

Lecture #7

Topic: Pastoral Care for Families; Sexuality and Gender

Reading: Genesis 12-50; Clergy Relational Guide; LGBTQ+ Terminology; 10 Things I Wish Every Christian Leader Knew About Gay Teens in Their Church

Your final project is due at the very end of next week. As I did with the mid-term paper, I put information about this assignment in the previous week's module. You will find it in Module 7. This will give you time to consider how you want to approach the assignment and ask questions for clarification.

It is important to me that the effort you expend on the final project bear fruit in your ministry. I left a lot of room in the specifics so you can design it to fit your context. Consider this question, "In the congregation's life together, what is the gap that always reveals a shortcoming in the pastoral care you offer?" Is exhaustion or burnout becoming a real barrier? Have you gone through a season of funerals and your own grief is weighing heavy? Do you need more help and support? Do you need to reboot your theology of care? Or is it something else altogether? My hope is that the time you invest in your final project will help close that gap. Please reach out to me THIS WEEK if you want to design your own project. I'm glad to discuss that.

I will grade your final project based on how well you engaged the course material. There is no requirement for length – or even format. For instance, if you choose to design a lay caregiver ministry based on the *Caring Congregation Implementation Manual*, I am glad to receive a slide presentation and an annotated timeline. Imagine that I am your board chair deciding on whether your project is persuasive enough to try it. Likely, I would need it to be clear enough that I can follow. How long would it take? How much money is needed? What are the advantages that make it worth the investment?

If you choose to map out a 4-week sermon series on a pastoral care topic, imagine that I am your music director. Can I follow well enough to choose music that will add value to the worship experience? Surely, I would want scriptures and sermon titles, but I would also want enough of an outline so I can see how the sermons tie together and how you are moving from the starting line on Sunday 1 to the finish line on Sunday 4.

I have discovered over years of implementation that nothing is ever a finished product. The starting point is hope and a dream, then you tweak it as you go along. I am not expecting to see where you will end up. I am expecting an image of where you are headed and what you THINK it will take to get there. I also offered one other project idea that I think would help clarify a theology of care – reflecting on one of the stones presented in Eugene Peterson's book, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. Again, I am open to any proposal that helps you close a gap in your current context.

Now, let us move to the topics for this week's material – caring for families in the congregation's life together and caring for hurting souls addressing sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

I am asking you to take a quick scan through the book of Genesis, chapters 12-50. This is the epic narrative of God's covenant with us. God reached out to Abraham with an offer of relationship through faithfulness or "chesed," the Hebrew word meaning steadfast love. To shortcut the process of an heir, Sarah offered, and Abraham accepted Sarah's servant, Hagar. Then Abraham tried to pass Sarah off as his

sister, allowing her to become a concubine of another leader. And this – so he would not be killed. As you read the story of our beginnings, consider the dysfunction that appeared in this family. Then, remember that God chose THIS family, including their dysfunction, as the conduit for the blessing of being a people after God's own heart.

Last week, I mentioned that pastors have the advantage of seeing people as they are connected to their families, but it can also be a burden. These are actual experiences for me in ministry. In premarital counseling, I found out that one of the parents refused to attend because of a decades long feud with someone else in the family. In confirmation (others might recognize this as baptism class), one of the students confided a parent was drinking too much. In my office, I sat with someone going through a nervous breakdown because she was employed in the family business and being terrorized by her older brother. Accompanying a church member in her final hours, I watched her daughter be forcibly removed from the hospital because she was intoxicated. We care for souls, and nothing shapes someone's soul like their family.

To serve families and the souls they shape, we must know about:

- Addiction and its impact on families
- Child Abuse – physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect
- Spousal & Partner abuse – and how this impacts kids
- The long-term effects of trauma, especially when it passes from one generation to the next
- Marriage difficulties and divorce

In addition, we must know about systems and communal realities that hurt families:

- Poverty
- Racism
- Misogyny
- Impacts of climate change

My objective today is to raise awareness and hold these issues together under the umbrella of faith. I asked you to scan Genesis 12-50 so we can form the appropriate frame for our umbrella. The family God used to bring the blessing of covenant to the world was full of pain and brokenness. Yet, the covenant was not dissolved. As I pray for a family in struggle or crisis, I hold the incredible value of each life (made in the image of God) in one hand. In the other hand, I hold the gift of family (despite dysfunction) as the container where God does amazing work. When I am faced with struggles like the ones I named above, I hold both hands before God and ask God to help me find a place where both can be honored. Each person in the family must be honored because he/she holds immeasurable worth in God's eyes. The container of the family must be honored because God uses this to shape us after God's own heart. Pastoral care for families must hold both. If we form the right frame – which is how I see holding both hands openly in prayer – the Holy Spirit often weaves the fabric which will cover the frame. At times, we are blessed enough to hold that umbrella over a family of souls in our care so that they can be shielded from the worst of the rain.

This provides an entry into the other topic for today's lecture: sexual orientation and gender identity. My denomination, the United Methodist Church, is emerging from being torn apart because of different convictions in this debate. That makes me especially sensitive to how hard this conversation can be for

folks. I do not know what experiences form your convictions, both theological and practical, but I know you have them. Fortunately, a debate on these subjects is beyond the scope of this class. What is in the scope of this class is the increased risk for suicide among teens who come out as gay or lesbian. Also, in our scope is helping parents receive their kids' coming out in ways that protects their kids from the risks of self-harm and hate from others. And, in our scope is creating safe places in our congregations for people to be honest when they struggle.

This week, I want you to read several pieces that teach us to be compassionate to ALL the souls in our care. One of the first acts of compassion is using the right words. The website with terminology is important. Unless you are a straight, white, cisgender man, there is an area of your life where you do not fit cultural expectations. In this area, you know the constant pressure of trying to conform and how liberating it is to be acknowledged/seen by the words someone uses. I know that being called, "lady preacher" feels a lot different to me than being called, "a woman pastor" -- or for someone to intentionally use the term, "clergy person" instead of "clergy man."

I am asking you to read a personal story from a woman with same gender attraction about what it felt like to grow up in a congregation where her orientation was not safe. Laurie, according to her bio, is now married to a man. Yet, she still sees the importance of creating safe space where teens can be acknowledged as their truest self.

I am asking you to read a guide from a pastor's perspective about how to frame this conversation for your congregation so they can engage it with safety for those who are closeted, those who have been hurt by the church, and those who are protective of friends and relatives. Pastor Danny is Southern Baptist. As you can imagine, he struggles to hold authenticity in his denomination, but hold it he does. His witness is important. I hope it will encourage us to make room for change, not getting stuck in doctrinal conviction so that we unintentionally hurt the souls for whom we are seeking to bring good news.

We care for souls – the place where people meet with God whether they want to or not. This is a tender place, but it can also be hardened by the pain of vulnerability that was not honored. The soul is scrappy and knows how to survive, to protect itself. A soul that is wounded requires a patient curator, one who can wait until the soul is thirsty before leading that soul to living water. May the journey you make with those who have been so deeply hurt by the church (i.e., a woman asked not to come back because she is divorced, or a man told he cannot marry his husband in the church that raised him) -- be a healing journey.

Next week, we will finish with a look at caring for our own souls. Know of my prayers for you in the care you offer others.