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The Painful Secret

A regular refrain heard amongst ministers is: “I wish they had taught us this in seminary.” This phrase is applied to many different situations. “I wish they had taught us how to lead a committee meeting without it looking like we are leading the meeting.” “I wish they had taught us that the most psychologically unhealthy people are often the most powerful individuals in a congregation.” “I wish they had taught us how to baptize a 6’9” inch man in three feet of water.” And so on.

If I had to pick just one thing I wish I had been told before I got into this job it would be this: “I wish they had told me how lonely it would be.”

Parish ministry is deceiving. We spend much of our time with people and have a never-ending stream of meetings, counseling sessions, and social engagements. We cultivate the ability to be friendly and caring even on our worst days. All of which leaves the impression that ministry is anything but lonely. But it is. It is brutally lonely.

The source of this loneliness is simple. Ministers have few true friends. We spend night and day with people in our congregation with whom we have close relationships, but these clergy-parishioner friendships have defined limits. I sometimes despise these limits, but in my heart I know they are unassailable.

For deep and abiding friendships to flourish several things must be present. There must be a sense of equality between the two people. If one person has power over the other, the seeds of sabotage are already planted in the friendship. Pastor-parishioner relationships are anything but equal. Even in the Protestant tradition where the priesthood of all believers is emphasized, such sound theology does not change this dynamic. Ministers have a spiritual and moral authority in their churches that is there whether we like it or not. And, in the Free Church tradition, the congregation has the power to hire and fire the minister. Both sides have a form of power, but it does not create anything resembling equality. Depending on the situation, one is always in a superior position.

Another feature of deep friendships is that neither person is expecting a specific benefit from the relationship. Close friendships are born out of the joy of being understood and appreciated by another. In a climate of openness and trust we share

our hopes, fears, successes, and sorrows. No tangible benefit is desired or necessary in order for the friendship to thrive. We simply enjoy being completely ourselves with our friend.

Pastor-parishioner friendships are filled with intimate sharing and wonderful moments. Yet, they are also full of expectation. Ministers are expected to do and be certain things for the parishioner, and the parishioner is expected to sustain the minister in tangible ways. This is not a relationship born of the simple desire to be open and transparent with another person. There are obvious and assumed covenants that exist between a pastor and her flock that demand specific actions and results.

I fight about this issue with Stewart regularly. Stewart is a member of my church and a good friend. I enjoy his company and can talk to him about all manner of things. But there are many things I can't speak to Stewart about. There is rarely a conversation I have with him where I do not censure myself. Why? Because while it would feel good to unburden myself about my doubts regarding something at church, or some confidential piece of information that is gnawing at me, such sharing would undermine my primary relationship with Stewart. I am his pastor first and his friend second.

Stewart hates this reasoning and thinks I am intentionally limiting our friendship. And he is right. I abide by these limits as a fulfillment of my calling to serve as his pastor. But doing so leaves me sad and lonely at times, longing for friends with whom I can pour out all my best and worst parts.

I think it is this loneliness that weighs on clergy more than anything. The job is overwhelming and lay people struggle to understand it. Ministers can talk around the edges of our experience, we can share parts of our story, but there are always omissions. I can be open and vulnerable in the pulpit, but only to a point. My congregation benefits from hearing that my marriage is not perfect and I struggle with the same issues they do in maintaining a healthy relationship with my wife. However, they don't need to know if we are in marriage counseling because of a serious conflict that may end our relationship.

Some pastors would disagree with me at this point. They would argue that complete openness and transparency about everything is the key to authentic ministry. The problem is that once you share every secret and private heartache with your congregation the church starts taking care of you. Or worse, they start avoiding you. If people know their minister is having troubles at home they may hesitate to call

in an emergency out of fear that their problem will only exacerbate the minister's troubles at home. You can see where this leads. Before long the pastor's ability to minister and guide is undermined because he wanted to be completely open with his members.

The only antidote for loneliness is connection and understanding. For clergy that means finding one another in settings where we can be completely transparent without fear of reprisal. Clergy groups formed for such sharing are a lifeline for the lonely minister. It took me years to realize my need for such a group, but once I discovered it my longing for deep friendships was satisfied.

Yes, I wish they had told me how lonely the life of a minister could be. More so, I wish they had told me that the friends who could fill that hole were not in the pews but in other pulpits. After all, who could understand better than other lonely ministers longing for a friend?

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