

Lecture #3

Topic: Boundaries, Effective Listening

Reading: complete novel; Implementation Manual, chaps. 6-9

Brene Brown quotes Prentice Hemphill in her book, "Atlas of the Heart." Prentice says, "Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously." Let us hear that again, "Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously." Most pastors and those offering care on behalf of the church feel a need to help people. So, I assume that our class has true and honest motives about caring for those in our congregations. That's why this conversation is crucial. Nothing puts those of us who honestly care about people in the ditch faster than boundary violations.

First, what is a boundary and how does it operate? I think the most helpful metaphor in describing boundaries is fences. Fences are permeable to certain things and impermeable to others. Fences clearly mark what is inside as different from what is outside. Fences serve a valuable purpose on their own AND allow property both within and outside the fence to serve its purpose in good ways as well. Put simply, boundaries allow us to answer the questions:

- What is yours?
- What is mine?
- What is ours?

These are the questions we must ask repeatedly.

We enter dangerous territory in caring for the souls entrusted to us when boundary violations occur. To add to the danger, boundary violations often become visible *only after they have occurred*. From the book entitled, "Boundaries," by Henry Cloud and John Townsend, these are "red flags" for boundary violations:

- Anger (disproportionate to the offense)
- Avoidance
- Neediness (from either side)
- Blame shifting, denying responsibility
- Distance from God
- Burden of too much responsibility

I would expand the red flags to say that anytime something feels off in the relationship, there is probably a boundary violation – on your part, on their part, or on both parts. Remember, "Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously."

This week, you will be reading four chapters in Karen Lampe and Melissa Gepford's book, *The Caring Congregation: Implementation Manual*. In the chapter about boundaries, they offer great teaching about how to establish boundaries, how to respect boundaries and how to keep boundaries clear. You will also be finishing the novel. Once again, I encourage you to imagine an encounter with one of the characters in the novel. You will be asked to write your mid-term theological reflection on how you could see yourself interfacing with this character as a pastoral caregiver.

Let me take a moment to introduce you to the two texts you are now reading since we will be spending lots of time with them in the weeks ahead. The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas

City developed a model for equipping laity to offer pastoral/congregational care about 15 years ago. It was so transformational for the church that they started training other congregations in the model. These two books are the latest iteration of how to involve members of our congregations in the work of congregational (pastoral) care.

I chose these books for two reasons. First, if you want to share the task of pastoral care with others (i.e. forming a team) these books, particularly the implementation manual, will get you there. Second, I felt the succinct way the authors approached the necessary topics of our course would help us cover a lot of material in a short amount of time. If you are interested in the full offering of this program from Church of the Resurrection, I will include the website on the lecture page. You will notice we do not start with implementation instructions, but rest assured, we will return to that in the coming weeks.

Back to the topic of boundaries. In this course, I feel the most helpful thing I can offer is a window into what boundaries are and why they are important. So, why are boundaries important? Well, because...boundary violations are at the root of every harm caused by us as pastoral caregivers, not to mention pain we cause each other in our relationships. Furthermore, the pain we experience through burn out, blame, betrayals, damaged relationships in ministry are because of boundary violations.

A few areas of boundary violations deserve special mention.

- Improper use of power. Lampe and Gepford note, as caregivers, we are the ones with authority in the relationship. Therefore, we hold the responsibility to keep the relationship safe. We must hold a higher ethical standard. We must respect the other's direction and request, even when we wish it were different. (A few exceptions exist which we will discuss shortly.) We are the ones who must not allow the relationship to enter a different frame of reference – moving from pastor to friend, for example. This is an improper use of power and is therefore a boundary violation.
- Abuse. This is an improper use of power. It is never okay to use congregants to meet your own needs or for your own personal gain. This can include things like borrowing money; asking for special care or treatment; pressuring for favors of any kind, especially sexual favors; objectifying anyone – measuring their value/worth by what they can do for you. It cannot be said too often, this is never ok. It is a boundary violation, and it is never ok.
- Confidentiality. We must hold a higher standard of confidentiality than our congregants. We must assume that anything shared with us is confidential unless we are specifically asked to share it. Prayer concerns are especially tricky. I have learned to ask, "Is this my story to share?" before I ever share a prayer request. If the answer is no, I must have specific permission from the person to share it. At times, I have upset people when they thought telling me meant it would be shared with their Sunday School class. I have had to explain that I would rather be safe than sorry on this one. If they want their Sunday School class to know, they should tell them. Confidentiality is non-negotiable for anyone caring for souls. When we break it, we have violated a boundary. Your congregation needs to feel like you are a vault, a safe place to hold the most important parts of their lives.

Lampe and Gepford mention the importance of reporting knowledge of abuse to authorities. The laws vary for this from state to state. I would encourage you to research the laws of your state. Most states require you to report, meaning there are certain stories you **cannot** hold in confidence. For this reason,

you should always offer a brief explanation anytime you feel like people are about to give you a peek into their interior life. Make it fit your wording but communicate that you are a safe person. Part of being a safe person means making sure everyone is protected. There are only a few situations that you cannot hold in confidence – when there is harm or possible harm being done to them or someone close to them. Respect for boundaries means we have this conversation up front before any information is shared. In this way, we allow people to make informed decisions and maintain their agency.

The other topic I want to address is effective listening. As a curator of souls, we must wait patiently with folks, giving their soul a safe space to be seen and heard. Lampe and Gepford offer important ground rules for effective listening. You will get a few more in the video you watch in week 6. We can all become better listeners, but it is important to know why we should. The privileged role we hold in people's lives means that they trust us to help them connect with God. Our words are not the ones that God needs to hear. God needs to hear the words of the one speaking with us. Listening, really listening, is our offering as a curator of souls. Sometimes, it is the only gift we need to bring.

In chapter 6, "Theology of Care," Lampe and Gepford name John Wesley's three general rules: do no harm, do good, stay in love with God. Wesley required all Methodists to keep these rules as this movement was beginning. In terms of boundary-keeping, these are the gold standard. In every care situation, we should ask, "Is there any possibility that my action or inaction might cause harm, or even just put a barrier between this person and God? Is this really the highest good that I can offer? Will this really be helpful? Have I discerned through prayer that my action is in keeping with God's will for me and for the other person?" In terms of boundary keeping, the three general rules are an excellent litmus test.

I want to wrap up this lecture with an exhortation to care for your own soul. If you have not spent time with God – enough that your own soul has been heard – you will struggle to offer this space to others. If you have not spoken your stories to a trusted friend or spiritual director, they cannot help but come out when you are trying to listen to others. The work of caring for souls begins and ends in prayer. Boundary keeping is a function of our prayer life. In prayer, we are reminded to do ONLY what God calls us to do – nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Prayer is where we get clear about what is ours to do, and what is not ours to do. Nothing supports good boundaries like a rhythm of prayer in our lives.

I know we have covered a lot in this lecture, and you will cover a lot in your assignments this week. As you watch this, please know of my prayers for you as you seek to honor God more fully in this incredible work of pastoral care.