

On Caitlyn Jenner, and pastoring a transgender person

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The Internet is awash with reactions to Caitlyn Jenner's photos in *Vanity Fair* magazine. Some thoughtful stuff, and plenty that's predictably ... less than thoughtful. I write this post with some trepidation, because there's still much for me to learn, and I hope those who have walked this road will offer correction with a generous spirit, for it's in that spirit that I write this. [This tip sheet from GLAAD is helpful.](#)

I had the opportunity to provide pastoral support to someone as she made a male-to-female transition. Her story is hers to tell, but this is a little of mine as I walked with her. (She was not on the membership rolls of any church I served. I say that to protect her identity and so people don't go wondering and digging. I'll call her Jade.)

I felt this person's anguish as we met over a period of months. It seems hard enough to be gay or lesbian, to go against society's default expectations and perhaps one's upbringing, to experience discrimination and sometimes harassment. But to be transgender—for one's body not to conform to what one knows so deeply to be true of oneself—seems a particularly tough burden. Violence against transgender people is disproportionately high. For many (though not all) transgender people, the answer is surgery, or as I learned, *surgeries*. And of course, these procedures are expensive and very involved, and thus out of reach for many people.

The person I met with asked me over and over again, "Am I a mistake? Does God make mistakes?" As someone who tries to be not only a straight ally, but a straight *Christian* ally, these questions felt important and agonizing. I read up on Christian resources for transgender people, and we talked a lot about Jesus' ministry with society's "misfits and outcasts." We read the story of the [Ethiopian eunuch](#), which to me is a clear sign that grace is a gift offered to sexual minorities too. Mainly I told her that the God I believe in loves us all unconditionally and wants shalom—wholeness—for us all.

The first time we met, when she was still contemplating a physical transition and what it might mean, I prayed for her by name—her female name. When she raised her head her eyes were filled with tears. “I **am** Jade. That’s who I am.”

I’ll be honest. It didn’t feel comfortable—I previously knew this person by a male name. But it was right. And this is what we do as pastors, isn’t it? It’s not about our own comfort. It’s about naming the grace of God that we are all living toward. It’s about claiming the abundant life that Jesus promises.

And Jade claimed that abundant life. It wasn’t easy and it still isn’t. Loved ones don’t always get it. Family systems are complicated. But when I saw her after one of her surgeries, I couldn’t believe the transformation. I’m not talking about breast augmentation and a reduced Adam’s apple. I’m talking about the peace that radiated from every pore. I’m talking about the way she carried herself. I’m talking about the carefree smile she gave me. You’d have to be blind not to see it.

Maybe, *maybe*, my prayer in which I invoked her new name was a gift to her. But that last meeting we had was a gift to me, because I saw wholeness and transformation in the flesh. I still don’t understand transgenderism. Is it a quirk of evolutionary biology? But I don’t have to understand it. My job is to point to abundant life, and then to celebrate as Jade and others seek to embody it.

In the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, there’s a saying, “Happy, joyous and free.” The gospel isn’t the gospel unless it moves us toward happy, joyous and free. That’s all I know.

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