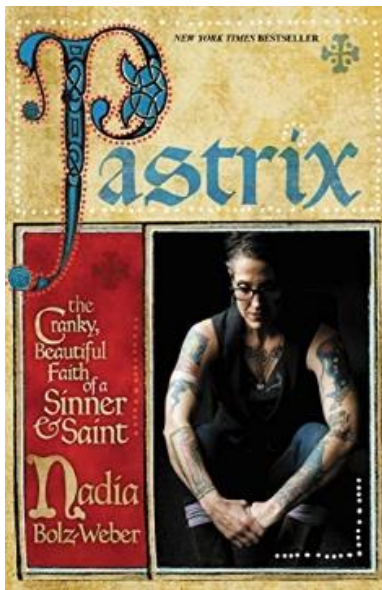


Nadia Bolz-Weber. Pastrix



About thirty years ago the ‘urban myth’ preacher’s story of choice went something like this: A preacher got into the pulpit and said “There are nearly 300 million people in the world who are starving and you lot don’t give a damn. And worse than that, you are more shocked that I said ‘Damn’ in church than that 300 million people are starving.”

Well, with Pastrix we are way beyond ‘Damn’. Weber has had an extraordinary life which she describes in colourful language and which has taken her from a conservative Christian community, through the underside of society, working the comedy circuit and on to seminary on the way to becoming a Lutheran pastor – or ‘pastrix’ as per the title of the book (an insult - that she ‘owns’ - from those who don’t think a woman can lead a church).

One health-warning – the language is not only raw, it is also very trans-Atlantic and I did not understand all the references and nuances of her stories. It is also very auto-biographical which I enjoyed but may not be to everyone’s taste.

Much of the book is about recovery from the damage caused in earlier life: the drugs and alcohol certainly, but more profoundly, the early Christianity in which she grew up. She tells the story of her mother saying on the phone something like: I wish you’d visit more often as we’re not going to be seeing you in Eternity. And she is critical of those who wield the Bible like an axe declaring they are speaking God’s truth in love when the victim is left bleeding on the floor.

But Weber has the grace to be self-critical too. She is aware that she enjoyed using her self-image (heroic drinker who will die gloriously young) like a favourite set of clothes; that she made friends from certain despised communities as that suited her self-understanding. And she talks freely of things that, as a church leader, she tried which failed spectacularly.

But she has a good eye for challenging stereotypes. Does repentance mean a sex-worker should become a librarian; or that we change our character from being angry to placid? Or does God love us where we are and is salvation realizable where we are? Is it more a case of God not letting us be defined by sin?

Indeed, it is possible to see this book as partly a study in the nature of holiness. She considers how yeast is a ritually impure substance and yet Jesus uses it as a symbol of a catalyst for the kingdom of God. And she finds examples of holiness as much in her wayward years as anywhere else. In this context she has an excellent Bible-study on Philip and the Ethiopian in Acts.

Weber’s church is called The House for All Sinners and Saints and her message is come to church and die to yourself – which she admits is not as numerically popular as the message come to church and God will make you rich. But despite the pressures of having a small congregation you get the feeling she will not abandon her principles just yet.