

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you peace." (Matthew 11)

PASTORAL COUNSELING IS A PROCESS OF HOLY MOMENTS

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The Bible contains many stories about God working in the lives of his people. One of the lesser known and quoted stories is the one about the high priest, Melchizedek. God's servant, Abraham, has just returned from defeating the kings who have threatened the life of his nephew, Lot. Upon Abraham's return, he is welcomed by the king of Salem, Melchizedek. This exchange is in the form of a blessing:

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abraham saying, "Blessed be Abraham by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth." (Gen14:18-19)

While there is no information provided as to Abraham's physical, emotional and spiritual condition at the time of this meeting, it is quite reasonable to assume that he was a man in need. We can assume this because we know that he has just returned from battle. Melchizedek likely provided him a safe place to tell his story and to find refreshment for his soul. He likely used his best listening skills to let Abraham give voice to his need. He surely did many caring and helpful things, but none of these are recorded. All that is recorded is that Melchizedek blessed Abraham.

This brief and seemingly insignificant story is in fact an important one. It says something enduring about the role and function of the spiritual healer, and the healing power in the holy moment. It is a distinctively sacramental process—one that is grounded in God's action, rather than ours.

When you come for counseling you have a story to tell. Abraham likewise had a story to tell. Counseling can be, and often is, therapeutic when you can be given a safe place to tell your story and find meaning and purpose for your life through the unpacking and retelling of that story. Today, counselors employ a variety of therapeutic strategies to achieve this goal. My guiding principle is that pastoral counselors are in a unique position to do even more than assisting those who come to us in retelling their stories. We are uniquely positioned, as Melchizedek was, to offer the healing grace of God to those whose stories we embrace and make our own.

Melchizedek delivered God's gracious blessing—his "shalom"—to Abraham through his sacramental blessing. In this, he revealed to Abraham God's healing love. I believe that the practice of pastoral counseling is a sacramental and holy process made up of many holy moments that reveal God's healing love. Some of those moments come in the painful expression of deep suffering and sadness, when together with you we simply embrace and hold those moments in our hearts and minds. These moments poignantly point us to the pain and suffering of our Lord on Good Friday, and remind us that we live in the shadow of the cross. The psalmist writes in Psalm 88: "*The darkness is my closest friend.*" These are the hard moments of therapy. They are the moments when words give way to tears and silence is the true prayer of the heart.

Other moments come in the exhilaration of discovery. They come through the process of seeing familiar things in a new and fresh way. Such holy moments point us to the Creator God, who has gives us the power of creativity and who invites us to join together with the Creative One in giving new shape to our dying and broken world. These holy moments give us hope that things can be different and we can, with God's grace, not only survive our present suffering but actually grow in and through it.

Other holy moments come not through words, but through action. They come through living experience not just talking about it. These holy moments are enacted in sacred rite and ritual, and they invite us to experience the gracious presence of the divine. In such experience, we can find reconciliation and restoration with self, with others, and with our God.

These occasions of suffering, exhilaration and experience are all holy moments in our ordinary lives. They are moments when we become more aware of the divine presence at work in and through us. The pastoral counseling process is a healing process. It is a process shaped by both words and rituals, by both human and divine activity, and by our shared work together. I call these moments, holy moments, because they are a slice of time set aside for healing. Study and experience inform me that the historic rites and rituals of the Christian tradition, when paired with postmodern, contemporary pastoral conversation, can provide a means for experiencing the healing power of God in powerful and enduring ways.

These distinctively holy moments, and our awareness of them, are what make pastoral counseling different from other approaches to counseling. I believe that all therapy, whether it is intentionally spiritual or not, is holy and reveals the healing love of God. I believe this because I believe that all healing is from God, whether we acknowledge it or not. Such a view compels me to see what I do as a pastoral counselor as sacred and to view the persons I work with – you - as a sacred trust and responsibility. “*Be holy, as I am holy,*” says the Lord.

Therapy moments, whether those moments are conversation or ritual, are holy because the persons involved – all of us - are holy. You are among those for whom God has compassion, even as Melchizedek had compassion on Abraham, and Jesus had compassion on the sick and suffering he encountered. These holy moments are those in and through which we often encounter the living Lord God, if we will but be open to his presence among us. My calling is to come alongside of you in the counseling process and become a companion on your journey, offering respite and healing through an intentional, focused, and prayerful experience of the healing power of the Holy One.