

The book from class that affected me the most was Kathleen A. Cahalan's *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*. The other books were useful in shaping my theology and perspectives but Cahalan's was the one that most helped connect some dots in my ideas of ministry. One of the foundational thoughts I took away from her book was something I knew but never really focused on, which is the idea that all Christians are first and foremost disciples; "discipleship is the self-identity and shared calling common to all members of the Christian community".¹ Discipleship is not only a marker of the community but is part of what brings the community together because disciples "have a personal and a communal relationship to Jesus and to each other".² The disciple's personal relationship with Jesus is important in helping each disciple understand who God is and what God does. Love and relationships seem to be at the center of both God's identity and actions.³ God is the one who determines our identity as his disciples and beloved children; without a relationship with him we would be lost in knowing who we are and what we are supposed to do and be.

Discipleship calls believers to actively follow Christ and engage their lives with their new identities. Cahalan discusses seven aspects of discipleship that each person is called to take part of and grow in; following, worshiping, witnessing, being a neighbor, forgiving, prophesying, and being a good steward.⁴ We are not all good at each of these areas of discipleship but we all work together to be more like Christ in these areas and to integrate our lives with our discipleship identity. Each person is given gifts to help build up the community in the ways that it needs.

¹ Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 49.

² Cahalan, 5.

³ Cahalan, 2.

⁴ Cahalan, 4-22.

Call to Ministry

My call to ministry either happened over several years or else I did my best to ignore and deny it for a long time. Going into ministry was not really on my radar as a child and adolescent; I did not think it was an option for someone like me, an organized and introverted female. I knew I loved God and really enjoyed serving him and others; I knew I loved getting to teach, speak, and mentor others in Christ at both church and my private Christian school. When it came time to decide on a major for college, I was not dreaming of going into ministry. I was trying to listen to someone's advice to choose a career in something you enjoy and want to learn about, but that did not seem to leave me with many options. I had talked about being a teacher for several years but the idea of taking education classes did not appeal to me. I knew I loved serving others and that I enjoyed the Spanish language so I decided to be a missionary. When I visited ACU, I ended up at a departmental interest meeting with the Bible department kind of by accident; one of my guy friends wanted to go to the Bible department but he did not want to go alone so I volunteered to go with him instead of going to the Foreign Languages meeting. Something about that meeting with Rodney Ashlock led me to decide to be a Bible major with a Spanish minor in order to pursue my missionary dream. It was a step in the direction to where I am today.

It was not until my junior year of college that I began to seriously consider a future in stateside church ministry. This willingness to entertain the notion was the combination of several factors but especially two. First, I received quite a bit of affirmation from people I was working with in my youth internships and classes; professors, ministers, parents, teenagers, and classmates were telling me I was gifted at working with people in this way and that I should think about it. Second, as I participated in more and more ministry and leadership experiences, I found myself drawn to it. I had always enjoyed studying the Bible, teaching classes, and

speaking at chapels, but there was a growing desire within me to continue this work and these relationships. I was discontented with the idea of sitting on the sidelines when I knew I was capable of helping people.

There was a moment during my internship the summer before my senior year that seemed to integrate both of these factors into one experience. The youth ministers over me were conducting the end-of-summer evaluation and reflecting on a foreign mission trip we had gone on with several of the teens. One of them said he noticed on the trip that at the end of the day I seemed to be more excited to come back to the group and hear stories from each of the teens about how they had seen God working that day than to share my own stories of how I had seen God working; they described this as having more passion for the teens than for the trip itself. That statement really stayed with me as I processed it for the next several months; in the moment I could not help but agree with them because I knew it was true but I did not know how to explain it. This passion for youth was and is my call to ministry. Since then I have been working to understand more specifically what it means to be in ministry and how to reconcile who I thought I was and what I thought ministry was with the path God seems to be calling me to walk.

Meaning of Ministry

Cahalan's emphasis on discipleship helped put words to how I had been viewing my role in ministry for the past few years. That passion to help my adolescents serve as well as to process and grow from their experiences was what I saw as my purpose in ministry. I know that I cannot do it all, reach everyone, and save the whole world on my own. However, I can invest in relationships and lives of the people around me and help them to see their passions, purposes, and gifts in the world for the kingdom of God; I can be a part of preparing them to go out and

reach people. My work is not about what I am doing as much as it is what I am helping others to do; this could include anything from helping someone grieve the death of a loved one to brainstorming ways to reach out to friendless kids at school, from planning opportunities for members of different generations to connect and learn from each other to providing parents with information and resources about issues their sons and daughters are facing.

Since Cahalan views discipleship as the key aspect of identity for all Christians, ministry in her eyes is “the vocation of leading disciples in the life of discipleship for the sake of God’s mission in the world”.⁵ Ministry is about helping others walking the path of discipleship. Being a disciple is not easy nor is it an innate knowledge of the exact right thing to do all the time; having someone to help you understand what it means for you to be a disciple wherever you are and wherever you go in life is what ministers do. Each Christian has his or her own callings in life. Cahalan has a longer and more specific definition of ministry but I prefer the shorter one about leading disciples in discipleship. She makes a strong distinction between the work of ministers and the other acts of service and mentoring that any Christian does.⁶ The uniqueness she sees in ministry as opposed to other vocations in discipleship is that “it is directly related to the flourishing of discipleship in the Christian community and in the world”.⁷ I agree with this unique aspect and concern of ministry but I come from a faith tradition that prefers to see each believer as a minister and missionary and I wrestle with how to recognize that uniqueness with the way I see each person. I understand the distinction she makes and must admit that I do see a difference between the efforts of an adult volunteer in the youth group and the efforts of the

⁵ Cahalan, 50.

⁶ Cahalan, 51.

⁷ Cahalan, 50.

youth minister. Yet my view is perhaps more in line with my faith traditions because I hesitate to discount the responsibility and ability of all Christians to minister in his or her own way.

What Cahalan perhaps desires to view as part of discipleship and vocation, such as living your life for Christ whether you are a partner at a law firm or an employee of the church, I prefer to see as each person's own ministry. The distinction for me perhaps is based on intentionality and relationship. For instance, a lawyer might see his or her main purpose as being a godly example of seeking truth, justice, and grace in the courtroom and teaching Sunday School is an additional way to use his or her gifts to build up the kingdom of God; a minister might see his or her main purpose as investing in lives and relationships of members and preparing lessons and opportunities to foster spiritual growth and accountability for those members. Each one serves and ministers in his or her own sphere but the minister's sphere is specifically about the other people and their spheres; "The change from being a disciple to becoming a minister is not only an interior change of one's self and being, nor an external change of assuming a new role and office, but a dynamic change in terms of relationships".⁸

Gifts for Ministry

I do agree with Cahalan that being a minister does not come before being a disciple; "rather, it is a further realization of the call to discipleship in and through a distinctive set of charisms".⁹ This set of charisms, or gifts and skills, combined with the focus on relationships and discipleship is what sets ministry apart. Cahalan lists six practices for ministry; teaching, preaching, healing or caring, praying and worshiping, social mercy and justice, and leadership

⁸ Cahalan, 157.

⁹ Cahalan, 49.

and administration.¹⁰ I think this list is a great start and if I believe I would want more experience in ministry before I began to change, substitute, or add anything to these six. In each practice, she lists three examples of gifts, one each for being, knowing, and doing; for the purposes of this paper I will only mention the one from each practice that I see most in myself or have been told most often by others that I possess.¹¹

In the practice of teaching, one gift I have seen in myself and heard from others since I was in junior high that I possess is that of using language and speech effectively and persuasively.¹² Not every lesson is my best lesson but finding ways to communicate, express particular ideas, and connect with listeners has been a natural skill as well as a honed skill through the experience of teaching, public speaking, and competing on speech team in junior high and high school. In the practice of preaching, a practice I would not have acknowledged any gifts in until a preaching-like experience this summer and reading Cahalan's description of the charisms of preaching, I see empathy and truth-telling as my best asset.¹³ Empathy is something I think I have had in some amount for many years but that I learned how to best use in my therapy training and often received affirmation about from clients and other therapists; among my friends I am known as someone who will tell the truth, even difficult truths in as tactful way as I can. In the practice of care, guiding, facilitating, and sustaining healing and reconciliation is a gift I now

¹⁰ Cahalan, 70-97.

¹¹ Cahalan, 73-97.

¹² Cahalan, 73-75.

¹³ Cahalan, 76-78.

feel competent in; others affirmed this in me in college but it was part of what I was terrified about doing as a therapist and now I feel equipped in it and that I know my limits with it.¹⁴

In the practice of prayer and worship, something I have been told by other people is that I exude a sense of peace and competence and I think this invites others to engage in the conversation, activity, or relationship.¹⁵ In the practice of social justice and mercy, organization and the ability to get things done is something I like most about myself and am known for among other people.¹⁶ I have worked hard the past few years, and am still working, to set boundaries for myself in how I am responsible and dependable while also learning the importance of delegating tasks to other people. In the practice of leadership and administration, I believe I have a skill in building up other people and helping them identify their gifts and passions; this gift is a big part of what drew me into ministry and helped me recognize that I could have a future in ministry.¹⁷ To me these last two gifts are shared between the two practices but they differ in the intention of how they are being utilized at the moment. I am by no means masterful or perfect at any of these gifts and each day I am learning about my skills and limitations in these practices.

Youth and Family Ministry

In the past few years, part of the affirmation I have received from people has been not just about my gifts for ministry but about my counseling abilities. I gained awareness of both of these skill sets at the same time in college and I wrestled for a year about which one to choose or how they could go together. The idea of being a therapist terrified me yet I believed there was a

¹⁴ Cahalan, 81-82.

¹⁵ Cahalan, 84-86.

¹⁶ Cahalan, 88-90.

¹⁷ Cahalan, 94-97.

lot I could learn from a therapy program, specifically marriage and family therapy, that would be continuously beneficial as a youth and family minister. I knew I was not just working with teenagers, I was working with their families; I also knew that life and families were chaotic and I wanted more training in how to help them handle the things that came their way. I wanted to see and prepare for ministry as an opportunity to help families grow physically, emotionally, and spiritually and to equip and walk along side of them during challenges to their growth and health.

My work as a therapist over the past two years has greatly changed and influenced how I see myself, others, and God. I hope it continues to be a major aspect of my way of thinking and interacting with people. As I learned more about therapy, I began to see potential connections between thinking about personal and relational change to spiritual growth and transformation. I have several particular ideas and theories in mind that I want to use as foundations for my ministry and I think these will greatly impact my identity and outlook as a minister.

One of these is attachment theory, which is a theory about the behaviors and patterns that are created in caregiving relationships and continue to be manifested in intimate relationships throughout life; I am especially curious about how attachment in human relationships parallels attachment to God and one's ability to grow in relationship and trust with God.¹⁸ Along with attachment theory is the importance of experience and emotions in creating lasting change. I think about how important summer camp and trip experiences were in my spiritual life and my friends' spirituality and yet how we tended to discount those because they did not last into the school year; I wonder about ways to capitalize on those summer experiences and affirm the

¹⁸ For each of these therapy related thoughts and theories, I am not using specific quotes or books. This paragraph is largely a summary of these concepts and the ways I am curious about how they could interact with my ministry. I would be happy to provide more specific information and resources about any of these topics mentioned.

emotional aspects of spirituality. The basic ideas of first and second order change also seem to connect with struggles Christians face to be more like Christ in a worldly society; what does it mean to change one's behaviors to match Christian rules versus changing one's perspective and values and life to match Christian discipleship. Systems theory is another basic tenet of marriage and family therapy that many have found to be useful in working with and conceptualizing families, specific ministries, and churches as a whole and the struggles and strengths each of these systems possess. Internal family systems therapy and narrative therapy also hold intriguing possibilities about how to view ourselves and our relationships with God and how we go about addressing problems and working towards a more Christ-like future.

Conclusion

Truthfully I am still working to understand what it means for me to be a minister and what I want to do as a minister. In many ways I am not a stereotypical youth minister; I am female, organized, introverted, single, reflective, and a listener. I believe each person has the opportunity to allow God to work and live through them and for myself I believe that opportunity comes by allowing God to use me to minister to and with other disciples. He has given me a passion and equipped me with gifts and training but has also taught me that I do not know it all and cannot do it alone. I know the path ahead of me as a female minister in the Churches of Christ is not an easy or a common one and that I may not even find an official ministry position. But I refuse to let this keep me from ministering to teens and families in whatever ways I can. As Cahalan says, calling "is more than a desire to do something for others; it is felt as an imperative that I must do this, regardless of how difficult".¹⁹

¹⁹ Cahalan, 40.

Bibliography

Cahalan, Kathleen A. *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010.