

I recently heard fellow Presbyterian pastor and counselor Randy McSpadden tell about a recent experience in his congregation over in Lancaster County. Randy's name is located on several plaques in our hallway due to his years of service in getting the Dimes for Hunger ministry off the ground. Several folks here know Randy through other pastoral work he has done.

Several weeks ago Randy was awakened by the phone; it was about 2:30 early on a Saturday morning. It was a phone call from a detective in Charlotte. The detective told Randy that a member of his church had taken her life and that her mother needed to be told. When Randy got to the home, the mother had learned about the death but knew very little of what had happened. There was a lot of confusion with police reports, making arrangements, and calling family members.

As they were all trying to make sense of what had happened, they learned that there was a note. And they learned about the sequence of events that led to her tragic decision. She had an injury at work three years ago. She received a settlement but it took years for the settlement to arrive.

She lost her health insurance, medical bills were not paid, the mortgage could not be paid, she went into bankruptcy, could not find another job, and could not afford to feed herself. Finally all of her struggles became too overwhelming for her and she felt she had no choice but to take her life.

In reflecting over the last year of this person's life, Randy lamented how his congregation had dropped the ball. They should have, in his words, been more attentive to her. He regrets that they did not get the attorneys in his church to help fight for her medical insurance, he regrets that they did not help with home repairs, he regrets that they did not visit more, he regrets that they did not help her with her prescriptions and medical needs.

I asked Randy for permission to share his story not because I wanted us to cast dispersions at his pastoral leadership or the ministry of the congregation he serves in Lancaster County. I asked him permission to share this story because I think it illustrates how burdens are best carried with the help and support of someone else.

This story illustrates how a community of faith needs to be a place where folks know that they do not face their difficulties alone. Sin and loneliness and depression and all of the difficulties of life do not need to be points of embarrassment but places where we can help support, encourage, and connect with one another and with God.

In our ministry to one another, we do not need to stand at far distances and throw out judgments and moral superiorities. We need to be in close relationship with one another and with folks outside these walls who are carrying very heavy crosses in their lives.

I was the county library in Rock Hill this week in the religion section and came across a couple of books that caught my eye. One was entitled, "The Dirty Little Secret About Porn." I don't remember exactly where but I had heard about the author of this book who started a ministry called XXXChurch that reaches out to folks in the pornography industry.

But the author, Craig Gross, doesn't cast stones at folks in the industry and trapped in porn addiction. As this book entails, he reaches out and gets to know the porn actors and gets to know the people who are trapped in porn addiction and the experiences that led them to become hooked.

In his book, Craig Gross reminds us that “Christians forget that Jesus preferred to spend time with people like porn stars. He shunned and often challenged the self-righteous Pharisees who condemned or persecuted exotic dancers like Heather or Amber or Adrienne or Shelly. With his sleeves rolled up, Jesus scooped up those stuck in humanity’s gutters.”

Gross condemns Christians by saying that we “appear to the world as moralists, seeking to outdo each other in the piety race. We are a suburbanite, potluck, turn signaling, bible wielding, bumper sticker group. So many of us go through life without ever getting our hands dirty, waiting to cash in our tickets to heaven. But Jesus didn’t give us harps or clouds, he gave us shovels.” Shovels to help us rescue people from the dumpsters of life.

Gross is pretty harsh on us Christians. But he is not the only one. In her book entitled “Dear Church: Letters from a Disillusioned Generation,” Sarah Cunningham writes about why twentysomethings find very little use of the church.

She records the voice of one woman who comments, “What can churches do to improve their relationships with the local community? I don’t see anything that churches can do. We’ve already got tons of churches. There’s a church on every corner. But nothing has changed has it?” She then continued to share the situation of her community, “People don’t have enough job training or employment opportunities. Drunks wander the streets. The same homeless people have been circling in and out of the shelters for the last 15 years. Kids don’t have anything to do to keep them out of trouble.

Meanwhile, the churches keep right on existing, holding services every Sunday. And it never changes anything. It seems pretty obvious to me that churches are not the answer.”

When Jesus says to pick up your cross and come and follow, I think this is an invitation by Jesus to reach out to folks beyond ourselves and help one another who find themselves in the gutters of life. Being a part of a church is not about punching a ticket for heaven.

Being a part of a church is about hearing about the cries in the world of people bearing lots of pain who need the support of Christians walking along beside them, encouraging, and giving a helping hand.

Some of your efforts of reaching out to offer support, encouragement, and assistance will be abused. Sometimes we will offer to help and we will fail. But even failure can be a learning tool. Failure can show us what doesn't work so that we can continue to figure out what does work.

I've shared some stories about how churches have failed folks. I want to conclude with an example of what it looks like when we get it right. A colleague of mine tells about a friend of hers. He's a man in his late 60s. Rugged, burly, brilliant guy. He moved to Texas to work on his doctorate but somewhere along the way he became addicted to cocaine. He lost his family, lost his place in graduate school, lost himself.

But somehow he washed up on the shores of a good church. The folks in that church put their arms around that man and slowly he started to heal and he miraculously reunited with his wife and children.

In reflecting over his life, this man said, "I want to believe that my best days aren't behind me and that my life can still count, that I can still make a difference for God. But I just can't help but feel like I've blown all of my chances."

And then his wife, reached over and took his hand and said, “Baby, just take your sticky fingers off that steering wheel. If God could yank Jesus out of a grave, God can make something beautiful out of your busted parts.”

In the midst of people with busted parts is where we pick up our cross and follow.
AMEN.

-Gross, Craig, “The Dirty Little Secret: Uncovering the Truth Behind Porn,” Zondervan, 2006

-Cunningham, Sarah, “Dear Church: Letters from a Disillusioned Generation,” Zondervan, 2006

-Pennington-Russell, Rev. Julie, Day 1 sermon from September 10, 2008.

-Text: Mark 8:27-38

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"You know you've created God in your own image when it turns out God hates all the same people you do" - Anne Lamott