

Making House Calls: A Model for Ministry from the Psychiatric Ward

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We live in an ever-increasing world of specialization and as a result we are used to going to the experts. I guess it makes sense that the ability to be seen by someone with expertise instills a confidence and hope in the expert's ability. Experts are sought out because we want the best advice and latest techniques. But why go to church? Perhaps the motivation is the same – people want answers and solutions from spiritual specialists, a three point solution to solve life's most difficult dilemma or a six week series that will ensure us prosperity. Yet the minister's primary call is not to be a specialist nor an expert but rather a practitioner whose chief aim is living among and before the people. Surprisingly, my work as a chaplain intern at a psychiatric hospital has help to nurture this conviction, providing an incarnational model of ministry much needed in the modern church.¹ I have been challenged to continue to see how ministry is adapted in and beyond the walls of church.

My first day as a chaplain at a psychiatric hospital involved the orientation to the chapel. Patients had come from across the grounds as they do every Sunday morning and were assembled for worship. I immediately noted the benefit of the chapel as I glanced at the patient's faces. While some care just to get away from their unit, others seemed to come searching for peace. For them, the chapel provided the homey feeling of grandma's house, a place where you expected to be loved and cared for even if only for the

¹ Chaplain Interns are under of the hospitals Pastoral Services Department and are apart of the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE).

weekend. So there I was, there when they arrived to usher them in and there when they left to send them on their way.

The service rendered for the patients is not unlike the service of the church in the world for it too has become home for many. In times of war people ran to the church for safety and security. The church steeple was a symbol of refuge, a safe place wherein all are welcome. The pews and stained glass remind people of a shared hope and common space. Even with the removal of most traditional objects of worship and the increased number of churches worshipping in multipurpose facilities, the idea that this space has been created as a refuge remains. What I had failed to realize the first day of orientation was that while chapel was a part of my experience as chaplain, it was only a small component. The true work took place not in the comfort of the chapel, but rather in the fragility of the wards.

The center of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God came to dwell among us. The incarnation should be not just a theological act to be remembered, but a model to be embodied that starts with leaving one's comfort zone for the sake of the other. Never should we rush past the act of God leaving God's royal home for there is no leaving home without a willingness to be vulnerable. It was in this vulnerability that God was not rejected by his own and eventually crucified, but it is also in this vulnerability that redemption was attained for all. Unfortunately, it is a stark contrast to the modern minister who is commonly celebrated for the number that seeks them. People are always welcomed to come to church to receive yet the great commission to go is largely ignored by the ministers or reserved for missionaries and evangelists. We are constantly tempted

to measure ourselves by our itinerary or crowd size alone, forgetting that our jobs extend beyond the church walls and the conference halls. Like Abraham, our call as ministers begins with leaving our places of familiarity and power even when it is the church.

My first day on the actual units in the psychiatric hospital were a bit startling because unlike normal hospitals where most patient stays are for days or weeks, many psychiatric patients call the hospital home. It is humbling then to minister everyday where people live and requires another type of vulnerability altogether different from leaving one's own home but that includes a sensitivity of entering into the intimate space of another.

Entering into people's homes has less to do with entering into their physical spaces as much as it does their context. While it is easier to enter their context by entering their physical space, for ministry it is not a prerequisite. When we enter the lives of others we are opening ourselves to them, offering them understanding and comfort inside of their world. We enter not with the aim of giving advice or being profound but to be present in their world. Our very presence is a symbol of hope.

The story of Elijah and the widow at Zarapheth illustrates this. On the surface the narrative seems to be focused on the widow and her situation and the Prophets dilemma is far from hers. The prophet is fed by air and nourished by a brook while the widow searches in the street for what is unavailable to her at home. It is not that Elijah has abundance for a withering brook is far from a flowing stream and a raven's lunch far from bread of heaven. Yet he has a certain security there, one which can't exist for a woman in that day without a husband, older son, or a wealthy family. Change does not

take place in this narrative until the prophet is forced to leave the place he had begun to call home, a place that has sustained him, in order to enter a world that would remain to him otherwise foreign. We are called to enter into their lives like the Prophet Elijah and not just wait for them to enter in ours. It is only when we enter in and listen attentively to every story that we are able to speak life therein.

This understanding makes the gospel more than a message to be preached to the lost, it is also a lifestyle to be embodied by the believer. If the gospel is the good news that there is life even in death, this must be affirmed by our actions. For the widow, Elijah affirmed this by his presence and by his prayers. Elijah's prayer to God was a plea that God not let his presence be contradictory to the gospel already proclaimed. It was in this moment that his words alone lost power if they were not accompanied with life from above. The chaplain seeks not only to teach the grace of Christ but also to be the body for Christ, to bring the peace that patients seek in the chapel to them in the unit- their home.

I often recall the story of Zacchaeus, who had heard of the presence of Jesus but was unable to meet him. His climbing on the tree suggests his desire to see one who was completely different than himself. To his surprise, Jesus invites Zacchaeus to come down so that he might abide in his house. This request by Jesus to enter his home was not only startling to Zacchaeus but to all the disciples and those who knew who Zacchaeus was. They knew how he made his living. I imagine the rabbis had preacher to him for years about social justice. Yet I doubt in all those years Zacchaeus never had many dinner guest. Even his friends probably kept a distance out of fear of their reputation. But on this

day, Jesus desired to know him from the ground up, in his lowly state of manipulations and deceit. Jesus, who really did not have a home, enters into the home of Zacchaeus. I always wondered what Jesus said for Zacchaeus to behave so drastically, but Luke doesn't tell us. Perhaps Jesus said nothing at all. I'd like to believe it was just his presence in Zacchaeus' home that was a sign for Zacchaeus that here is someone who, despite who I am and what I have done, has come to dwell with me.

This is what I have learned to offer as a chaplain- less words and more presence. A presence that reminds people that when it comes to spirituality there are no experts or specialist, only practitioners. Those who are trying daily to be more like Christ and to live out what it means to follow him. To accomplish this, we must always be willing to leave our security behind and take the message of God's grace to the door of every heart.