



Jesus healing the multitudes. Wood engraving c1880.

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You Must Be Compassionate

The Biblical Development of an Ethic of Care and What It Means Today

It was nearing midnight as I made my way down the darkened corridor of the hospital. As a new RN, I was being transferred to a unit that needed help. Suddenly, in front of me, a white veiled figure appeared, supporting two men, one on each arm. “Shssh,” she said, softly. And then, “You can help.” As one of the men stumbled, I instinctively moved toward them. That was when the stench of alcohol and body odor assailed my nostrils — and I knew this had to be Sr. Mary Frances, the “angel of mercy” to local alcoholics.

As night supervisor, Sr. Frances had developed her own self-styled brand of pastoral care. Every night, soon after the night shift began, she could be counted on to open a stairwell door on the side of the hospital and escort those gathered there to empty patient rooms. Once inside, each would be given a warm meal, a hot shower, clean clothes, and a bed for what remained of the night.

By 6 a.m., they would be awakened, fed again and sent on their way before the day shift appeared.

Sr. Frances was something of a legend — a night creature who kept to herself during the day and didn’t interact much with the sisters with whom she lived. But she had a huge heart for anyone who was suffering, especially the city’s alcoholics, who waited each night for her care, taking turns for a night off the streets.

And so it was that night in 1968 that I helped her feed, shower, and put to bed the two men whom she had gathered in as guests. We worked gently, quickly and without speaking. When I left to go to my assignment, a full hour late, Sr. Frances was whispering prayers beside the beds of the two men who had been recipients of her mercy — or of God’s — that night.

— Sr. Fran Ferder

PASTORAL CARE: THEN AND NOW

As this story reveals, Sr. Frances was eccentric, and her practice of bypassing procedures of hospital admission was unconventional at best. But she had a passion for caring and, in those days, the good she did outweighed the rules she broke. It was inevitable that her particular form of pastoral caring would come to an end. Issues such as patient safety and communal responsibility assumed prominence over unregulated and individually styled practices in our health care institutions. But Sr. Frances, and others like her, stand out in history as striking examples of those who have internalized a sense of God's reign, who have tasted the banquet, and offered their lives to help others get to the table.

Since the dawn of Catholic health care ministry, the overarching goal has been to care for the sick. There was an early sense that this included spiritual care but, for the most part, how that was carried out was left undefined. It often fell to the hospital chaplain, to local ministers who made "hospital visits," or to individuals like Sr. Frances, who developed their specialized brands of pastoral care.

Eventually retired Catholic sisters became regular hospital visitors, moving quietly down corridors, praying at the patients' bedsides.

AN EVOLVING ETHIC OF PASTORAL CARE

By the mid-1970s, we began to speak of pastoral care as a ministry in itself — one that was increasingly seen as essential to healing the whole person. More than just visiting the sick, elderly or homebound, and offering a prayer or leaving a holy card, pastoral care came to be recognized as a special form of ministry, requiring education and supervised training. We moved from a place where individuals often acted alone, even idiosyncratically, to a place where teams of individuals collaborated to identify spiritual needs and better serve the most vulnerable populations in our health care institutions.

At its core, the ministry of pastoral care enflashes the reign of God as it is preached and practiced by Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, if we are committed to expanding and integrating the role of pastoral care in our sponsoring institutions, it is vital for us to understand the origins and background of Jesus' sense of mission. As a Jewish man in 1st century Palestine, what are the roots of his compassion? What is the compelling vision that shaped his care for people?

Today's ministry of pastoral care finds its

biblical origins in ancient concerns related to *community safety and protection*. The biblical story is truly an evolution — perhaps even a revolution — in an ethic of care. Understanding this evolution will help us appreciate the gift and demands of pastoral care in our time.

THE GOD WHO CARES

The central event in the memory of the Hebrew people is the Exodus. It is the story of a God who responds to the plight of the Israelites and leads them from slavery to freedom, from danger to security. The Exodus is a metaphor for biblical caring. We can see its essential outlines in these words: "Then the Lord said, 'I have *seen* the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have *heard* their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I *know* their sufferings, and I have *come down* to deliver them from the Egyptians.'"¹

The four verbs in this passage reveal the tender care of God. First, God *sees* — pays close attention to the pain that is unfolding. Second, God *hears* — listens with compassion to the cry of the people. Third, God *knows* — which in the Hebrew language implies moving beyond empirical observance to an experiential and affective understanding. Finally, God *comes down* to deliver — that is, God chooses to become present in an active way to liberate the people from their suffering.

This scene contains a poignant image for a theology of pastoral care. Simply put, the minister of care is one who seeks to internalize the divine stance of compassion as it is described in *Exodus 3*. The minister of care chooses to respond to people in pain by seeing, hearing, knowing their suffering, and then choosing to "come down" — that is, to be present, even at times of human helplessness, with the compassion of God.

God's attentive care and the Exodus journey became a spiritual prism through which the Hebrew people began to reinterpret their entire history. Gradually, through the centuries, as they celebrated the Passover, they began to understand the implications of what had taken place in their history. God's loving initiative on their behalf became, in turn, a summons to respond in a similar fashion toward others. It challenged them to ask difficult questions about their core ethical practices related to protection, family, relationships, justice and the human search for *shalom*.

What were these difficult questions? Prior to

the Sinai Covenant and their journey to a more settled existence in what we know today as the Holy Land, the Hebrew people, like most of their contemporaries in the ancient Middle East, lived a tribal, semi-nomadic way of life. Their daily existence was demanding and dangerous. They lived at the brittle edges of life and death. Their survival depended on communal efforts to ensure the safety of the group. Tribal living was forged in the conviction that the entire community derived from a common male ancestor and that its members shared the same blood. For ancient people, blood is the primal energy of life, it is the dynamic force that sustains and binds a people to one another, to the land, and to the responsibility of continuing the future of the tribe through offspring.²

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THE GO'EL: AN EVOLVING ETHIC OF CARE

In such a setting, there arose the figure (and eventually the social/ethical institution) of the go'el, whose role was to live out the vital task of preserving the bonds of tribal blood and protecting the community. The term go'el is often translated as "redeemer," but its first meaning connotes protection.

The etymological root of go'el is literally the "blood brother" or "next of kin." In the pre-covenantal era, when the Hebrew people were still scattered tribes, the go'el is described as having four different roles. The first was that of "blood avenger." If someone killed a family or tribal member, it was the responsibility of the go'el to avenge his blood by killing up to seven members of the tribe who had perpetrated the murder.³ The second role was to ransom back any family member taken into slavery.⁴ The third was to buy back (redeem) any land that was lost.⁵ Finally, if a man died without a male heir, it was the responsibility of his blood brother (go'el) to marry his brother's widow so that the family name and bloodline would be continued. The story of Ruth includes a tender — and more inclusive — version of this role of the "kinsman."

The go'el, therefore, can be understood as an ancient minister of care. This mysterious figure functioned as protector for the vital interests of the tribal community — its lifeblood, its social solidarity, its land and its continuation through offspring. But the Exodus event and God's gracious act of care began to raise fundamental questions about this early tribal ethic. Is avenging blood really an authentic way to protect the community? Or does it only spawn further violence? And just as importantly, what about those people who have no go'el? Who protects the vulnerable persons who do not belong to a family or a tribe? Who is next of kin (go'el) for those at the margins of society?

These questions find a dramatic response that flows directly from Israel's encounter with God in the Exodus experience and in the covenant at Mount Sinai. We can combine several passages that describe these emerging "hospitality codes" into this simple paraphrase: "*You shall not molest the widow, the orphan, or the stranger, because once, when you were aliens in the land of Egypt, I was your go'el (redeemer).*"²⁶

This summary statement represents a significant evolution in moral consciousness. The ethic of care among the Hebrew people undergoes a dramatic transformation in light of God's saving initiative. When they had no one to protect them, when they were abandoned and vulnerable, God chose to become their go'el — their next of kin, their redeemer, protector and liberator. This emerging realization becomes, in turn, the ethical template for a new understanding of justice among the chosen people. It calls them to a different — and more inclusive — understanding of justice, protection and caring, one that is to include all those who are without safety, land and kin.

THE SERVANT OF THE LORD

In the 1960s, in the midst of the civil rights struggle in the United States, Martin Luther King Jr. said that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."²⁷ He is speaking here not primarily of civil justice, but of biblical justice — the seeking, active love of God. Biblical justice is not blind or impartial like our popular understanding of justice. Biblical justice is another word for God's passionate desire to stand at the side of the poor, the suffering and the vulnerable. God's justice (*sedakah*) is intimately connected to God's compassion (*rachmim*). In the heart of God, there truly is a "preferential option for the poor."

As we explore this ethic of care and its emergence in the Hebrew writings, we are, in fact, tracing this arc of human, moral consciousness. We are following the slow “bending toward justice” that unfolds in the history of Israel.

Perhaps more than any other author in the Hebrew canon, the unknown poet and theologian whom we call Second Isaiah articulates an immense leap forward in the understanding of what it means to care for others.⁸ The author writes for the people in exile to give them hope and reassurance, wanting them to trust that God will continue to be their *go’el* — their redeemer and liberator — by bringing about a new exodus. God will bring the exiles home to safety and a restored community. The temptation, of course, is to interpret this experience literally: to understand it as belonging exclusively to a particular people. But this is an expansive promise, an inclusive message, which, in Jesus, will be understood as the birthright of care that can be claimed by all of God’s sons and daughters everywhere.

This new exodus, therefore, is not just a geographical homecoming. It is also a journey deeper into ethical consciousness. “For every mile the feet go,” wrote poet E.E. Cummings, “the heart goes nine.” At the center of this inward journey are four short poems in the Book of Isaiah that are known as the Servant Songs. These are theological poems that reveal new ethical themes regarding God’s care and the community’s responsibility for the vulnerable.⁹ These themes include: (1) an invitation to accept suffering as potentially redemptive; (2) a greater sense of inclusion in the meaning of community care; (3) a responsibility to reach beyond ethnic boundaries to other peoples; and (4) the call to act justly as the path toward peace.

Each of these themes reflects the changing understanding of an ethic of care for the Hebrew people. But it is a fifth theme, or more correctly perhaps, a transformation of moral consciousness that particularly deserves our attention. This is the figure of the Suffering Servant who is willing to be the *go’el* for others by actually taking on their pain and carrying their suffering to help bring about healing and true shalom.¹⁰

JESUS AND THE MISSION OF CARING

The Gospels tell us — and Christians have believed for millennia — that Jesus fulfills this role of the Suffering Servant. In his preaching and ministry, his suffering and dying, and in his being raised to new life, Jesus brings to realization the

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evolving ethic of care — the unfolding moral consciousness of his Jewish forebears.

The long arc of “the moral universe” finds its destiny in Jesus and those who are willing to fulfill his vision. Remarkably, *the figure of the go’el has evolved from one who protects the tribe by avenging blood to the servant Jesus, who gives his blood in order to heal the human community.* This is the grounding vision for the ministry of pastoral care.

Perhaps one of the most poignant and moving Gospel stories is that of Jesus returning to Nazareth, opening the scroll of Isaiah, and reading the words that will be the grounding vision for his ministry.¹¹ The message, more complete in Isaiah than in Luke’s version, offers a clear and compelling mandate that Jesus had internalized:

*“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me; he
has sent me:
to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion —
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint
spirit.”¹²*

The oppressed. The brokenhearted. The captive. The imprisoned. The mourners. The weary. All those who were forgotten, oppressed and without favor. These were the faces he saw. Theirs were the cries he heard. These were the stories that moved him. Like the God of Israel, Jesus *saw* the distress of the people; he *heard* their cries; he *knew* their suffering. And the next time we see him in Luke’s gospel, he is doing something about it. He has gone to Capernaum where he will, for the rest of his days, teach, heal

and proclaim the compassionate God of Israel burning in his heart.¹³

Jesus received little thanks for his efforts. Sometimes, like today's caring ministers, he got into trouble with the religious authorities of his day. But he did assemble a "team" of sorts. Sometimes it helped and other times it was more trouble than it was worth. No one called it pastoral care then, but the deep sense of passion for all who needed healing continued to stir him.

This is how it is for contemporary pastoral care ministers. Often there is little recognition. Religious authorities are not always pleased. Pastoral care teams continue to have good days and bad. How we name the people who do this work may change. But it is the passion for God's little ones — seeing their need, hearing their voices, feeling their agony — that empowers the journey of biblical caring to become the face of human comfort, the voice of freedom and the oil of healing in our time. ■



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NOTES

1. *New Revised Standard Version*, Ex 3:7-8. This passage is a turning point in understanding God's *hesed* — the divine, loving kindness that reaches into history to liberate and care for those in need. Today, we might well embrace it as a mission statement for all forms of ministry.
2. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 10-12, 21-22.
3. *Gn 4:13-16; 23-24.*
4. *Lv 25:47-49.*
5. *Jer 32:6f.*
6. *Ex 22:20-24, Lv 19:33f, Dt 24:17f and Ez 22:7.*
7. In 1961, Dr. King used these words when he explained his principles of nonviolence. On March 31, 1968, only four days before his assassination, he used these same words in the National Cathedral when he gave what would be his last sermon.
8. *Is chapters 40-55.*
9. *Is 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12.*
10. *Is 52:13-53:12.*
11. *Lk 4:16-21.*
12. *Is 61:1-3.*
13. *Lk 4:31.*