

Humble connections: Staying in challenging relationships

I could stay home on Sundays when visiting my parents. But I return to the pews of my childhood church because I love the people despite our differences.

by [Nicole Chilivis](#) in the [December 23, 2015](#) issue



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On a recent trip to Atlanta to visit my parents, I attended my childhood church with them. This congregation, which has grown in the past 30 years to about 3,000 people, doesn't allow women to preach, serve communion, or serve on the vestry.

I haven't lived in Atlanta since I graduated from high school. Since then, I have graduated from seminary and become a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Each time I sit in the pews of my old church, however, my emotions are roiled.

On this particular Sunday, a young man stood up to lead prayer. He asked God for forgiveness for "killing our babies and calling it choice," "divorcing and calling it convenience," and "defacing marriage and calling it equality."

There was a time when this prayer would have disturbed me deeply. This time, I was mostly curious about these glib generalizations. What made the young man choose to phrase things this way, and what was behind these words? Was forgiveness the sincere aim of the prayer?

It is tempting in our prayers and sermons to put people into neat categories to further our ideologies or prove a point, but that approach falls short of the repentance, love, and hope that are the underlying message of the biblical story.

I think of the biblical stories in which a life is transformed by the love of Christ—the story about the intimate encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well, for example, or about the breaking of bread after Jesus’ resurrection, when the disciples finally recognize him. These are face-to-face encounters with people who are full of sin and betrayal of various stripes. In every action and interaction, Jesus seeks to move people toward wholeness.

When I was in college, Tony Campolo spoke to my InterVarsity group, and a student asked him how he could tolerate staying in relationship with his wife when she held a different view of same-sex relationships. (Until recently, he was not supportive of same-sex couples.) Campolo replied, “What do you want me to do, beat her?” At 19, I knew he was speaking the truth about relationship being more important than ideology. The challenge is to be curious about differences while having the courage to maintain the authenticity of one’s own beliefs. There is a certain violence in relationships that require someone to lose his or her sense of self.

At my parents’ church, I followed the service with a measure of compassion until 15 men—and only men—stood up to serve communion. I couldn’t deny my hurt and frustration—or my inclination to become an apologist for my own beliefs. I wanted to build a wall so I wouldn’t have to see or hear those men. But I also thought of my parents sitting beside me, my positive memories of growing up in this church, my hope for unity in the body of Christ.

At the end of the service, my mother asked me to come with her to greet the pastor and his wife. Somewhat reluctantly, I did. They hugged me, talked with me, and promised to continue praying for me and my family. The hugs, smiles, and interest were genuine, born out of years of relationship.

In that moment, I realized why I keep coming back. Despite our differences, I love these people. They care deeply about my parents. It is precisely that love that allows me, maybe even compels me, to return to this place and to grapple with feelings of personal rejection regarding this church’s stance on women in ministry.

I could scoff at the church or sit in judgment. I could choose to stay home on Sunday mornings when visiting my parents. I could deny or hide my beliefs and perspectives

to avoid conflict. Or I could choose to make what my spiritual director calls a “humble connection.” We can clearly define who we are and what we think, while being interested in the other’s position.

Making a humble connection is challenging; it takes intention. There are tensions that won’t be resolved this side of heaven, but now and then, if we are willing to stand prayerfully in the tension, we glimpse grace.

That glimpse of grace happened when my uncle died and I was asked by the family to officiate his funeral. I invited my younger brother, a talented musician, to play at the funeral. His theology is different from mine. He once refused to attend a memorial service I presided at, and he didn’t attend my ordination.

However, not only did my brother agree to lead the funeral service with me, but we collaborated on it, staying up late several nights texting and talking. I wouldn’t have imagined in my wildest dreams that this would be the result of honest engagement and waiting. What my brother believes about women in ministry and a host of other issues matters to me. But what matters even more is that we have stayed in relationship, allowing the day to come when we could lead a funeral together. In that moment we were two human beings working together for God’s kingdom. I think that is what it means to wait in the tension, with eyes wide open for transformation to happen in unexpected and healing ways.

After my recent visit to my parents’ church, I wrote to the pastor and shared my views. I knew it would change our relationship. He was a significant part of my faith formation; he wrote a recommendation for me to go to seminary.

The pastor responded, assuring me of his deep love for me and my family. He thanked me for my candor while holding fast to his beliefs. He said he was doing the best he could to follow God’s word sincerely.

That pastor and I fundamentally disagree about an issue, but we are in dialogue, and for that I am grateful. I thank God for my courage to be honest about my beliefs and experience of God’s call in my life. I thank God for this pastor’s willingness to engage with me. I believe in the ultimate mystery of a God who finally will heal every broken place in our hearts and in the world. Who knows, maybe one day, through prayer and conversation, this pastor and I will slowly see the tension find resolution.

So I will continue to sit in those pews when I make my yearly journeys to the place of my youth. I will sing, pray, worship, delight in, and grapple with the culture that

played a part in forming me. I will do so because of a deep and abiding hope that if we are faithful and committed to staying in relationship, living in the tension, Christ will show up with a healing love for us that may even reach the ends of the earth.