

May 9, Easter 6B (John 15:9-17)

What would the insurance-mandated boundary trainings that I've attended make of Jesus' intimacy with his disciples?

by [Melissa Earley](#) in the [April 21, 2021](#) issue

Rod came up to me during fellowship time after church. "How are you?" he asked. "Oh, fine," I said. "No, how are you really?" He wasn't just being polite. This wasn't an opener to pave the way to the real question or request. He wanted to know how I was.

About a month earlier I had told my congregation that my marriage was ending. I was devastated, humiliated, and ashamed. Rod was on the board of trustees. I'd come to respect his non-anxious way of leading, the insightful questions he asked, and his sense of humor. I liked his wife and kids. After I told the congregation about my marriage, Rod shared a story about his good friend who was going through something similar. So I turned to Rod and trusted him with the truth. "I'm still sad. But I'm also so, so angry. Sometimes I just want to break things."

"If you want, you can buy a punching bag at Play It Again Sports. I'll hang it in your basement. And no one ever needs to know," Rod said. I never took him up on it, but I was so grateful for the offer.

I was taught that clergy shouldn't be friends with their parishioners. Friendship leads to complications. Boundaries get blurred; expectations get messy. Older, wiser clergy warned that congregants would compete with each other to be close to the pastor, believing that their friendship would grant them special status. Experienced pastors had stories of betrayal. They had confided in parishioners they thought were friends, only to have those confidences end up as fodder for gossip. I've accepted dinner invitations, looking forward to an evening out, then been trapped in a dinner table conversation about the latest church controversy. Friendship between pastors and congregants has its pitfalls.

Jesus gives us a different example of leadership. Jesus says, “I don’t call you servants any longer . . . instead I call you friends.” He blurs the boundaries between them. He remains in them; they remain in him. They all remain in God. The lines between rabbi and disciples, leader and followers, Savior and saved get smudged. There is now a reciprocity, a greater mutuality, a shared vulnerability. They need each other.

I don’t pretend to be Jesus. The people in my church would be quick to agree with me that I’m not the savior of the world. But I wonder if stiff boundaries actually reinforce perceptions that put clergy on pedestals. We often think of leaders as the ones with all the answers, leading from the front of the pack, impervious to need. Here Jesus puts himself in the midst of the disciples. As he faces his arrest, torture, and death, does he realize his deep need for greater support, friendship, and love? Does this one who has fed, healed, and taught others find that he needs to be carried?

What would the insurance-mandated boundary trainings that I’ve attended make of Jesus’ intimacy with his disciples? Those trainings always emphasize that, in addition to avoiding inappropriate romantic liaisons with parishioners, we should also avoid putting our church members in a position to take care of us. We are supposed to take care of them.

During the year I divorced and the year I recovered, I managed to keep preaching, visiting, and doing my job. I didn’t share the sordid details of the ending of my marriage. When people told me how much they had liked my ex-husband, I held back my honest reply and agreed that he had many good qualities. But I also cried in church. I admitted to having bad days.

I learned I needed the congregation, needed to be part of a community of love and forgiveness. I didn’t need them to be on my speed dial when I was having a rough night. But I still needed a church. It’s tricky being a part of a church and a pastor of a church at the same time. But there’s something beautiful about it when it happens.

I have often said that being a pastor makes me a better Christian, and it’s only a little bit because I know I’m being watched. I am a closeup and constant witness to church members’ generosity, grace, and care for one another. I am also a recipient. One of my parishioners makes dinner weekly for another one. Sometimes she brings me a plate, too. It’s such a delight. Her thoughtfulness softens my heart toward the

more difficult members of my church, and her love for me connects me to Jesus. I experience why church matters.

For a lot of my ministry I kept myself at a distance from my congregation. I still don't share all of my life with them. But I'm a bit less filtered. They don't hear about my dating woes, but I do let more of myself show. That porousness allows the community's love and forgiveness to seep into my soul, and I am baptized again in grace.

In that difficult season of my life, I needed to hear the choir and the reading of scripture and the prayers of the people. I needed to be part of a congregation in a way that didn't always put me at the center of the action. I still need my congregation's friendship to know that the church's ministry is more than my profession. I believe that my neediness in those days made me a better pastor. I hope I didn't inflict my neediness on my church too much. In breaking apart, I also broke open.