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Metaphors for Ministry

Hitting 'The Road' with Cormac McCarthy.

When a friend felt forced to resign from his church, he and I met up to talk, pray, shoulder burdens together, and cry out to God. I arrived a little early, so before I met him for brunch, I did what I always do when I have extra time. I stopped at a used bookstore. In the dollar discards was a dog-eared and stained mass paperback copy of Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Road*. I picked it up with a few other treasures and headed to the restaurant where we were meeting. We talked about deep pain and fiery hope, works of love and moments of failure. Our conversation roamed the whole range of pastoring within the local church.

After our time of conversation and prayer, as we headed to our cars, I knew it would be a long time until I would see him. I gave him a hug and then handed him the roughed up copy of *The Road*. I hoped, somehow, this worn out copy of the book might breathe life into his worn out life and broken down ministry.

My friend isn't the only casualty of ministry in these divided and confusing days. Many pastors I have met are struggling with what it means to be a pastor *now*, wondering where we should turn for guidance in these times. Scripture and the great pastoral tradition provide the best and first resources, but in times when ministry is unclear, we need other voices to help us gain perspective and see rich metaphors for ministry.

While I am wary of misusing a literary work, I cannot think of any novel more appropriate as a parable for pastors in this present moment than *The Road*.^[1] Against the background of an ashen, decayed world, burned out by an unnamed disaster, a father and son (referred to only as "the man" and "the boy") walk a road littered with danger and goodness toward a hoped-for, yet unclear, destination.

As pastors today, our situation is similar. Everything we understood as normal is a faint

memory in this post-pandemic secular age. Still, we are on a journey through dangerous lands, holding onto hope and goodness amid the perils we face. *The Road* offers us metaphors for ministry as we seek to shepherd our people with love even in desperate times.

Cormac McCarthy may seem like a strange author to turn to in such times. His spare yet powerful writing is often dark and grotesque. Still, McCarthy's novels are haunted by some divine presence, even if his views are far from orthodox Christianity. In an interview McCarthy once said, "I don't think you have to have a clear idea of who or what God is in order to pray."^[2] Throughout *The Road*, the father invokes God, sometimes in angst and other times in hope. This tension with the divine offers fertile ground for exploring echoes of pastoral work in the novel.

It's Not Safe

We cant stay, he said. It's getting colder every day. ... It's not safe.

We could stay one more day.

It's not safe. (36)

With their home behind them and their wife/mother dead, the father and son move south toward hoped-for safety along the remains of a ruined and largely abandoned road. Every curve and bend of the way could bring unexpected relief or terror. There are ragged solitary travelers, marauding bands of cruel survivors, abandoned homes with unforeseen provisions, and always the burned-out earth covered in soot and ash. The tension of each step grips these two characters and the reader.

Before the past couple years, we knew the normal challenges of ministry. Pastors experienced tough counseling situations, difficult sermons to preach, conflicts with staff or boards or congregants. But then came the pandemic.

I remember, as many of us do, how quickly our church was forced into lockdown with in-person ministry and worship services grinding to a halt without enough time to ponder what that meant. Then came meetings and contingency plans made and changed with each new announcement. I remember our first regathering with physically-distanced seating, face coverings, and additional considerations.

Then came additional pressures as the exposure of racial injustice led to debates about how the church should engage in the public realm. To march or not to march? To make a statement

or not to make a statement?

Last of all, the federal election with its heated rhetoric bleeding into the church, followed by the chaos of January 6, 2021. Many of us wondered what world we were in.

Suddenly the normal challenges of pastoral ministry were exacerbated by a context of tension and division that few of us had ever experienced. The amount of unsolicited feedback and free advice about what a pastor should say or do was immense. The disorientation of mounting criticism came like a scorching fire blowing through the church. Every conversation felt fraught with tension. Even stepping in front of the congregation to lead worship before our Triune God each weekend felt more vulnerable and dangerous than before.

Janet Maslin, writing a review of *The Road* for *The New York Times*, describes the man's care for the boy as: "loving efforts to shepherd his son." [3] Throughout their journey, the father and son find breaths of safety but also many hazards amid a devastated world. They cannot linger long anywhere because it is not safe. When a band of cannibalistic marauders catches them off-guard, after fleeing on foot, the father is forced into a deadly confrontation with a man holding his son at knife-point. It is a harsh and grievous moment for the father and son leaving both physical and emotional wounds. After the encounter the man explains to the boy: "You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know. It may happen again. My job is to take care of you" (65).

While our work is much different, as pastors we are not guaranteed life or ministry will be stable or trouble-free. Our calling to shepherd our congregations involves risk and is not always safe. Our brothers and sisters from other places around the world often live with this reality, but we have become accustomed to thinking we deserve security.

If it is true that our enemy prowls like a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8) and that we are foreigners and strangers on this earth (Heb. 11:13), perhaps *The Road* can help us relearn that our way is often perilous and met by myriad raw forms of evil. Jesus said, "in this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33), which is a clear-eyed articulation of our ministry context. Perhaps we need no longer to be surprised that shepherding our congregations occurs amidst such risk and difficulties.

We're Carrying the Fire

We're going to be okay, aren't we Papa?

Yes. We are.

And nothing bad is going to happen to us.

That's right.

Because we're carrying the fire.

Yes. Because we're carrying the fire. (70)

One of the most beautiful and haunting aspects of *The Road* is the man's hopeful refrain that they are "carrying the fire." While "the fire" is never fully defined, it becomes code for the man instilling in the boy a sort of ancient morality or goodness that keeps them from forsaking their humanity in a world of madness and savagery. Near the end, the man tells the boy he must carry the fire through the rest of his life. The boy is perplexed about how to do it and asks, "Is it real? The fire?" To which the man responds, "Yes it is. ... It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (234).

The fire sets the man and the boy apart from those they encounter along the road. In like manner, we, as pastors with our congregations, are set apart even as we live in a world given over to fallenness and evil. Even as we acknowledge that the world and ministry is not safe, we carry living hope within us like a fire.

Many in our congregations have faced discouragement during these days. Some have lost loved ones or jobs. Some are in conflict with spouses, children, or friends. At times people come to us to share their burdens, while at other times people inflict their burdens upon us. As pastors, we, too, carry our own burdens and difficulties. We are real people with families, marriages, friendships, financial challenges, and more.

When the fire of the Holy Spirit fell on our forebears in the faith on that first Pentecost day, their lives were set ablaze in a noticeable way (Acts 2:1-7). During all life's challenges, including these most recent ones, our faith fires can sometimes burn low. Perhaps this is why Paul encouraged his young pastoral protégé, Timothy, to fan into flame God's gift in his life (2 Tim. 1:6). By faith in Christ we are filled and sealed with the Holy Spirit's presence and power (Rom. 15:13; Eph. 1:13). Not only that, but we walk by faith and not by sight, looking for an eternal country (2 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 11:13-16). We need to kindle the flames of our hope in Christ and carry it with us through the day.

Every morning as part of my time in prayer, I recite the Apostles Creed. Saying again and again, "I believe in God the Father Almighty ... I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord ... I believe in the Holy Spirit," has helped me daily remember the center of my existence and the

fire within me by faith in Christ.

Pastors, we still carry the fire. Perhaps that is what our congregations need to be reminded of by us. Perhaps that is what we as pastors need to remind ourselves of every day.

Who Are We?

Are we still the good guys? he said.

Yes. We're still the good guys. (65)

Throughout their journey, the man and the boy grapple with who the good guys and the bad guys are, and which category they fit into. Numerous times, the father reminds his son that they are the good guys who carry the fire. Their undefined human ethic—the fire—pushes them to be good even when it is costly.

Encountering a ragged old traveler who calls himself Ely, the boy convinces his father to share from their limited food stores and bivouac in the woods with him for the night. When Ely asks the man why the boy wanted to share with him, the man does not have a good answer. “Maybe he believes in God” (146), Ely suggests. They are, it seems, the good guys.

But at other times it is less clear where they stand on the moral spectrum of their disordered world. While they forage for provisions away from their camp, a thief steals their shopping cart loaded with supplies. The man leads them in pursuit of the thief. Finding the thief, the man mercilessly forces him to hand over the stolen goods and then strip naked in the middle of the road as the sun sinks into cool dusk by the ocean’s edge. The man leads the boy away, leaving the thief to die.

An argument erupts as they walk away, and the boy refuses to talk to the man for a long time. Several days later, sitting by a campfire, the man asks if the boy wants to hear a story. But the boy is not interested, responding, “No ... in the stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people” (225). Maybe they are not the good guys after all.

Most of the time we like to think of ourselves as the good guys. We carry the fire in a fallen world, trying to speak good news of great joy for all people. We serve others in our congregations, offering pastoral presence and counsel to those in need and presiding over milestones of faith and marking celebrations of life for those in joy. We do our best to selflessly serve the people God has entrusted to our care, living into the calling Jesus gave to Peter: “Take care of my sheep” (John 21:16). We strive to live into holiness of character and uphold pastoral

integrity of life. We're still the good guys.

But, if we're honest, there are times when it is less clear where we stand. We falter in our faith and struggle to carry out our vocation. Like Jonah we push back against God's call on our lives and in our worst moments complain bitterly about our congregations. Temptation slinks at the door like a sallow, an unwelcome guest, and we dally there more than we'd like to admit. And when our society commonly defines "priest" or "pastor" as an abuser, misuser, or hypocrite, we realize we do not stand fully in the light. Maybe we are not always the good guys.

Just as the man must face the dark truth as he edges toward violating his moral code, so, too, pastors must face into our dark sides. We must learn to acknowledge the temptations and struggles that linger nearby, even close at hand. The probing prayer at the end of Psalm 139 serves as a guide here:

*Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting. (vs. 23-24)*

Speaking about our own areas of darkness, Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima write, "Though it may sound simplistic, if we want to overcome our dark side, we need to start by acknowledging its existence and understanding the shape it has taken over the years. For many people who have spent a lifetime in church, this is not quite as easy as it sounds."^[4] Daily confession and self-examination are invaluable practices for this. Whether using a liturgical resource, extemporaneous prayer, or the daily examen, it is important for us to let the Holy Spirit guide us into healing and repentance related to our dark places.

We need this because we do not always see ourselves clearly and none of us are ever completely the good guys.

Learning to Love

The Road begins with a tender description of the bond between the man and the boy: "When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. ... His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath" (3). As we trace the journey of these two, there is a tenderness that keeps at bay the nihilism present in many of McCarthy's other, and particularly his earlier, books. His own relationship with his son inspired *The Road*, and McCarthy once said that the book is primarily about "the love between

the father and the son.”[\[5\]](#)

If I can borrow a phrase from Walker Percy, “love in the ruins” might not be a bad way to summarize *The Road*. It also may not be a bad way to summarize pastoral ministry in this time. When tensions are high and divisions are deep, pastors need more than ever to shepherd the congregations given us by God with abiding and deep-hearted charity. The love of God is ever our example as pastors, as revealed in the Father’s gift of Jesus the Son, the Son’s self-giving upon the Cross, and the Holy Spirit’s selfless indwelling presence within us as God’s flawed, yet grace-covered people. Serving this self-giving Triune God, the pastor seeks to live out what Jesus described: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

But it is not easy to love in the perilous lands in which we live and minister. As troubles come from outside and inside the church community, we can easily settle for the safety of ministerial duty and ecclesial shopkeeping. But that is not what it means to be a pastor. The great tradition of the shepherd-leaders of God’s people finds roots in a deep love that grows and leads pastors toward self-sacrifice. Imperfectly carrying the fire and oscillating between sinner and saint, we pastors seek to introduce our people to a loving God by loving well, like God.

Near the end of the *The Road*, after the father’s death, the boy joins with another family who also seems to carry the fire. The mother “would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said that was all right” (241). The father guided the son through perilous lands imperfectly but with love. And this led the son into prayer.

What if we, as pastors, also were able to imperfectly love our congregations close to God in such a way that they were led into prayer. That would give them something that would endure long after we are gone; something to live by until we see God face to face. “Now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

Conclusion

We all struggle to pastor well in ordinary times, but in these days, we pastor with a sort of humbled confusion and prayer-filled desperation. When I handed my friend that roughed-up copy of *The Road* it was more on a whim than anything else. I was not sure what he would think about it or if it would speak to him at all. A little while later, after he had moved on to somewhere else to rebuild and recover, he sent me a simple text: “I know why you gave me this book.”

- [1] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).
- [2] Oprah Winfrey, Television interview with Cormac McCarthy, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, June 5, 2007.
- [3] Janet Maslin, “The Road through Hell, Paved with Desperation,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/25/books/the-road-through-hell-paved-with-desperation.html>.
- [4] Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership: How To Become An Effective Leader By Confronting Potential Failures*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 168.
- [5] Nick Ripatrazone, *Longing for an Absent God: Faith and Doubt in Great American Fiction* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020), 157.

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