

## **Living Boldly in a World of Shame**

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I need to let you in on a secret about pastors.

Every pastor is different, but there's a general truth about us. There are certain places where we need to go, but those places foster within us a sense of anxiety.

One place where I go that fosters this anxiety is a hospital. When I drive to the hospital to visit someone, I have all kinds of questions running through my head that bring a sense of anxiety.

Those questions include:

What am I going to find when I enter the patient's room?

What am I going to say?

How can I fix this situation?

These are just a few of the questions that I ask myself when I'm about to visit someone in a hospital or adult daycare center or any time I visit someone I think is suffering. I'm afraid of what I'll find. I'm afraid of not having the right things to say. I'm afraid of not having the answers that will fix the situation.

I tell you this because I imagine that many of you are like me. And I tell you this because all of that anxiety about what you're going to find or what you're going to say or how you might fix the situation, all of that anxiety is not necessary. That anxiety is totally avoidable. Because having the right thing to say doesn't matter. What matters is showing up.

I was reminded of this fact on Wednesday as I drove to the hospital to see my sister. She was admitted to the hospital the prior week and diagnosed with heart failure at the age of 40. As I drove to see her, all of those questions ran through my mind as my anxiety increased. My God, I wondered, what am I going to say to my sister in this situation.

I knocked on her door and entered the room. We made eye contact and before saying a word she immediately began to weep. I walked straight to her and held her in my arms as she wept on my shoulder. We didn't speak a word for the first few minutes.

That's when I remembered a the most important phrase about ministry that I learned in seminary – “the ministry of presence.” I want to invite your mind to hold on to this phrase so that you always remember it because it's so important. The most important thing as we minister to one another is not “the ministry of having the right thing to say.” It's not “the ministry of fixing another person's problems.” It's the ministry of presence. Of showing up. Of being with another. So I sat in a chair across from my sister and I listened to her. She talked about some regrets in her life. She wondered if she was being punished in some way for not taking care of herself. She talked about feeling a sense of shame for the way she has lived her life and the sense of isolation

she has felt. She feared the mystery behind her diagnosis because, despite all the tests, her doctors didn't know what caused her heart to fail.

What answers could I give to my sister? The only good answer I could give was the ministry of presence. The ministry of showing up. Of gently holding the space between us without judgment and without adding to her sense of shame.

There's a truth about being human that we find in our passage from Genesis this morning. That truth, written thousands of years ago, is that it is not good for humans to be alone. And yet hospital patients and people in adult daycare centers are often lonely. They feel isolated because more often than not, we don't feel comfortable visiting them.

But I want to dispel some anxiety for you. You do not need the right "answers." In fact, having answers is often not helpful. When people suffer, we often ask some form of the "why?" question. Why did this happen to me?

When these types of questions come up, we almost instinctively try to come up with answers. But these answers usually come across as blame and only increase a sense of shame. In an attempt to be helpful, we might say, "This happened because you didn't do this" or "because you did this." And sometimes we end up with a case of the "shoulds." We can start suggesting that once someone gets out of the hospital, they "should" do this, or they "shouldn't do that." I would like to suggest something very practical to you. If you find yourself telling someone that they "should" or "shouldn't" do something, I want to invite you to stop. In fact, I'd like to invite you to take those two words out of your vocabulary for two reasons. First, people usually already know what they should and shouldn't do. They don't need us to tell them. And second, the phrase "you should do this" elevates us over the other person. It creates a hierarchy that places us above the other. And when this hierarchy is created, the word "should" just projects more shame upon the other.

Genesis says that the man and the woman were in the garden and they felt no shame. But we now live in a world that is saturated with shame. Tragically, our passage from Genesis has been misused in a way that shames women. Men have used this passage to shame women by saying that they were created to be the "helper" of men, as if women are supposed to be subservient. But that's a misunderstanding of the story. Do you know who in the Bible is called helper more than anyone else? God. The woman in the story has more in common with almighty God than the man does.

But this story isn't about which gender is more powerful or divine-like. It's about equality and mutuality. The point is that we are interconnected beings. "This is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" is a statement that is true about all of us. In our shared humanity, you are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. We find our true selves not in isolation. Rather, we find our true selves in community, in being present to one another.

Tragically, this passage has also been misused to shame another group – our LGBTQ siblings. When I was growing up, I heard people use the demeaning phrase, "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." People have used this story in a way that shames, but that's a misuse of the passage. The creation stories in Genesis say that God created humanity in God's very image.

It says that when you look at another person, you are looking at the closest thing to God's image in the universe. It says that when you look at another person, you are looking at the bone of your bone and the flesh of your flesh. God created us in all of our diversity and in all of our similarities. The fact is that God created Adam and Eve and Steve and Charlie and Jodi and Heather and Virgil and Marsha and Jeff and Lita and Clara and Patti and Amira and Sandor and Peg and Jim and all of us. It doesn't matter if you are gay or straight or transgender or black or white or brown or rich or poor or ill or healthy. You are a beloved child of God. You are made in God's very image. You are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.

This passage from Genesis was written thousands of years ago, and yet I think it remains one of the best answers that we can give in a world that is still full of shame. This last week, our president shamed and mocked Christine Blasey Ford with lies, claiming she couldn't remember things that she clearly did remember. Unfortunately, many women who come forward after being sexually abused are shamed by the powers of patriarchy in a similar manner.

And here I want to come back to the point. When my sister sat across from me and began talking about the shame she's experienced in her life, my first reaction was to come up with answers. Then I wanted to tell her that it wasn't that bad and she shouldn't feel so much shame. But that would just minimize her feelings and shame her even more.

And so I sat there with her and just reminded myself to be present to her. Because sometimes the best answers are not verbal. To live boldly in a world of shame isn't about having the right words or the right answers. It's about showing up. It's to stay present without judgment and without adding more shame. If there is any "right" thing to say, it might be this: You are not alone. Because no matter who you are, in our shared humanity, you are forever bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.

May it be so forever in our lives. Amen.