

REPORT TO THE PRESBYTERY OF GRAND CANYON

September 20, 2002

My report today deals with one of the most difficult problems facing the church in the 21st century, the destructive effects of which reach back many generations. It touches every aspect of our life together, in our congregations and denominational offices. Although it is not identified as such by the secular media, this problem is intimately connected with sensational news reports about clergy sexual misconduct, but it has many other dimensions, most of which do not involve sexual activity. It also relates to events that rarely get picked up by the secular media, involving dysfunctional behaviors of prominent lay leaders.

The subject is the agonizing relationship between narcissism and grace. Narcissistic church leaders, be they ministers, elders, deacons, educators, choir directors, matriarchs, patriarchs, ordained or non-ordained, create difficult situations which absorb a great deal of time and energy from personnel committees, sessions, Committees on Ministry, and presbyteries. And as these various groups search for ways to work through the disorder caused by narcissistic leaders, their deliberations are inevitably influenced by a strong urge to respond with grace.

Within the discipline of clinical psychology a narcissistic personality disorder is carefully described. There are specific behaviors that taken together point to such a diagnosis. I am not a psychotherapist and am not trained to diagnose personality disorders. My use of the word is in a general rather than clinical sense. So please refrain from diagnosing yourself or other people as I lay out this discussion of narcissism. Let me say also that this report is not about any particular person. In the course of fourteen years serving two presbyteries as pastor to pastors and executive presbyter, I have encountered scores of problematic ministers, elders, and other church leaders who exhibited some of the behaviors described here.

In Greek mythology Narcissus was a young man who fell in love with his own reflection in a stream. The imagery of that myth has been associated with all sorts of self-absorbed human behaviors. We talk of narcissistic wounds in childhood that lead people to take everything personally. We chatter about braggarts who think they are God's gift to humankind. We're not surprised at the sensitive artists and the serial seducers who act out their narcissism through physical and emotional demands on other people. We observe politicians and celebrities with insatiable needs for public adoration. And we shake our heads in wonder at how many devoted followers rush to the defense of a Gary Condit or a Newt Gingrich.

It's been said that if all the narcissists were suddenly removed from the US Senate, that body would be far short of a quorum. The ranks of narcissist clergy are not that full, but if the same sudden removal were to take place in the church it would certainly exacerbate the current shortage of available pastors.

In the context of the church, the narcissistic leader is one who expects others always to bend to his or her will. Years ago a pastor told me his approach to ministry was to do what he wanted first and then ask for approval after the fact. If he worked with the session first, he might not get his way, and, he added, "It's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission." Do you recognize the cynical manipulation in this pastor's behavior?

The narcissist sees his or her vision for the church as superior to that of less gifted folk. Coupled with that, the narcissist is not shy about showing impatience with anyone who would obstruct his or her plans. There is an unrealistic sense of entitlement and self-importance here that usually turns into anger when the inevitable criticism comes from those who do not recognize the superior talent and beauty of the narcissist.

Ordination, as understood by such leaders, sets them apart as especially worthy instruments of God. Servant leadership is not a model the narcissist is comfortable with. Elevated status is important, and fame and fortune are merely confirmations of God's favor. Think of the televangelist who proudly proclaimed, "God wants me to have this Rolex watch!"

Narcissist pastors and lay leaders take advantage of other people to further their own goals. They know their needs are more important than ordinary people's, so the end justifies the means. And of course the average person doesn't really understand how special the narcissistic leader is, so it's no wonder that he or she gets angry when the proper respect and deference are not forthcoming.

I once knew a thirty-something pastor, with good looks and boyish charm, who called upon affluent widows in the congregation he served. He invited them to lunch and plied them with compliments and asked them for money –not for the church but for himself. He told them how much he wanted a ten-speed bike or a new sound system, but he was a poor country pastor who couldn't afford these things. He accepted a lot of money from these women, and saw nothing wrong with that, because he deserved special things. This man is no longer in ministry.

The narcissistic leader is a high maintenance person, requiring lots of compliments, admiration and appeasement to keep things running smoothly. And if he or she is criticized, things do not go smoothly.

Now, of course, this outward behavior masks deep-rooted insecurity, often born out of childhood trauma, and that complicates the situation. Narcissists are masters at using their woundedness to garner sympathy and enlisting other people to run interference for them. Often they will cultivate inner circles of supporters who receive special recognition or favors, in return for which these chosen insiders are tacitly expected to defend and protect them from critics.

Indeed, many people –inner circle or not- feel an urge to protect narcissists from the consequences of their self-serving behavior for the sake of their wonderful ministry. And there's an element of truth in this codependent response, because narcissists tend to be bright and talented and engaging preachers.

Over the years I have taken dozens of calls from outraged parishioners and ministerial colleagues accusing me of being judgmental, mean-spirited, arbitrary, pharisaical, a back-stabber, unchristian, hypocritical, and more, simply for holding a narcissistic pastor to account for problematic behavior. It does no good for me to interpret these calls as personal attacks. I understand the dynamic and the emotional intensity involved. And yet, why is it so hard to understand that the purpose of ministry is not ego gratification for the leader?

Here's another complication. We all have a bit of narcissism in us. We are all fallible human beings whose ego needs get in the way of our efforts to do good. We have all committed improprieties and made mistakes. But most folks acknowledge their errors when called to account. Most folks know it when they've been selfish or self-centered or hogged the limelight. The difference is that the average person's narcissism is held in check by other personality elements. Full-blown narcissists lack such internal restraints and have a hard time understanding why people feel hurt by their grandiosity.

There is also a big difference between a strong healthy ego and a narcissistic one, which needs constant approval. Ministry requires leaders with egos strong enough to handle the inevitable challenges and criticisms and healthy enough not to take everything personally and not to crumble if, God forbid, they make a mistake. Self-confidence and narcissism are not the same thing.

The question inevitably rises about a connection between theology and narcissism. Is there a correlation between one's theological position and narcissism? My own informal survey says no. Narcissist pastors, elders, and other church leaders cover the spectrum from extremely conservative to extremely liberal.

So, what do we do about the problems created by narcissist church leaders? The damage they do is only half the problem. The other half is what happens when these troubling behaviors are met by the urge toward grace generated within congregations and the presbytery. Presbyterians are no different from most people. We want to be nice, we want to be fair, and we do not want to be seen as mean-spirited and judgmental. We also believe in second chances.

Another way to pose the question is what is the relationship between forgiveness and accountability? The lectionary gospel text for last Sunday was a portion of Matthew 18 where Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive one who has sinned against him, and Jesus said (in the NRSV translation) seventy seven times. That text certainly makes the case for patience and going the second and third mile with problem people.

The key to this continuing forgiveness, however, is recognition on the part of the sinner that someone has been wronged or the community has been hurt. This is the hard part for narcissists. They have difficulty recognizing that their own behavior is harmful. If they're doing what they want and getting their needs met, what's the problem? And the urge to forgive quickly and to placate such behavior, in the name of grace or Christian charity, enables the narcissist to go on manipulating, controlling, and taking credit for every good thing that happens.

At the beginning of this report I identified this problem as one of the most difficult facing the church in the 21st century. It is surely at the heart of the crisis in the Catholic Church today. I believe it is the central struggle that the institutional church –all denominations- will have to overcome in order to turn around years of decline. If the church does not learn how to manage the mischief created by narcissistic leaders it cannot expect to flourish numerically or spiritually.

Ironically, congregations that call narcissist pastors sometimes experience a short term increase in membership, as people are drawn in by the charms of the new leader. Long term, however, the prospects for spiritual growth among members often suffers, and the numerical increase is not sustained.

Although most of this report has focused on the clergy, not all of these problem leaders are pastors. Too many congregations suffer from the manipulations of narcissistic elders or prominent members who press their selfish agendas behind the scenes. Bishop Michael Neils of the Grand Canyon Synod of the ELCA wrote in the July synod newsletter: "I have spent a great deal of time this spring dealing with paralyzed pastors and confounded congregation councils where ministry has been placed in jeopardy because of the inability of the community to say to the one, two, or five dysfunctional and perennially angry members, 'We won't stand for this any longer.'"

Reflecting on recent work of the Conference of American Roman Catholic Bishops, Bishop Neils also wrote: "Whether the number of strikes is one, two, or three, the final judgment is that some people don't belong in professional ministry. And what is true of professional leaders is also true of lay leaders. Some people just don't belong in leadership."

He's right, of course, but that doesn't make it easy to remedy the situation. As members of the church we see ourselves as nurturers, not gatekeepers. We want to be gracious and patient. We have deep faith that anyone can change for the better. And this is true. But what if the cost of that patience and grace is continued suffering for parishioners and decline for the congregation? Is it necessary to keep a problem leader in place while waiting for repentance and

change to emerge? Cannot the needed growth occur apart from continuing in the privileged place of church leadership?

And speaking of repentance, there is a sense in which the church as an institution needs to repent of overlooking and excusing leaders who are out of control. The church as an institution needs to confess a pattern of genteel toleration of leaders who are motivated more by their own ego needs and less by the call to serve. We need to bring some Christian realism into our work together. The question is, can we do that without becoming pious prigs and ecclesiastical executioners?

Yes, I think we can, but it will take concentration and resolve. Dealing with specific, identifiable misdeeds is relatively easy. If you can identify a time and place where some particular bad thing happened, you can address it. It's much more difficult, however, to document patterns of manipulative behavior. Most of what narcissist leaders do is not illegal. Using people for one's personal gratification is unethical, but not necessarily what the church identifies as immoral. And how do you quantify delusions of grandeur? How do you measure a sense of entitlement? How can you calculate the level of pain generated by a non-sexual seduction? Hard to quantify, yes, but damage to the body of believers is done nonetheless.

There's something else needed to address the problem of narcissism and grace: the courage to make hard decisions. When a church leader has failed in some way, we need to ask God for the courage to extend grace and continue that person's ministry where there is repentance and a realistic hope of growth and renewal. But if doing so would be at the expense of vulnerable parishioners, we need to pray for the courage to extend grace but discontinue that person's ministry. When faced with a narcissistic denial of responsibility, the church must respond by denying the privilege of office.

The church is not perfect, and over the centuries as an institution it has made a number of unfortunate decisions about the lives and livelihoods of some of its members. And it has erred also by failing to make decisions about the lives and livelihoods of some of its members. As a body we are not infallible.

And so we do the best we can and seek humbly to discern God's wisdom and will. Let us pray that we make our difficult decisions not in anger but in calm contemplation of what is best for all concerned. And just as we must rely on God's ultimate grace for those chastised by decisions of our governing body, so we must rely on that same grace for ourselves as we make those decisions.

Praying now through the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick: O God, Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour, and for the living of these days. Thank you.

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