

Who Will Bring the Bandages and Wine?

Thomas R. Steagald

In the late summer of 1995, after being appointed for a third year to his third appointment, Tom Steagald experienced a profound crisis of faith and ministry. A nine-month voluntary leave of absence allowed him to relocate and begin healing through an intense regimen of counseling and spiritual direction. In June 1996, he was reappointed and moved with his family to the church he would serve for the next nine years. His new book, *Praying for Dear Life: A Reason to Rise, Strength for the Day, Courage for the Night* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006) chronicles life and ministry after that time of crisis. He was appointed to Stanley First United Methodist Church (Stanley, North Carolina) in June 2005. The following was presented to a meeting of the Western North Carolina Conference Order of the Elders in the fall of 2006.

One of the books which those in my generation of seminary students were asked to read was Henri Nouwen's *The Wounded Healer*. If we did not always read the book with care, we used the term with abandon—it seemed an apt turn of phrase for those of us in that tumultuous era who for all sorts of reasons, social as well as personal, political as well as spiritual, wrestled with what it meant to be both broken and called, vessels as earthen as the

poor world in which we hoped to serve and at the same time, dare we imagine it, the instruments of heaven, channels of blessing, means of grace among those to whom we would be sent.

Which was the greater burden, we wondered at length, the greater blessing: our woundedness or our ministry?

If Nouwen's term is more or less passé in this era of technique, and if the entire concept a bit clichéd in this semester of the church's life when the syllabi and lectures are geared more toward swelling, it seems, than healing, for me Nouwen's turn of phrase still suggests a question, or a series of them, layered and nuanced. When the healers are found to be wounded—whether they start that way or get that way or do it to themselves—who if anyone will stop on their way from Jerusalem to Jericho with bandages and wine? Which is to say how might the process of healing begin, if indeed it begins at all, so that the broken vessel is not simply discarded—the half-dead and naked abandoned to the vultures—but the freshest wounds at least anointed with unguents and compassion that healing might begin? That fresh streams of mercy and ministry might one day flow again through them, those admittedly flawed instruments who it is to be hoped have become strong in their broken places?

That such a healing work is required of us who sit in this room is not news, I think, nor is the notion that it can be a powerful ministry for others than the obviously wounded. In James 5 the author writes: Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any of you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the

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Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise them up, and *anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you (all) may be healed.* (emphasis mine)

That process may be a powerful one, but it does not have to be. Though the prophet Obadiah warns that we “should not gloat over our brothers on the day of their misfortune, or rejoice over our sisters on the day of their ruin” (after verse 12), we sometimes do. And why is that?

Though the apostle Paul commands the Galatians, “When you see a brother or sister overtaken by sin, those of you who have received the Spirit should restore that one in a spirit of gentleness. Remember that it could happen to you,” (after 6:1), we often do not—do not take time to remember, do not work to restore. Why not? Schadenfreude, perhaps, or because the fall clears the way for us or because, in the case of high profile failures like Ted Haggard, their hypocrisies seem to reinforce our own theological and even political prejudice.

Besides, confession does not come easily to any of us, and even when offered it does not always elicit a corresponding humility. And so, I fear, we do not do as Paul commands and certainly not in the way James counsels: we do not confess our sins to one another; we do not always or even very often pray for each other, if we pray at all; less often still do we anoint one another with oil. When, then, and where, how will the healing and forgiveness come?

Tellingly, though *The United Methodist Book of Worship* contains two healing services that may be “freely adapted,” it does not contain specific rubrics for a Ritual or Sacrament of Reconciliation. And though there is a liturgy for “bidding a pastor farewell” there is no ritual for welcoming a pastor back—into the Order or conference or otherwise. More’s the pity, for administrative redeployment is one thing, spiritual and communal restoration quite another, and such a service might provide a redemptive balm for everyone who is wounded for another’s transgressions.

It is in my nature to navigate my way by means of parables, analogies, the images and even characters that spangle our tradition as stars do the literal darkness. And so when Nathan wrote to me and asked me to make this small offering to you, the elders of our conference, I got my bearings not by the Book of Discipline but from two New Testament figures, two Elders who show us at both our best and our worst.

The first one, of course, is the elder son of the waiting father, who when his prodigal brother returned home maintained both his distance and his indignation, refused to rejoice that the one who had died was alive again. Perhaps he was angry, fearful that his own inheritance or appointment was once more at risk if the father decided, joyfully, to rewrite the will yet again. Or is that the assurance the Father is trying to convey when he says, “Son, all I have is yours”? In any case, I can imagine a day when the younger brother cries to the elder, as the Psalmist cried to God, as I myself have cried to God and my colleagues, “Will you be angry with me forever?” Sadly, perhaps. The aggrieved have long memories.

Of course, as Nouwen noted just before his death, prodigals

themselves have a terrible time not becoming elders after their return, and so let me confess that there have been times when I have noticed in myself a tendency to gripe and complain about what I perceived to be the steak offered to other prodigal pastors while there seemed only goat on mine, when in truth I am really very thankful I have anything on my plate at all. In my own defense I will only say that I suspect what I really wish is that we could all of us just eat together, whatever is on the plate, just share real collegial fellowship around all the various tables where we gather, confessing to one another and forgiving one another, praying for one another and thanking God for the bounty and mercy before us.

The second Elder is John, frequently mentioned as the author of the apocalypse, the Revelation, an exile on the island of Patmos who writes to others who on account of the gospel are just as isolated and exiled as he in a pagan world. “I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance...”

I, your brother, on account of Jesus share with you the persecution, share with you the kingdom, share with you the patient endurance. That, to me, is the best definition of elder and a description of our best ministry one to the other who are brothers and sisters in Jesus. It sounds more than a little like what Paul says in Galatians 6, again, when he writes, “Bear one another’s burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ.”

In little ways I try to emulate John the Elder’s example, if only by remembering—which is not as small a thing as it sounds—remembering, as Stuart Henry used to say, that all of us, all of us, are burdened, wounded, worried, and that most of

us try our polished resume best not to let on. I try to remember that, and I try to write letters to those overtaken in sin or sickness whenever I come to know about it, just to let them know I am here and I would gladly come there, that I understand at least a little and would be glad to bring the wine and oil, to sit and listen and share.

Sadly, I do not often know when my colleagues have fallen because, given the tenor of these litigious times and the fact that I am on almost no one’s grapevine, I do not often hear. But when I do hear of another in forced or self-imposed exile, I remember my own prodigality, and I write. I do my best to share in the persecution, do my best to pray for everyone’s patient endurance till the Kingdom shall come . . . which is to say, till all God’s children, and even all us elder brothers and sisters, shall be healed of all their deepest wounds and fears at last. □



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