

Pastors, friendship, and the limits of boundaries

What use are boundaries when you're sitting with a friend who is about to die?

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [November 6, 2019](#) issue



Unsplash

“Does being my pastor mean you can’t be my friend?” a parishioner once asked.

I chose my words carefully. “I can be your friend so long as it doesn’t stop me from being your pastor.” What I was really trying to do was to distinguish between two understandings of the word *friend*: someone who could be trusted, relate, relax, and not always have to be talking about churchy stuff, as opposed to a person who could fill an idle evening, offer emotional support that a late spouse used to give, and impart insights not shared with others. Yes to the first; no to the second.

We talk a lot about boundaries, those of us who like to regard clergy as caring, passionate, privately needy, and short on self-knowledge. And so we should, if by so doing we decrease the burnout that comes from becoming addicted to ministry, the damage that ensues from relationships that mask self-deception, and the fury in the child of the manse whose parent yet again is interrupted at a crucial stage in a Monopoly game by a phone call that should have been entrusted to the everlasting arms of voicemail. Not long ago in a meeting a pastor spoke of a colleague who had “poor emotional hygiene”—a coinage that impressed the rest of us, though we were all rather frightened by a pastor so consummately aware of his own needs and so acute in diagnosing the shortcomings of others.

But what use are boundaries when you’re sitting face to face with a friend who you know is soon going to die—a friend who knows plenty well that you’re a pastor but who most of all wants deep human connection, a love that will not let her go, a communion that goes beyond words and extends to a tight grip of the hand, an unflinching hold of the gaze, a lament crystalized in a shared silence? What use is good emotional hygiene when you hug her and know it’s almost certainly the last time, when you face her spouse and feel cruel slinking back to other things when those other things seem little more than an attempt to distract and distance yourself from the intensity of this grief?

Because things won’t turn out as anticipated. What ever does? Instead, while carrying your friend on your heart every day and dreading the message that says, “We’re going to the hospital, I think this is it,” you get a call with news about another person. This is someone to whom you really are a pastor, but deep inside you feel they’re a friend. They get it; they know the moments that matter to you, the snubs that hurt, the recognition that gratifies, the thresholds that count. They’re not a regular friend, because they actually need a pastor more than they need a friend, and they know it. So that’s what you are, and it’s just more rewarding with them than with most people.

But this call you get: it’s bad news, terrible news in fact, but you’re in denial so you just call it bad. This person has been in an accident, they’re seriously injured, they might linger a few days but there’s nothing seriously to hope for. Once you understand that there’s no prospect of any real recovery, a lightning bolt of loss rips through your body—for now you realize this really was a friend, though you never called them that; this was someone special, a gift sent by the Spirit to show you how to be a pastor, inspire you with the joy of ministry, reward you with the discovery

that not all seed falls on stony ground.

And your heart hasn't got room for both emotions. You have the slow burn of inevitable loss, the instinct to walk with the person you cherish as a friend but with whom when it becomes intense you're inclined to retreat into being a pastor. And you have the scorching pain of sudden grief, a recognition that here was a person to whom you really were a pastor but now all is so shatteringly over you rather wish you'd done it all differently and been a real friend.

Did Jesus do boundaries well? Someone got the idea that he was especially close to one of the crew, the one who became known as the beloved disciple. Doesn't sound like much of a boundary to me. But was that special one a constant companion, the one he went with to the movies when he had a night off from being the savior, the one with whom he shared inside jokes and a knowing wink? Or was it later that this one disciple seemed to remember things, to understand them and ponder them in a way none of the others seemed able to do? Was it only later that he and they recognized that he "got" Jesus all along, while no one else worked it out till the Gospels were written and the Spirit made it all clear as day?

Ministry's a powerful thing. *Boundaries* can be a word that helps pastors do less damage with that power, to others and themselves. But in the end it comes down to love. And while boundaries can keep love from being transgressive and manipulative, they can't take love away—nor should they. Never be fooled: you can't control the love of God. You thought you went into ministry to spread it, but you end up receiving it. Don't try to be ready, because it'll find a way to surprise you. And then you'll be tearful, and thankful, at the same time.

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