

Lake of fire

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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When I was younger, I imagined that people who inhabited the pastor role had some specific set of skills that made them uniquely suited to sift through the wreckage of human pain that they encountered. I imagined that they strode confidently into rooms where people were coping with tragedy and death and doubt and loss and grief and crushing pain and anger and fear armed with just the right words for the job, just the right Bible verses, just the right insight into when to give someone a hug and when to give them space, just the right prayers, just the right ability to project just the right combination of warmth and decisiveness and spiritual authority (whatever that might mean), just the right combination of attitudes and attributes to make bad situations somehow better.

And then I became a pastor.

And I began walking into these rooms where the air was thick with sorrow of all kinds. I began to sit with teenagers with bandaged arms to hide the blade marks and middle aged men who were talking suicide and weary couples staggering through the last days of a dying marriage and people who were angry at others and the church for reasons they couldn't even articulate and parents struggling with teenagers who seemed hell-bent on burning their lives to the ground and old men who were dying bitter and alone and young women who had been discarded like trash and men who had struggled their whole lives with addiction and racism and abuse, whose bodies were beginning to betray them, whose minds were playing the very worst sorts of tricks on them.

And the more rooms I walked into, the more I realized that, while there may indeed be pastors like the ones described above, there are at least as many of us who are just blundering along, trying, struggling, failing, hoping and praying against all odds that our hoping and praying alongside people makes some kind of a difference. I realized that the right words don't always or even often "just come." Sometimes it's just awkward and heavy and miserable. Sometimes, you're convinced that rooms like this need people with a lot more hope than you have to offer.

One day a few weeks ago, it was another room, another sadness that seemed too impossibly heavy for the world (or God) to tolerate. A mother whose son had just died. On Mother's Day morning, *Christ have mercy*. Is there even language for such sadness? Do words even exist? There were hugs and tears, stories and pictures, memories and laments. But the words mostly just drifted around inadequately in the air. Words don't land in rooms with that much sadness. They're weightless things, desperate attempts to fill the time and space.

It's impossible to be in such a room without imagining yourself on the other side of the table, groping around in a fog of rage and despair, trying to come to terms with the loss of a son or daughter while some well-meaning person on the other side of the table mumbles and stumbles along, asking questions, nodding, gulping, crying, praying, offering platitudes, and, ultimately, leaving. I imagine that I would probably smile politely and be grateful for their efforts. But inside I would be thinking, *Please just go and take all your useless words with you, because there is nothing that can be said or done. My child is gone.*

Often when I leave these rooms thick with sorrow, when I'm walking out to my car, when I'm driving home or back to the office, I often breathe a silent prayer—something pious or hopeful or expectant or something.

Yesterday, my prayer was more succinct. *Goddamnit!* Literally. God, would you please *damn it*?! Would you please do something useful and condemn these awful realities, these rooms full of all kinds of sadness that we don't know how to sit with? Would you please reveal as false and transitory and fleeting these damnable experiences of tear-stained mothers sitting at kitchen tables holding pictures of their dead sons? Would you please cast our pain and darkness, all our victimhood and complicity in the screwed up ways of this screwed up world into a lake of fire or something—anything that's up to the task of burning away our struggle and sorrow?

Yes, we could certainly do with some damning.

In the meantime—in the absence of flames for all the things that need burning—we keep stumbling along with one another. We sit with one another as long as we are able in rooms full of sadness. We offer words. Or not. We offer shoulders and tears, food and friendship. We offer what we can, even when it doesn't feel like much. And, if we are wise, we entrust one another into the care of Christ, trusting and hoping,

sometimes through clenched teeth, that there is not only a tree of life for the healing of the nations in our future, but a lake of fire for all the things that never belonged.

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