

When Pastors Experience Deep Loss

When I was contemplating entering the ministry as my profession, a trusted mentor warned me with these words: “David, many people assume that there are three sexes – female, male, and pastors.”

At the time, being 20-years old, I didn’t quite get it. However, after being in ministry for over 40 years, I have gained more understanding of that, though now I do believe that thought was self-imposed.

Pastors, as most know (hopefully), are human beings as well. They experience life with hurts, pain, weaknesses, sins, and loss as others do. They are not super-Christians immune to this fallen world and all its pain.

The toughest time in my ministry was when our grandson died. When my wife and I saw the hurt and pain of our son and his wife, and feeling the loss of Josiah David ourselves, we felt powerless to help anyone else.

When one would come to my office for a counseling session, and pour out their troubles to me (which was daily), I felt strangely detached from them. At times I thought, “So this is your problem you’re complaining about? Give me a break!” Though I never verbalized those words, at times I felt disdain for their problems.

And even when I did not think that, trying to connect with their pain was simply beyond my present ability. I was drained emotionally, and had nothing left to give to them (or so I thought).

There was also the dreaded church leaders meeting every Wednesday night. Most pastors/ministers know how stressful some of those meetings can be. Many discussions center around some members’ complaints – such as we stand too much in the worship service, etc. Or some big ‘church issue’ concerning some not-real-life-issue. Just fill in the blank.

In one such meeting, an elder of our church was sitting next to me. His wife had just died a few weeks earlier, and the meeting went on and on about some inane, insane subject, with a few in the room getting, shall we say, a bit animated. Jerry leaned over to me and said those words I had wanted to shout out, in a very animated way. “None of this really matters, does it David?”

The worst effect to me was what I call 'Climbing into the pulpit' every Sunday. Here I was feeling weak in faith, and quite honestly, angry with God for not responding the way I wanted him to after thousands of prayers for Josiah. But as every Sunday came around (and they did every 7 days!) I had to be the encourager for everyone else. And I was weary.

One day, I broke. I told the church what I thought, how angry I was with God, and how I had nothing left in the emotional tank. I took off that mask I had put on, and simply got real. Even though I had long ago adopted this 'honest' method in ministry, this was different. We had a grieving son and daughter-in-law, and our own grief to deal with. And I learned some valuable lessons. Here are some of them.

1. Grievors, even pastors, simply MUST give themselves permission to grieve.
2. Grievors should not always grieve alone. Even though being alone with our grief is good at times, it is NOT healthy to always grieve alone.
3. Grievors do NOT have to be strong for others all the time, even those in ministry. It is OK and even wise to say at times something like this: "No, I cannot talk with you now. You will have to find someone else."
4. When I grieve deeply, this does NOT mean I have a failing or a weak faith. This intense grief may include questioning God, and even disagreeing with God's non-action to intervene and heal. I seem to remember Jesus asking the big 'why' question.
5. Being honest with one's feelings, frustrations, questions, etc. and sharing these in appropriate ways, even from the pulpit, is quite healthy – both for you and your hearers.
6. It is OK for spiritual leaders to seek help when they are struggling with whatever. Even Jesus one day asked three friends to help him – "Keep watch while I pray" he told them.

Jesus was vulnerable. He was honest. He was not ashamed to ask three very human and weak friends for help, and to bare his soul to them. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death' he confessed to them.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13).