

Commentary: The secret sauce of pastoral care

February 20, 2024

It was early on a Wednesday morning. There was a slight chill in the air. Not the kind of chill carried by fresh wind and fresh hope for a new day. No, this was the chill of cold metal ducts carrying cold air into cold rooms filled with bodies hoping to remain warm.

I stood underneath the over-bright lights designed to imitate daylight in a way that comes as close to sunlight as an Amazon Alexa does to the warmth of a conversation.

On this otherwise dreary Wednesday morning, amid the dull thrum of medical machinery, there sprung forth a raw energy, warmer than any blood-pumping heartbeat, and more akin to sunshine than any fluorescent light ever could dream of being.

I stood in the background as four pairs of hands, clasped in desperate hope and defiant courage, took center stage.

The life of a pastor is interesting. How is it I find myself sitting in on these holy moments?

A pastoral moment

Anne is a member of my church who was facing a major surgery to remove a tumor resting on her brain. Survival wasn't an assumption. At a minimum, bad news from a closer look at the mass in her skull was anticipated.

I looked on as daughter gripped the hands of mother and father, who each

gripped the hands of daughter and son, completing a circle of fear and faith, horror and hope. Would this be the last conversation they would share with their beloved? Would things ever be the same?

In the ministry of care, you will find yourself thrust into these moments—moments that feel intrusive to observe, much less participate in. And yet, in these moments, you will find yourself having a part to play.

Often it is in the most insecure times, when people are faced with their own mortality, that you will be expected to speak up, to have an answer. If this is a new space for you, you may find yourself wondering what to say when words feel like they never could be enough.

If that's you, here's the secret sauce: It's not you who will make a difference. If that feels deflating, allow me to reframe. It's not you who will make a difference, but there is someone *in* you who can.

Letting the Holy Spirit flow

When someone looks to you to be the harbinger of hope, there is nothing more natural than to want to have the answers, to be the help they're looking for. But to present yourself as the solution to questions of eternity is to present yourself as a god. That is a recipe for disaster. That is a burden you can't possibly bear and a burden you don't have to bear.

Does that mean you should stay quiet? By no means. These moments of care are moments to speak, moments to rise up. But not in your own strength.

As a Christian woman or man, something goes with you into every space, every conversation. That something is the infinite love, contagious joy and unexplainable peace of God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. These are moments to let the power of the Holy Spirit flow through you in

three simple ways—presence, Scripture and prayer.

Presence

Perhaps the greatest thing you bring to the ministry of care is the power of presence, of simply showing up. Being in the room with someone who is suffering can have an incalculable impact without even saying a word.

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes 4:12 reflects on this: “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

There is something woven into the fabric of our being that demands community. How wonderful is the presence of one who carries the presence of the One.

Scripture

However, you obviously can't sit there in silence forever. At some point, you have to open your mouth and speak. While it can be tempting to try and come up with a profound bit of wisdom or some overused pastoral axiom, you never can go wrong by keeping it simple.

One helpful way to look at pastoral care is to look at it as a ministry of reminder. As the Holy Spirit reminds us according to John 14:25-26, we serve as God's mouthpiece by reminding those in our care of the simple and wonderful promises of Scripture.

Maybe it's a beautiful Psalm for the suffering or one of the promises of Jesus, such as John 16:33: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Whatever you choose, when you give someone Scripture, you give them something that can speak to them long after you leave and can speak more deeply and appropriately than you ever could (Hebrews 4:12).

Prayer

Finally, in these holy moments of care, as obvious as it may sound, you **always** should pray. To pray is to reach out to the source of everything you're looking for.

Rather than directing people to the hope you bring, to pray—and to encourage the suffering to pray—is to remind people of the unfathomably intimate connection they have in relationship with the trinitarian community of love—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As the medical team came in signaling the time had arrived, there was one thing left to do. All the caregiving I had done for this family culminated in one pinnacle moment.

I stepped forward to the bedside, eyes pooling with hot tears. The chain-link circle of hands opened and shifted from a circle of blood to a circle of a different sort of family.

Warmth passed from hand to hand as I slowly looked each person in the eyes, finally landing on Anne, and said: “God loves you more than you can possibly imagine. He has promised to always be with you. Let’s pray.”

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