

Niall Williams' novel "This Is Happiness" presents a rich tapestry of human experiences in the small Irish village of Faha. The arrival of Christy, an older man who returns to Faha, offers a valuable study for Pastoral Care. After a long absence, Christy seeks to make amends with his long-lost love, Annie Gaffney, who is dying of cancer.

As challenging as this situation is, it "offers an opening for the church to bring Christlike healing." (TCC p151)

1. Naming the Situations and Pastoral Care Issues

a) Reconciliation and forgiveness.

Christy's return to Faha and desire to reconcile with Annie after many years away is the context. There is guilt, shame, and a need for forgiveness in this relationship.

b) Supporting individuals and the community through grief and loss

Annie has a terminal cancer diagnosis. The looming loss creates a space of fear, grief, anger, and sorrow. There is a need for care for both individuals and the Faha community. This care can lead to restoration and redemption. "Through acts of care, people can find restoration in the middle of death and grief or in simple acts of kindness. Redemption becomes the cornerstone for everything done through congregational care." (TCC p50)

Both situations call for sensitivity, a theology of hope, and the assurance of God's presence in suffering.

2. Scriptural Guidance and Prayer

a) **Ephesians 4:32:** "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

-This verse serves as a guiding principle in pastoral care, encouraging acts of kindness, understanding, and forgiveness. It reminds individuals struggling with guilt or loss that just as God forgives us through Christ, we are called to extend that same grace to ourselves and others.

-This verse is fitting for both Christy and Annie and can be applied to reconciliation with God and others.

b) **Psalm 34:18:** "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit"

-This verse helps support individuals and the community when experiencing grief & loss.

-Christy: Encourage Christy to see that "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted," reminding him that his past regrets do not separate him from God's healing presence or the possibility of Annie's forgiveness. Should the worst happen with Annie, Christy can hold on to this verse and the nearness of God.

-Annie: Help Annie embrace that God "saves the crushed in spirit," assuring her that her quiet endurance of loss is seen and redeemed by His love.

-Faha: Remind the town that even as the old ways fade (community context) and people pass into eternity, God remains near, sustaining them through change and preserving the beauty of what was.

A prayer for this situation might be:

"Eternal, Ever-Present, and Loving God,

Your Word promises that "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18), and we cling to this truth in times of grief and change. Be with Annie in her illness, surrounding her with Your peace and reminding her that she is never alone.

Strengthen Christy as he seeks reconciliation, helping him embrace the healing and

forgiveness You offer. Comfort the people of Faha as they navigate loss, showing them that even as seasons shift, Your love remains steadfast. May we all walk in the kindness and compassion You call us to in Ephesians 4:32, extending grace to ourselves and one another as You have so freely given to us. Let Your presence bring light to the weary and hope to the brokenhearted. In Jesus name, amen.”

3. Important Boundaries

In this situation, the most important boundaries to protect are:

a) **Respecting Annie's autonomy and privacy** – Ensuring that she feels in control of her journey, as well as honoring her dignity and privacy. We must be careful when discussing private issues and we should never force Annie to speak or receive visitors (which would be easy to do when confined to a hospital bed.)

b) **Maintaining appropriate emotional distance while offering compassionate care** – Walking alongside Christy, Annie, and the community in their grief without becoming entangled in past regrets and strong emotions.

c) **Balancing the needs of individuals (Christy and Annie) with those of the wider community** – Encouraging Faha to embrace change with grace, recognizing that while loss is inevitable, we must bear one another's burdens and foster unity through kindness (Ephesians 4:32).

These boundaries matter to God because they preserve human dignity, respect free will, and demonstrate love for all members of the community. They reflect God's own nature of respecting our choices while offering unconditional love and support. As caregivers, it's crucial to remember that "Boundaries are the limits or borders we place on relationships, which allow us to balance closeness and freedom. Boundaries can exist to safeguard as

well as to delineate what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. When you are ministering to another person, not only do you need to respect his or her boundaries, but you must also set boundaries for your relationship with him or her." **(TCC p78)**. Additionally, we must recognize that "crisis and trauma are not God's will for our lives but rather the result of living in an imperfect world where bad things happen." **(TCC p1530)**

4. Vision for Redemption

As a pastor, I envision redemption as an effort "to restore." **(TCC p49)** In this situation I envision movement from isolation and regret toward a restoration of connection and peace. My hopes for pastoral care in moving this situation toward redemption include:

a) Facilitating a space for Christy and Annie to reconcile, allowing for forgiveness and closure. Covering this issue in prayer while protecting the anonymity and privacy of Annie. This issue can be "unfinished business" for Annie, and would provide a great deal of peace. **(TCC p124)**

b) Guiding the community of Faha in supporting both Christy and Annie, fostering a sense of belonging and shared compassion.

It is important to remember that healing is not a one size fits all. "There's no right way to heal from grief, and though people learn to live with grief over time, there's no prescribed timeline that lessens the hurt or eases the process. Be gentle with someone grieving." **(TCG p79)**

c) Helping individuals find meaning and spiritual growth through this challenging experience.

d) Having a plan for the aftermath should Annie pass away, because “aftercare is so important! Plan how you will follow up and identify who will help you. Without a plan, the aftercare would fall between the cracks of everything else that happens in ministry.” **(TCC p140)** Continued phone calls, notes, and interactions could be scheduled to make sure care continues.

"As caregivers, it is essential to be able to assure people that God is with them, helping them to make it through the pain and then to eventually help them rise up into new creatures in Christ." **(TCC p154)**

While this moment of struggle is difficult, there is still time to make this moment count for all involved.

As a pastor, my hope is to lead these individuals toward trust in God’s faithfulness. For the grieving family, I pray they find comfort in their faith and in the support of their community. For the spiritually burdened individual, my goal is to dismantle misconceptions about God’s nature, helping them embrace His unconditional love.

Conclusion

The situation presented in "This Is Happiness" offers an opportunity for pastoral care that addresses reconciliation, mortality, and community support. By approaching these issues with scriptural guidance, prayer, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and focusing on redemptive outcomes with after-care, a pastor can help individuals and the community navigate through loss towards healing and spiritual growth. Through this process, we can demonstrate that even in the face of terminal illness and past regrets, there is still potential for meaningful connection, forgiveness, and peace.

Works Cited

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