



**AFRICAN
AMERICAN
PASTORAL
CARE**
REVISED
EDITION

**EDWARD P.
WIMBERLY**

AFRICAN AMERICAN PASTORAL CARE REVISED EDITION

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CHAPTER ONE

A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO PASTORAL CARE

Since the publication of *Pastoral Care in the Black Church* in 1979, I have become firmly convinced that black pastors approach pastoral care through narrative. It is this insight about such an approach to ministry that motivated me to write a supplement to that book.

A truly narrative style of pastoral care in the black church draws upon personal stories from the pastor's life, stories from the practice of ministry, and stories from the Bible. Genuine pastoral care from a narrative perspective involves the use of stories by pastors in ways that help persons and families visualize how and where God is at work in their lives and thereby receive healing and wholeness.

This method of pastoral care involves several dangers. The primary danger is that the pastor's own life experience is so subjective and personal that it might be used imperialistically to lead some pastors to think that "my way is the only way." Second, the narrative approach might lead some to think that a personal indigenous style is all that is needed and that formal training has no place. Third, the narrative style might cause the pastor to be less empathetic and thereby transform counselee/parishioner-centered counseling sessions into pastor-focused counseling sessions.

However, a narrative approach need not be imperialistic, nonempathetic, or pastor-focused. Storytelling can facilitate growth and empathy, be parishioner-centered, and contribute to the essential qualities of any caring relationship. For example, this approach can enable the pastor to enter the parishioner's world of experience and see things through the parishioner's own eyes. It can help the parishioner take full responsibility for making his or her own decisions. It can enable the parishioner to be specific when describing events. This approach can also help the counselor openly discuss things that are occurring between the counselor and the parishioner. Finally, it can help the counselor express his or her feelings about what is taking place in the parishioner's life in ways that lead to growth.

This book is an attempt to demonstrate that an indigenous approach to caring that relies upon storytelling is one style of pastoral care and counseling that takes place in the black church. Not only is this style already used by pastors, it is a basic method used by black people, both lay and clergy, to care for one another. Therefore, this book is written for clergy, seminary students, and laypeople who are interested in knowing how they have cared for one another and how they can improve that care.

THE NATURE OF STORYTELLING

Black pastors use many types of stories—long stories, anecdotes, short sayings, metaphors—to respond to the needs of their parishioners. Most specific instances in life situations lend themselves to story formation. For example, stories can be used to address the normal crises people face daily, such as birth, a child's first day at school or at day care; transitions from childhood to adolescence or from adolescence to adulthood; and mid-life, old-age, and death transitions. Likewise, story formation can occur during periods of crisis: losses such as illness, accidents, changes in residence, and a variety of other events that pose threats to someone's emotional or physical well-being. Stories also can be developed during selective phases of counseling to facilitate the counseling process.

In all these ways, stories function in the caring setting to bring healing and wholeness to the lives of persons and families within the black pastoral care context. Henry Mitchell and Nicholas Lewter call such stories *soul theology*, the core belief system that gives shape to the world, that shows how African American people have come to grips with the world in a meaningful way.¹ Narratives and stories embody these core beliefs that permeate the church life of African Americans, and black pastors and congregations draw on this narrative reservoir when caring for their members. These narratives suggest ways to motivate people to action, help them see themselves in a new light, help them recognize new resources, enable them to channel behavior in constructive ways, sustain them in crises, bring healing and reconciliation in relationships, heal the scars of memories, and provide guidance when direction is needed.

Soul theology makes up the faith story that undergirds the stories used by black pastors and parishioners in caring for others. And how that faith story has brought healing and wholeness through storytelling to the lives of African American people is the subject of this book.

THE FAITH STORY

Mitchell and Lewter point out that crisis situations spontaneously express core beliefs.² Core beliefs are deep metaphors, images that point to the plots or directions of life. These core beliefs, rooted in stories, manifest themselves in human behavior as people attempt to live their lives. For the African American Christian, deep metaphors are related to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who liberates the oppressed and cares for the down-trodden. These deep metaphors are especially informed by the Exodus story and God's involvement with God's people. These deep metaphors and core beliefs are anchored in the story of God's relationship with God's people, as recorded in Scripture and as lived out within African American churches.

The plot that gives structure to the deep metaphors of the Christian story is important to the faith story. Plots tell us why we live on earth; they

point to the direction life is taking.³ Plot in the Christian faith story shows us how our lives are connected to God's unfolding story. The faith story, therefore, answers the question of the "ultimate why" of our existence.

The dominant plot that gives life meaning for the African American Christian is what I call an eschatological plot, one that envisions hope in the midst of suffering and oppression, because God is working out God's purposes in life on behalf of persons. The eschatological plot takes suffering and oppression very seriously without minimizing their influence in life. Yet despite the prevalence of suffering and oppression, God's story of hope and liberation is unfolding. Although the final chapter of the story of liberation awaits consummation at the end of time, during many moments along life's journey, there is evidence of God's presence, bringing healing, wholeness, and liberation.

Mitchell and Lewter refer to this eschatological plot that underlies the faith story of black Christians as the providence of God:

The most essential and inclusive of these affirmations of Black core beliefs is called the Providence of God in Western terms. Many Blacks may not have so precise a word for it, and they may not even know that the idea they cling to so naturally is called a doctrine. But in Africa and Afro-America, the most reassured and trusted word about our life here on earth is that God is in charge. This faith guarantees that everyone's life is worth living. The passage that expresses it best is Paul's famous word to the Romans: "And we know that God works in everything for the good of those who love him and are called according to his plan."⁴

The eschatological plot calls the Christian to faith because each must participate in life and in God's unfolding story, knowing that things will work out in the end. The eschatological plot is important because it does not minimize suffering and oppression, nor does it give suffering and oppression the last word.

A goal of the narrative approach to pastoral care in the black church has been to link persons in need to the unfolding of God's story in the

midst of life. The African American pastor has narrated, and continues to narrate, stories that help people catch a glimpse of hope in the midst of suffering. It is by identifying with the story that Christians have linked themselves to purposeful directions in life, despite suffering and pain.

The eschatological plot, through which God is working out healing, wholeness, and liberation on behalf of others, has four major functions: *unfolding*, *linking*, *thickening*, and *twisting*.⁵ God's plot *unfolds* one scene and one chapter at a time, and one cannot know the end of the story until the entire drama is completed. However, by identifying with faith stories, particularly stories in the Bible, one can learn to participate in God's drama, while trusting God's authorship of the drama and God's plan for the final outcome. In counseling within the black church, this often has meant that the pastor must ensure that the counselee who is identifying with a biblical story reads the whole story before coming to any conclusions. For example, it is important that one continues the story of Joseph and the coat of many colors until Joseph is occupying an important government position for the second time. To stop reading this story before its end may leave the reader feeling that life is tragic. Only at the end of the story can we see God's purposes for Joseph revealed. When one reads the entire story, one can envision hope in the midst of tragedy.

When one identifies with stories that have an eschatological plot in Scripture, one is not only pointed toward God's unfolding story in the midst of life, one is *linked* with the dynamic that informs the plot. God's unfolding story is more than a good story with which to identify. It is an ongoing, unfolding story, even today, so when black Christians have identified with that story, they also have linked their lives with the dynamic force behind the events of life. When people are linked to God's unfolding story, their own lives become different. Significant changes take place. People find that life has direction for them, that they have value as human beings. The slaves' identification with Israel's Exodus is illustrative of such positive outcomes. By linking their lives with the unfolding plot of Israel's Exodus, the slaves focused their attention on God, who was also working on their behalf to liberate them.

The eschatological plot also thickens. *Thickening* refers to those events that intrude into God's unfolding story and seek to change the direction of that story for the ill of all involved. The plot often can thicken when suffering stakes its claim on us. This thickening could be the intrusion of oppression and victimization that, for a time, hinder our growth and development; and it is at such times that we wonder whether God really cares. However, unfortunate negative interruptions are only temporary, and the story again begins to unfold in ways that help us envision God at work, seeking to *twist* the story back to God's original intention, despite the thickening that hindered the plot.

A pastor who understands the working of God through drama can link people with the unfolding of God's story. Such a pastor seeks to help parishioners develop *story language* and *story discernment* in order to visualize how God's drama is unfolding in their lives. This means that telling and listening to stories become central to the caring process. It also means that people learn to follow the plots of stories, to visualize how God is seeking to engage them in the drama as it affects their lives.

The eschatological plot, with its emphasis on God's healing presence in life despite suffering and pain, has been the driving force behind the narrative approach of the black church. By telling and listening to stories, black preachers and congregants have sought to help people envision God's work in the midst of suffering. They have sought to link people with this activity, so that their lives can have significant meaning, despite the reality of suffering.

In addition to the unfolding, linking, thickening, and twisting of plots, faith stories have four types of therapeutic functions: healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling.⁶ These are the traditional functions of pastoral care and are very much a part of the narrative approach. However, since a narrative approach to pastoral care cannot determine the impact of a story, one cannot predetermine the impact a story might have on a parishioner or counselee. Nevertheless, stories do influence people's lives in characteristic ways: they can heal or bind up wounds caused by disease, infec-

tion, and invasion; they can sustain persons in the face of overwhelming odds and lessen the impact of suffering; they can provide guidance to those affected by the personal and interpersonal obstacles that can hinder people's ability to grow. The goal of pastoral care and counseling, from a narrative perspective, is to use storytelling to strengthen people's personal and interpersonal growth so that they can respond to God's salvation drama as it unfolds and as it has an impact on their lives.

From a narrative perspective, pastoral care can be defined as bringing all the resources of the faith story into the context of caring relationships, to bear upon the lives of people as they face life struggles that are personal, interpersonal, and emotional. The gospel must respond to the personal needs of individuals and families as they face life struggles. This is best done in the private context of pastoral care, rather than in the public context of preaching or worship. Because the context and intent of preaching, worship, and pastoral care are different, the use of storytelling in each ministry is also different.

STORY-LISTENING

So far, this discussion has been devoted to the storytelling aspect of caring. One might conclude that the telling of stories is the main dimension of a narrative approach to pastoral care. The danger of overemphasizing storytelling, however, is that it may ignore the needs of the person facing life struggles. Story-listening is also an important dimension of African American pastoral care, and the narrative approach is a story-listening as well as a storytelling approach.

Story-listening involves empathically hearing the story of the person involved in life struggles. Being able to communicate that the person in need is cared for and understood is a result of attending to the story of the person as he or she talks. *Empathy* means that we attend to the person with our presence, body posture, and nonverbal responses. It also means using verbal responses to communicate that we have understood and are seeking

to understand the person's story as it is unfolding. The caregiver also gives attention to and acknowledges the significant feelings of the person as they are expressed in the telling of the story. It is only when the story has been fully expressed and the caregiver has attended to it with empathy that the foundation is laid for the utilization of storytelling.

The emphasis must be on story-listening to avoid the trap of shifting the focus away from the needs of the person facing life struggles. There are two important ways to prevent this potential abuse of storytelling. First, a growing body of literature on storytelling within the context of counseling and psychotherapy can assist pastors in knowing how to use their own life stories in helpful ways. Second, pastors need to grow in their own personal life so that their life stories and participation in the faith story will be a reservoir of conflict-free and anxiety-free stories. The ways one can use new resources from the counseling literature and can grow so that one's life will be an anxiety-free source of stories will be addressed in later chapters.

STORYTELLING AND RETELLING THE STORY

In an age where the village connections are being continually lost, it is important to utilize communal means of storytelling and story-listening as a vehicle for reconstructing village functions. Michael White put forward one such village reconstructive narrative method, the definitional ceremony. In the year 2000, I attended the Milton H. Erickson Institute in Anaheim, California. Here my narrative understanding expanded by leaps and bounds. Michael White, an Australian family therapist, presented a video of a group of Aborigines whose lives had been disrupted by technological advances. Their traditions for dealing with loss and grief had been disrupted, and he was asked to help them come together in order to grieve the loss of a family member who had been murdered. He called his approach to them the definitional ceremony. The definitional ceremony is a narrative process of storytelling and retelling the story where a person who

has an emotional concern or issue tells his or her story. It is then followed by a group of persons retelling the original storyteller's story in light of what struck those hearing the story when the original storyteller told the story.⁷ The original storyteller becomes part of the audience, and those who were part of the original audience become storytellers and retell the story they heard, drawing on their own lives. Following the retelling of the story, the original storyteller becomes the storyteller again and begins to retell the story in light of what he or she heard from those who retold the original story. The end result of this phase of retelling the story is that the original storyteller gets an opportunity for catharsis by expressing strong feelings as well as by deriving new perspectives on what he or she had been experiencing. The original storyteller also feels cared for and loved by those who took the time to listen and retell the story. A support system of relational ties is thus created, which sustains the person as he or she goes through the grief process. Thus, the supportive and maintaining function of the village was re-created through the telling and retelling of stories.

An example of this process of telling and retelling stories will be re-created based on a number of telling and retelling story sessions in which I have participated. This particular story is about the grief and loss resulting from sexual abuse triggered by the death of a parent who was the sexual abuser.

The setting was a class in Inner Healing that I have taught since 1985. In the Inner Healing class, the focus is on the student's own life issues, and the goal is to create an atmosphere where students feel comfortable to tell stories with which they feel comfortable. One way to create an atmosphere of openness where students feel free to share their own stories is for the professor to begin the process of storytelling himself or herself. Thus, depending on the topic, I would share some concerns out of my own life that I felt comfortable sharing. I do not customarily share stories with which I am currently struggling, however. Rather, I share stories out of my own life with which I have dealt in the past and about which I might feel comfortable sharing more information if asked. The major point of telling my

own story is not only to demonstrate transparency but also to make sure that the story is such that it will trigger students to think about their own stories rather than focus on my story. If the stories that I tell are unresolved and recent, they might stimulate interest in my own story rather than enable others to tell their own stories.

Before getting into the actual process of telling and retelling stories, it is important to envisage the classroom as a laboratory for re-creating village functions. Every class in seminary is an opportunity for the formation of a village. Here the concept of village refers to the process of becoming a support system of relational ties that fosters an environment for enabling members of the class to maintain their emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual integrity in the face of life's complexities.

Indigo was a member of the Inner Healing class. The topic was domestic violence and how domestic violence serves as a relational means of recruiting family members into negative identities for the purpose of building up the perpetrator of the violence at the expense of the victim. The process of recruiting through the use of domestic violence involves getting the potential victim to internalize a negative identity so that the victim becomes a willing participant in his or her own self-destruction and is always available for abuse by the victimizer. As the topic of domestic violence unfolded late in the semester, Indigo felt comfortable in bringing up her own story of domestic violence that was clearly on her mind due to the death of her biological father.

The background to Indigo's story was that she had been in seminary for one year. The first semester went well, but in the second semester a series of deaths began to take place in her family. It began with the death of her grandmother's boyfriend who had sexually molested her when she was a young girl. She was raised by her grandmother, and her grandmother's boyfriend routinely sexually molested her while her grandmother was at work. He was supposed to be watching her after school. He would tell her not to tell anyone what he was doing, threatening more harm to her. Thus, she kept the experiences of sexual abuse quiet, fearing reprisals.

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