pastor does it.

Heavies

One of my great pastoral regrets goes back to a September Sunday in 1994. Three days before, a USAir jet coming in for a landing at the Pittsburgh airport suddenly nosedived into a hillside, killing everyone on board—131 people. It happened twenty minutes from our church. USAir employed a lot of people in our congregation. One of our men was a gate agent nearby. One was a supervisor who had to meet with waiting families. One would work in the hangar where they brought the wreckage. Another worked for the FAA and would eventually investigate the whole event. The airline was on the financial ropes, and there was an immediate underlying fear that this disaster might put them out of business, costing thousands of jobs. The whole city mourned.

But my instincts that weekend were lousy. That Sunday morning I did not consider what had just happened to my flock. After all, I reasoned, no one in our congregation had lost anyone. I prayed

about the loss but that was it. We should have taken plenty of time to grieve together in the Lord's presence, but I wanted to stick to the plan. I'm embarrassed to tell it.

PART OF WORSHIP IS RECOUNTING GOD'S MIGHTY
DEEDS, AND THE PASTOR IS OFTEN THE CHURCH'S TELLER
OF TALES.

In the fall of 2008 there was another crash. This time it was the markets. The younger people in our church were almost oblivious to the financial earthquake, living paycheck to paycheck as they do. But many in our congregation saw years of careful saving drained. I knew people were frightened and I didn't want to make the same mistake twice. I felt this was a time for me to comfort the church. I prayed for a way to speak to them.

When the service started, I welcomed people and then talked for a moment about the frightening things we were seeing. Then I sang to them of God's care—no instruments, just a little chorus, "He Careth for You." I read Scripture for a few minutes, like I would in a hospital room, and prayed for us to be able to rest in the Lord. Then I sang a verse and a chorus of "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." Others could have done all of those things at least as well as I, but no one else was their pastor. We were all bolstered by God's sustaining grace.

Teller of Stories

The Psalms teach us that part of worship is recounting God's mighty deeds. Those mighty deeds keep happening among God's people, and the pastor is often the church's teller of tales. Pastors circulate from life to life within the church, picking up stories of God's work. Part of worship is telling those stories to the glory of God. Sometimes before a song or before I pray, I tell a story someone has told me. Other times I do a brief interview, often right in the aisle. My associate pastor, Michael, recently asked Bob, a Gideon, to tell the story of eager people receiving free New Testaments at the county fair. During a recent sermon series from Proverbs 1-9, I searched out people who especially loved reading the Proverbs every day. Then I interviewed them on different Sundays. One woman told of the lifelong impression her mother made by reading a chapter of Proverbs every day to her kids. One of our businessmen talked passionately about how Proverbs shaped his life from his first days as a believer.

Like many churches, we put out a white rose and tell the story when someone is converted through a person in our congregation. One memorable Sunday recently we had two roses. I told the church of the fifty-year-old cleaning lady named Debbie whom one of our women led to Christ, and also introduced Andrew, a fifth grader, who had prayed with his parents a few days before. As I expected, the congregation clapped like they would for anyone who had just come home after a long time away.

These stories we tell don't take time from our worship; they *are* our worship. They tune up the songs we sing and illumine the Scripture we read.

The Table and the Bath

I am comfortable with others leading Communion or baptizing someone, but again these are privileges that pastors shouldn't miss. Often in our church, we serve Communion in trays passed down the rows. I love to stand there by the table and watch. There is time to look at particular people and remember how they came to Christ or what they've been through as believers. I'm humbled at the way they all turn their eyes toward me as I recite the familiar words, "The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread..."

Sometimes we have people come forward to receive the elements. Usually there are four of us serving. Like so many other pastors have done, I look into the eyes of each person who stands expectantly before me. I can call most of them by name. "Janet, the blood of Christ shed for you." Sometimes my voice breaks.

Because we have a baptistery in the front of our church, we can baptize people during our morning service. We practice immersion and I meet the candidates as they each come down the steps into the water. I introduce them, and they share the story of their faith in Christ with the church. The pastoral moment is not when I baptize them. Others could do that. It is when I say a few words commending them to the church for a spiritual gift I've recognized or a particular way they touch others. I might mention how they've encouraged me or what promise I see in them as a believer. Then, after someone dear to them prays, I baptize them. Not long ago, on Easter Sunday, I baptized Drew. He is from a Christian home, but he had wandered far before the Father, seeing him a long way off, ran to meet him. After he was baptized and stood smiling beside me, I felt led by the Good Shepherd to say, "Some of you have been waiting a long time for a prodigal to come home. You see here what can happen. Take heart."

Hand Blessed

We hope our churches are blessing people often, but sometimes we do it with our hands. A new pastor is installed or ordained. A short-term missions team gathers on the platform. A new board of elders assembles to be recognized and commissioned. God dispatches one of our number to a new place of service, like when my longtime associate pastor, Jared, left to become a Navy chaplain. Christians have our own Bible expression for this that no one else uses: “the laying on of hands.”

Some of these situations are weightier than others, but in each case representatives of the church are conveying God’s grace to these people— grace for the journey and work, grace for the parting. The touch of our hands on heads and shoulders is the promise of God’s call and blessing. Several people in our church may have hands for these commissionings, but a pastor should be among them, because the shepherd knows his sheep.

Our favorite blessing occasion is the dedication of children to the Lord. When parents bring their child to the platform, we are all reminded again what a precious and fragile gift a child is. The parents pray first, publicly committing their child to the Lord with a written prayer I give them. Then I pray, taking the baby in my arms or putting my hand upon the child’s forehead and dedicating him or her to God. But our favorite part comes after that.

THIS BLESSING IS A UNIQUE KIND OF STATEMENT, ITS
OWN GENRE. IT ISN’T A WISH. IT IS A DECLARATION.

Years ago I heard this idea from another church. While someone sings or plays—a lullaby perhaps—I carry the child down the aisles, row by row, from side to side, and the people, one by one, bless that precious little one. They reach far to touch his foot. “God bless you, David,” they whisper. Hands gently touch her forehead. “God be with you, Lauryn.” I see lips move, and their benedictions are so sweet I often have tears in my eyes. There is no other time quite like it in our church. The parents watch in wonder from the platform. They’ve warned me, many of them, that their baby might cry, and I promise that I’ll bring him back to them if he does. But, amazingly, I do not remember that ever happening since I started

doing this some twenty years ago. There's no particular reason I would need to be the one who carries this child through the congregation; when we have several children, others share the privilege. But I wouldn't miss it for the world and I think it is very important to the parents that their pastor does this.

“Let Us Stand for the Benediction”

Other than preaching, there is no privilege in a worship service I love more than pronouncing the benediction. I can't imagine ending a worship service with, “See you next week,” or “You're dismissed,” when I can offer our congregation God's blessing instead.

Through the mutual carelessness of pastors and their people, the words can cease being sacred gifts and become merely clergy code for the service's end, a congregational heads-up to collect their stuff. But, in fact, a benediction is so much more. This blessing is a unique kind of statement, its own genre. It isn't a wish. It is a declaration: “The Lord blesses you—He really does!” It doesn't tell us what God *will* do for us, but what God *is doing* ever and always for His people. It is God's vow.

Benedictions can be drawn directly from Scripture or shaped for that service. But believe me, when pastors stand before their people quietly, till everyone stops fidgeting, when we raise our hands over them (a gesture unique to church), and when we declare God's covenant care over them as emissaries of the Lord Himself, then God's people really are blessed. Grace settles on them afresh like dew.

WORSHIP LEADERS ARE LIKE SPOTLIGHT OPERATORS,
HELPING US ALL SHINE GLORY ON GOD AT THE CENTER OF
THE STAGE.

The benediction felt strange to me when I first pronounced it years ago. It was too weighty for my voice, too big for a man of my character. I felt peculiar—a little ostentatious—raising my hands over people like a priest. But that is what Aaron did from the very beginning, according to Leviticus 9:22: “Then Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them.” So I do it, too, for the Lord's sake. I have memorized the biblical benedictions I use and I say them slowly, looking at faces. Some in the congregation hold their hands in front of them, cupped as though to receive a drink of water.

Perhaps some churches do not use the benediction because it sounds foreign to the unchurched they want to reach. But that is the

point! It *is* foreign. Visitors won't hear God's blessing anywhere else. That is exactly why they should hear it when they are with us.

For what it's worth, I have taken to singing benedictions quite often. I know that isn't for everyone, but since I can sing passably, I've come to love mixing melody and blessing. I particularly like two written by Michael Card: "Barocha" (his rendition of Numbers 6:24-26) and a shortened version of "Grace Be with You All" (from Hebrews 13:20-21). All I can tell you is that sweet and holy things happen when I sing these blessings to God's beloved people. A young man who has only been in our church a couple of months told me, "When I first heard you sing the benediction as our shepherd I felt so loved."

Worship Is a Little about Us

Matt Redman has taught us to sing, "I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about You, all about You, Jesus." He's certainly right, but that doesn't mean worshipers should forget who they are. Worship wouldn't be better if we were all invisible. Worship is *sinners* celebrating salvation, *children* adoring their Father, the *blessed* effusive in their thanks to the Giver, the *weak* reminiscing of God's aid, and the *homesick* listening together for the trumpet and shout. Worship is better when we keep in mind who we are.

What's more, true to His grace, God gives to us even when we want *Him* to receive all our attention. Does anyone ever come out of true worship thinking we put in more than we received? Worship leaders are like spotlight operators, helping us all shine glory on God at the center of the stage. But something else is going on. Remember what happened to the shepherds near Bethlehem? "And the glory of the Lord shone around them." We as the shepherds of God's people help our congregation see the glory of the Lord shining all around them. We grace God's worshipers with His delight in them and His timely Word in trouble, with the stories of His work among their brothers and sisters, with the bread and cup, and with water and holy hands.

Whether the worshipers in our churches come in from green pastures or up from the sewers, thanks to Christ they are privileged heirs of the King, priests of the Most High God, and the white-clad Bride of Christ. Shepherds help them remember that.