

The Subversive Pastor

Our mission, to undermine the kingdom of self and establish the kingdom of God, is a covert operation.

Eugene H. Peterson

As a pastor, I don't like being viewed as nice but insignificant. I bristle when a high-energy executive leaves the place of worship with the comment, "This was wonderful, Pastor, but now we have to get back to the real world, don't we?" I had thought we were in the most-real world, the world revealed as God's, a world believed to be invaded by God's grace and turning on the pivot of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.

The executive's comment brings me up short: he isn't taking this seriously. Worshiping God is marginal to making money. Prayer is marginal to the bottom line. Christian salvation is a brand preference.

I bristle and want to assert my importance. I want to force the recognition of the key position I hold in the economy of God and in the executive's economy if he only knew it.

Then I remember that I am a subversive. My long-term effectiveness depends on my not being recognized for who I really am. If he realized that I actually believe the American way of life is doomed to destruction, and that another kingdom is right now being formed in secret to take its place, he wouldn't be at all pleased. If he knew what I was really doing and the difference it was making, he would fire me.

Yes, I believe that. I believe that the kingdoms of this world, American and Venezuelan and Chinese, will become the kingdom of our God and Christ, and I believe this new kingdom is already among us. That is why I'm a pastor, to introduce people to the real world and train them to live in it.

I learned early that the methods of my work must correspond to the realities of the kingdom. The methods that make the kingdom of America or any human kingdom strong-economic, military, technological, informational-are not suited to making the kingdom of God strong. I have had to learn a new methodology: truth-telling and love-making, prayer and parable. These are not methods very well adapted to raising the standard of living in suburbia or massaging the ego into a fashionable shape.

But America and suburbia and the ego compose my parish. Most of the individuals in this amalgam suppose that the goals they have for themselves and the goals God has for them are the same. It is the oldest religious mistake: refusing to countenance any real difference between God and us, imagining God to be a vaguely imagined extrapolation of our own desires, and then hiring a priest to manage the affairs between self and the extrapolation. And I, one of the priests they hired, am having none of it.

But if I'm not willing to help them become what they want to be, what am I doing taking their pay? I am being subversive. I am undermining the kingdom of self and establishing the kingdom of God. I am helping them to become what God wants them to be, using the methods of subversion.

But isn't that dishonest? Not exactly, for I'm not misrepresenting myself. I'm simply taking my words and acts at a level of seriousness that would throw them into a state of catatonic disbelief if they ever knew.

The Pastor's Odd Niche

Pastors occupy an odd niche in American culture. Christian communities employ us to lead worship, teach and preach the Scriptures, and provide guidance and encouragement in the pilgrim way. Within our congregation, we experience a modest honor in our position. Occasionally one of us rises to national prominence and catches the attention of large numbers of people with the charisma of sunny, millennial cheerleading or (less often) the scary forecasts of Armageddon. But most of us are known by name only to our congregations and, except for ceremonial appearances at weddings, funerals, and bullroasts, are not in the public eye.

In general, people treat us with respect, but we are not considered important in any social, cultural, or economic way. In parody we are usually treated as harmless innocents, in satire as shiftless parasites.

This is not what most of us had in mind when we signed on. We had not counted on anything either so benign or so marginal. The images forming our pastoral expectations had a good deal more fierceness to them: Moses' bearding the Pharaoh; Jeremiah with fire in his mouth; Peter swashbucklingly reckless as the lead apostle; Paul's careering through prison and ecstasy, shipwreck and kerygma. The kingdom of God in which we had apprenticed ourselves was presented to us as revolutionary, a dangerously unwelcome intruder in the Old Boy Club of thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers.

The vocabulary we learned in preparation for our work was a language of battle ("We fight not against flesh and blood"), danger ("Your adversary the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour"), and austerity ("Take up your cross and follow me"). After arriving on the job, we find precious few opportunities to use our leadership language. And so, like the two years of Spanish we took in high school, it is soon nonfunctional from nonuse.

Did we learn the wrong language? Did we acquire the wrong images? Did we apprentice ourselves to the wrong master?

Everybody treats us so nicely. No one seems to think that we mean what we say. When we say "kingdom of God," no one gets apprehensive, as if we had just announced (which we thought we had) that a powerful army is poised on the border, ready to invade. When we say radical things like "Christ," "love," "believe," "peace," and "sin"-words that in other times and cultures excited martyrdoms-the sounds enter the stream of conversation with no more splash than baseball scores and grocery prices.

It's hard to maintain a self-concept as a revolutionary when everyone treats us with the same affability they give the grocer.

Are these people right? Is their way of life in no danger from us? Is what we say about God and his ways among us not real in the same way that Chevrolets and basketball teams and fresh garden spinach are real? Many pastors, realizing the opinion polls overwhelmingly repudiate their self-concept, submit to the cultural verdict and slip into the role of chaplain to the culture. It is easy to do. But some pastors do not; they become subversives.

Undercover to Undermine

Virginia Stem Owens has written the most powerful evocation since King Lear of the subversive character of the person (and this certainly includes the pastor) who intends to convert the world by truth and not guns. Her book *And the Trees Clap Their Hands* is a dazzling performance on the parallel bars of anti-gnostic polemic and "God's spy" intrigue. In the opening pages, Owens, accompanied by her pastor-husband, sets the scene.

"We sit in coffee shops and scan faces as they filter by unawares on the sidewalk. We are collecting, sorting, storing the data. But we do not call ourselves scientists; we cannot make controlled experiments. In life there can never be a control group. There is only what is-or what presents itself, at any given moment, for our perusal. And we, with our own limitations, can only be in one place and one time at any moment. For this reason we call ourselves spies, for we must strike a trail and stick to it. We must catch as catch can, life being no laboratory, spreading our senses wide and drawing them in again to study what we have managed to snare in the wind.

"We have several covers, my companion and I, business we appear to be about while we are actually always watching for signs of the invisible prey, which is our primary occupation. He, for example, balances church budgets, counsels divorcees and delinquents, writes sermons. But beneath it all is a constant watchfulness, a taking note. Even as he stands in the pulpit, he sifts the faces of the congregation for those fine grains, no larger than the dust of pollen, that carry the spoor of the trail he's on.

"And I sit among them there, internally knitting them up like Madame Defarge, listening, recording, watching, remembering. Softly. Softly. The clues one must go on are often small and fleeting. A millimeter's widening of the eye, a faint contraction of the nostrils, a silent exhalation, the slight upward modulation of the voice. To spy out the reality hidden in appearances requires vigilance, perseverance. It takes everything I've got."

The kingdom of self is heavily defended territory. Post-Eden Adams and Eves are willing to pay their respects to God, but they don't want him invading their turf. Most sin, far from being a mere lapse of morals or a weak will, is an energetically and expensively erected defense against God. Direct assault in an openly declared war on the god-self is extraordinarily ineffective. Hitting sin head-on is like hitting a nail with a hammer; it only drives it in deeper. There are occasional exceptions, strategically dictated confrontations, but indirection is the biblically preferred method.

Jesus the Subversive

Jesus was a master at subversion. Until the very end, everyone, including his disciples, called him Rabbi. Rabbis were important, but they didn't make anything happen. On the occasions when suspicions were aroused that there might be more to him than that title accounted for, Jesus tried to keep it quiet-"Tell no one."

Jesus' favorite speech form, the parable, was subversive. Parables sound absolutely ordinary: casual stories about soil and seeds, meals and coins and sheep, bandits and victims, farmers and merchants. And they are wholly secular: of his forty or so parables recorded in the Gospels, only one has its setting in church, and only a couple mention the name God. As people heard Jesus tell these stories, they saw at once that they weren't about God, so there was nothing in them threatening their own sovereignty. They relaxed their defenses. They walked away perplexed, wondering what they meant, the stories lodged in their imagination. And then, like a time bomb, they would explode in their unprotected hearts. An abyss opened up at their very feet. He was talking about God; they had been invaded!

Jesus continually threw odd stories down alongside ordinary lives (para, "alongside"; bole, "thrown") and walked away without explanation or altar call. Then listeners started seeing connections: God connections; life connections; eternity connections. The very lack of obviousness, the unlikeness, was the stimulus to perceiving likeness: God likeness; life likeness; eternity likeness. But the parable didn't do the work; it put the listener's imagination to work.

Parables aren't illustrations that make things easier; they make things harder by requiring the exercise of our imaginations, which if we aren't careful becomes the exercise of our faith.

Parables subversively slip past our defenses. Once they're inside the citadel of self, we might expect a change of method, a sudden brandishing of bayonets resulting in a palace coup. But it doesn't happen. Our integrity is honored and preserved. God does not impose his reality from without; he grows flowers and fruit from within. God's truth is not an alien invasion but a loving courtship in which the details of our common lives are treated as seeds in our conception, growth, and maturity in the kingdom. Parables trust our imaginations, which is to say, our faith. They don't herd us paternalistically into a classroom where we get things explained and diagrammed. They don't bully us into regiments where we find ourselves marching in a moral goosestep.

There is hardly a detail in the gospel story that was not at the time (and still) overlooked because unlikely, dismissed because commonplace, rejected because illegal. But under the surface of conventionality and behind the scenes of probability, each was effectively inaugurating the kingdom: illegitimate (as was supposed) conception, barnyard birth, Nazareth silence, Galilean secularity, Sabbath healings, Gethsemane prayers, criminal death, baptismal water, eucharistic bread and wine. Subversion.

The Assumptions of Subversives

Three elements are implicit in subversion. One, the status quo is wrong, so deeply wrong that repair work is futile. It must be overthrown if the world is going to be livable. The world is, in the word insurance agents use to designate our wrecked cars, totaled.

Two, there is another world aborning that is livable. Its reality is no chimera. It is already in existence, though not visible. Its character is known. The subversive does not operate out of a utopian dream but out of a conviction of the nature of the real world.

Three, the usual means by which one kingdom is thrown out and another put in its place—military force or democratic elections—are not available. If we have neither a preponderance of power nor a majority of votes, we begin searching for other ways to effect change. We discover the methods of subversion. We find and welcome allies.

At a sixtieth birthday conversation in 1986, the poet A. R. Ammons was asked, "Is poetry subversive?" He responded, "Yes, you have no idea how subversive—deeply subversive. Consciousness often reaches a deeply intense level at the edges of things, questioning and undermining accepted ways of doing things. The audience resists change to the last moment, and then is grateful for it."

These are the convictions implicit in the gospel. They are not, though, convictions commonly implicit in parish life. More frequently, there is the untested assumption that the congregation is close to being the kingdom already and that if we all pull together and try a little harder, it will be. Pastors especially seem to assume that everybody, or at least a majority, in a congregation can be either persuaded or pushed into righteousness and maybe even holiness, in spite of centuries of evidence to the contrary.

That pastors need an accurate knowledge of Christian doctrine is universally acknowledged; that they need practiced skill in the techniques of Christian subversion is overlooked. But Jesus is the Way as well as the Truth. The way the gospel is conveyed is as much a part of the kingdom as the truth presented. Why are so many pastors experts on the truth and dropouts on the way?

In acquiring familiarity and skill in pastoral subversion, we could do worse than to read spy novels and observe the strategies of communist infiltration, but the biblical passages are more than adequate if we will only pay attention to them:

"A great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:11-12).

"This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6).

"You are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13).

"The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds" (Matt. 13:31-32).

"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling" (1 Cor. 2:24).

Unfortunately, this biblical methodology of subversion is easily and frequently discarded by pastors in favor of assault or promotion. There are two likely reasons: vanity and naiveté.

Vanity. We don't like being wallflowers at the world's party. A recent study of the decline in white males' preparing for pastoral work concluded that a major reason is that there's no prestige left in the job. Interestingly, the slack is taken up by others (blacks, Asians, women) who apparently are not looking for prestige and have a history of working subversively. Neither was there prestige in Paul's itinerant tent-making.

Naiveté. We think the church is already the kingdom of God and, if only better organized and motivated, can conquer the world. But nowhere in Scripture or history do we see a church synonymous with the kingdom of God. The church in many instances is more worldly than the world. When we equate the church and the kingdom and the identity turns out to be false, we feel "taken in." Little wonder that anger and cynicism are epidemic behind the smiling veneer of American pastors. We need refresher courses in Barthian critiques of religion and Dantean analyses of sin, especially spiritual sin.

Tools of Subversion

Prayer and parable are the tools of the subversive pastor. The quiet (or noisy) closet life of prayer enters into partnership with the Spirit who strives still with every human heart, a wrestling match in holiness. And parables are the consciousness-altering words that slip past falsifying platitude and invade the human spirit with Christ-truth.

This is our primary work in the real world. But we need continual convincing. The people for whom we are praying and among whom we are telling parables are seduced into supposing that their money and ambition are making the world turn on its axis.

There are so many of them and so few of us, making it difficult to maintain our convictions. It is easy to be seduced along with them.

Words are the real work of the world-prayer words with God, parable words with men and women. The behind-the-scenes work of creativity by word and sacrament, by parable and prayer, subverts the seduced world. The pastor's real work is what Ivan Illich calls "shadow work," the work nobody gets paid for and few notice but that makes a world of salvation: meaning and value and purpose, a world of love and hope and faith-in short, the kingdom of God.

My passion is the kingdom of God, as it is, if I'm not mistaken, for most pastors. Daily I pray for its arrival ("Thy kingdom come"). Daily I pray for vision to perceive its presence ("The kingdom of God is among you").

My methods? I review my life and ask the question: "What methods were formative in my becoming a pastor? In becoming passionate about the kingdom?"

The answer is clear in retrospect. In virtually every instance I recall, the methods were those of indirection, of subversion. I remember a two-year period in which my vocation hung in the balance. Influential people in my life had mounted a campaign to recruit me to academia. It looked like they had won. For many, maybe most, academia is a kingdom calling; for me it was an avoidance—a ship going to Tarshish. Meanwhile there was a woman praying who never told me what she prayed for, and a man who played handball with me three times a week, whose playing was a parable. While the big guns of argument and career were trained on me and firing away, subversive prayer and parable were doing their work. I was never conscious of the prayer or the parable. They did their kingdom work beneath the surface of my awareness.

And then one day, as a result of the prayer and parable, I clearly saw that I was a pastor after all. The enticements and seductions to abandon my calling were seen to be just that—enticements and seductions. It was a narrow escape. I had been let over the wall in a basket. Subversively.

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