

People are needy. People are gifted.

By [Diane Roth](#)

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One of the hazards of visiting people in the hospital, in nursing homes, and while they are grieving is coming to regard people as the sum total of their needs and deficiencies.

I visit people when they can't get out of bed. I visit people when they are numb with grief. I visit people when they have forgotten who they are, or when their hands tremble, or when all they can swallow is the tiniest bit of a wafer dipped in wine. I visit people when they are helpless. I hold the hands of people who are at the end of their rope, and sometimes it feels like it is my job to tie the knot that they can hang on to. Or something.

This is called pastoral care. It is to go and pray for people, to say the words of hope, to give the bread and wine that feeds people, to listen and to keep saying the most important things, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever. God is for you. Nothing can separate you from God's love."

There's something humbling about this. I remember going into a hospital room where a parish member really wanted a nurse to take her to the bathroom more than she wanted to talk to me -- at least at that moment. Whatever it was I have to offer, it sometimes doesn't seem to be nearly enough.

But there's something else as well. When I go to visit someone in the hospital, or a nursing home, or to plan a funeral, and I call that "pastoral care", I'm tempted to see myself as the giver and the other person as the "needy person", and it's so much more complicated than that.

I also will go out to coffee with a church member, just to get to know them better, to hear some of their stories, to find out what they are passionate about, to learn about their family or their work. I once got to hear a story from a woman who broke up a schoolyard fight when she was ten, and knew, right away, that this was her vocation. Recently else someone called me and said she wanted to get together so she could figure out what she could offer to her church, now that she was retired.

I'm beginning to think that this is pastoral care too, and that pastoral care that focuses exclusively on people's neediness is not as helpful as it seems. Instead of just praying for people, maybe good 'pastoral care' will pray with people; instead of seeing myself as giver and the other as 'receiver', maybe good pastoral care will see us as partners, with gifts to offer each other, with ministry to do together, for the sake of the world.

Once I heard someone say the phrase "the less fortunate", as in "at Christmas-time, let's give to the 'less-fortunate.'" Something about the phrase bothered me, the way it separated people into "them" and "us" -- as in *them* the needy ones, and *us* the gifted ones, the fortunate, the givers. But it's a lot more complicated than that, isn't it? We're all needy, and we're all gifted. Some wounds are on the outside. Some gifts are hidden on the inside.

One of the hazards of visiting people in the hospital, in nursing homes, and while they are grieving is coming to regard people as the sum total of their needs and deficiencies.

The truth is, people (including me) are the sum total of their needs, their deficiencies, their stories, their gifts, their hopes, their fears, their strengths, their utter helplessness, and, most of all, the indelible mark of God upon their lives, which expresses their incalculable worth. "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever."

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