

Using scripture in pastoral care

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The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* affirms that “through the Holy Spirit, God moved human witnesses to write what is needed for salvation, for guidance in faith and life, and for devotion to God.”¹ The Bible is a pastoral book. It is an announcement that God cares for all people. All God’s servants—prophets, evangelists, writers, and others—provide a ministry of pastoral care. It is God’s will that we all use scripture in our

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Pastoral care is a ministry that touches individual members of the group. Our lives include loss of various kinds, including illness, death and subsequent grief, and disappointments. We may experience troubled relationships, failures, lack of self-worth, withdrawal, sin, need for salvation, assurance of salvation, forgiveness, anxiety, abandonment, anger, transitions, suicide, aging, barrenness. I will reflect on a few of these experiences as settings in which pastoral care takes place and in which pastors may draw on the rich resources of scripture to provide guidance and comfort.

I lived my teenage years in the shadow of the Cold War, and in fear. I was fearful that we could be blasted to smithereens, Jesus would return, and I would be rejected by God. I was not at peace. Late one night when all was quiet, I met my father in the kitchen. I told him of my restlessness. He took the Bible, turned to Luke 15, and read the story of two sons and their generous father. My father, a pastor, focused on the behaviour of both sons: the sins of

the younger son saddened his father; the criticism and resentment of the older son disappointed his father. The father loved both sons! “The father loved,” my father said. Carefully and helpfully, my pastor father used scripture to teach that salvation does not just address our behaviour, but in it we hear and feel God’s love. The Spirit took that beautiful biblical story and the sensitivity of my father to convey to me not merely my sin but also God’s love.

In my teenage and young adult years a lack of self-esteem affected my confidence at every turn. In pastoral ministry I discovered that this malady also afflicts many others. Outside my office window at Oak Street Mennonite Church in Leamington was a little garden, a lovely sanctuary that birds and squirrels visited. These little creatures became God’s reminder to me and to others who sat there of our worth to God. As Jesus said, “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” (Matt. 6:26; see also Psalm 8).² Reflecting on these verses gives us an opportunity to remember that our worth and identity rest in God’s creative act. God made us in love and with purpose. In love demonstrated on the cross, God recreated us “to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:3-6). This insight shared by the psalmist, Jesus, and Paul, provides ongoing pastoral care to me, which I passed on to others who sat at that window, their spirits and identity nurtured by scripture.

Ephesians 1:3-6 continues with teaching on forgiveness, a gift crucial to a healthy identity and restored relationships: Paul says, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.” This forgiveness, I assured many, addresses our relationship to God, so necessary for our personal freedom and inner peace. It is a forgiveness achieved for us “through his blood” (Eph. 1:7), the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Our living in forgiveness affects our relationships with others. Jesus made this dynamic clear in his instruction on prayer: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12; see also Luke 11:4, where “sins” replaces “debts”). To forgive means to set people free. Jesus’ teaching seems to imply that if we have difficulty freeing others who have harmed us, how can God set us free from our sins? The dynamic of forgiveness is also crucial to a vibrant congregational life. It is the glue that

holds communities together. Likely, it is for this reason that Paul commends forgiveness in many of his writings (2 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13).

We also need to forgive ourselves. Whenever we feel guilt, an inner conversation takes place. It may take the shape of self-incrimination as it did for a widow who called on me. In her grief

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she had to deal with business she had failed to address while her husband was still alive. She now needed to forgive herself for having neglected these matters. She also needed to forgive herself for having burdened her marriage with unfavourable agenda, with which she now also burdened herself. I explained that when we sin against God, we

sin against ourselves. As we acknowledge our sin to God, we must take pains to admit it to ourselves as well. As God frees us completely, we are encouraged to free ourselves from continuing self-condemnation. I quoted Jesus' words: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19). True love of self demands self-forgiveness.

Having moved from place to place, and from experience to experience, many people identify their life as a pilgrimage. The writer to the Hebrews describes the heroes of faith as pilgrims, "aliens and strangers on earth" (Heb. 11:13). Peter also identifies his readers as people in pilgrimage (see 1 Pet. 1:17; 2:11). The concept of pilgrimage also aptly describes our movement through life. The calendar announces transitions and occasions—birthdays, anniversaries, deaths. Our experiences in pilgrimage may be traumatic, pivotal, life-shaping, or worthy of celebration.

The Bible is the record of a people in pilgrimage. And it is a book of instruction for people on the way. The psalmist was convinced that "your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Ps. 119:105). In my tradition, a specific verse of scripture was given to people at various points in their life experience, along their path. We live in an especially mobile environment. Our young people leave for school or voluntary service. Our families relocate. Others accept temporary assignments away from home. It is appropriate for the community of faith to acknowledge these transitions with a send-off that includes a verse of scripture, such as these words from Psalm 1:

*Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of the scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD, . . .
They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season. (Ps. 1:1-3; NRSV)*

Sharing the wisdom of the sages not only connects us to that wisdom, it keeps us linked to the community that passed this wisdom on. The treasure becomes part of the memory bank by which our lives are nurtured.

Not long ago, I visited a congregation where I had served as pastor. On that morning one of the pastors gave Bibles to all the children in grade three. The pastors had highlighted some verses in each Bible. When the children had found these verses, they were invited to meet the pastor to receive a gift. The children also received stickers they could use to draw attention to the word *love* as they discovered it in their reading. Our delight was heightened as our granddaughter, a member of this group, began reading from her own Bible, a gift from the people of God for her pilgrimage.

Many pastors give baptismal candidates a verse of scripture to encourage them in their faith pilgrimage. The Psalms are rich in words of encouragement for the pilgrimage. Here is one:

*Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.” (Ps. 73:23-24)*

Sometimes a baptismal verse became the text for a wedding or an anniversary. Or a new text might be selected for the wedding and used for subsequent anniversary celebrations. Favourites during my years of ministry were passages that dealt with love and the marriage relationship, such as 1 Corinthians 13; Ephesians 5:21–33; Philippians 2:1–5; 1 John 4:19.

For funerals and memorial services, I encouraged families to select scripture texts by which they wanted to remember their loved one. In some cases, the deceased had selected the scriptures that were to be read at their funeral service. My reflections and preparations were enhanced when I could identify a specific verse

that was particularly meaningful in the life of the deceased. The bereaved were also nurtured by these associations. Two texts most frequently selected are Psalm 23 and John 14:1–5.

A verse of scripture that has remained with me from childhood—I suppose my parents felt a need to repeat it frequently!—is Proverbs 1:10: *Wenn dich die bösen Buben locken, so folge nicht.* (“If sinners entice you, do not give in to them”). At my eleventh birthday, my father gave me this verse: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10). And, on that same occasion, my mother gave me a word from the Apocrypha: “And remember the Lord every day of your life. Never deliberately do what is wrong or break his commandments”

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(Tobit 4:5). Such is the legacy that my parents have left me. Their blessing through the use of scripture has accompanied me all my life. Perhaps this legacy is what Paul had in mind when he suggested to the Ephesians that their worship and fellowship should include “speak[ing] to one another with psalms” (Eph. 5:19). Needless to say, the Psalms, Proverbs, and the Epistles are full of instruction for a godly life. And, most impor-

tantly, the Gospels give us a marvellous glimpse into the life of Jesus, who told his disciples: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

Illness and adversities of many kinds afflict us along the way. Much pastoral care is given in such times. When illness strikes, questions about the purpose of suffering surface quickly. Pastors are privileged to be caregivers while God is the cure-giver. In being present, pastors and other caregivers offer support and encouragement. I have found the following scriptures helpful to a caring ministry. Psalm 125:2 became dear to me in the West Bank as I was reflecting on my loss: “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people, both now and forevermore” (Ps. 125:2). During my wife’s dying and in my grieving, knowing that she was at peace even as cancer ravaged her body, I often sang Isaiah 26:3:

*Thou dost keep him in perfect peace,
whose mind is stayed on thee,*

*because he trusts in thee.
Trust in the LORD for ever,
for the LORD GOD
is an everlasting rock. (RSV)*

Isaiah assured his people that God's love will support, redeem, and restore them:

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.
(Isa. 43:1-2; RSV).*

All who experience illness or adversity and whose life is marred by anxiety and fear need to hear again and again the words of Jesus: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. . . . For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:28-29).

While there is value in reading a passage of scripture in many life situations, perhaps there is still greater value in having pastor and parishioner interact with the word. Such involvement requires thought and prayer in preparation. The interactive experience is then guided by the pastor and the person. The responses of the one with whom we meet become the agenda in the visit.

I was conducting a service of communion in the home where Anne, who had a rare illness, was cared for by her husband John. Near the end of the service, I read Psalm 103:2-4.

*Praise the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—
who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with love and compassion.*

We went through the passage line by line, celebrating lines 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6. But the line that required further process was line 4—"who heals all your diseases." Anne and John desired healing. I told Anne that I, too, had difficulty with that line when I saw

cancer destroy my wife's body. Anne wondered: What did the psalmist mean by that claim? What is the purpose of suffering? Is suffering the consequence of some sin? In ministry, pastors have opportunity to continue discussion of these crucial questions and to walk with people in their difficult experiences.

One can also offer pastoral care by being scriptural in other ways. That is, we may not always have a text ready, but may instead offer words of encouragement that reflect a biblical spirit. In saying "God loves you" or "God is present to you," we reflect that spirit.

One resource that I often used at the bedside of those who were sick and dying was song. Many songs convey a biblical message. Those who are sick often feel comforted by hearing familiar songs. People I visited would sing along with me as best they could. Sometimes they had sufficient reserve only to move their lips. During my own grieving, I discovered that songs, sung or listened to, ministered to my deep hurts. The word of scripture in song lifts the spirit and encourages the pilgrim from life to life.

Our claim that the Bible is the word of God written, and that God continues to speak through the written word, is a mandate for pastors to use it generously in their ministry.

Note

¹ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 21.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the NIV.

About the author

Menno Epp wanted to be a farmer, but circumstances and opportunities determined other directions. These reflections grow out of his forty-eight years of service with the church as an instructor and administrator, camp director, pastor, and counselor. In all of these settings, scripture was a central feature of his ministry.