

Crying in church

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October 6, 2010

I just spent the last three hours trying not to cry my eyes out in pastoral care class. The topic this week was funerals. I rightfully anticipated a swell of emotions and prepared my heart accordingly. But in class the conversation the stories drifted towards the death of children, the most precarious moment of pastoral engagement. I felt the lump in my chest rise to my throat and before I knew it I was doing deep breathing exercises to control the pain and sorrow of even the idea of my daughter's death.

Can pastors be criers? This was the question I managed to eek out before actually bursting into tears before Prof Dykstra at the break. Between sobs I got out that my strong reaction was deeply related to child death, not death in general. He gave me some assurance about the role of empathy, especially for grieving parents, the importance of not hiding our emotions.

Nice. Helpful. But could I actually do it? Could I actually stand before the family of a three-year old who died of leukemia and make a convincing case for the resurrection? In all honesty, that I will be regularly conducting funerals has never fully sank in when I consider leading a congregation. I just can't go there.

This is about the time that I want to call into question my ability to do this job. I am a pretty good mind person. I can grasp fairly complex arguments. I can translate difficult concepts. But most of all I've never cried in a course on Christology or Romans. My skill at successfully leading a family through the Gospel proclamation that death has been swallowed up even as our hearts are broken. I mean, how would you like it if the mouse-like pastor couldn't get through the Gospel, let alone the sermon, at your mother's funeral? Holy smokes....

I think that most theology types like to think that the really difficult work of the church is figuring out the inter-relationship of the Trinity or identifying the sacramental theology of Aquinas. For me, the really difficult questions are quite

different. How do you tell the parent of a child who died in a car accident that you're not going to be able to lead a hockey themed funeral? How do you physically tear a mother away from the graveside of the child she bore with her own body?

Theologians have it easy.

Originally posted at [Sign on the Window](#), part of the [CCblogs network](#).