

The Church that Risks Its Life

January 31, 2018

Earlier this month, my next-door neighbor committed suicide. In just the ten years I had known him, Ron (not his real name) had borne more suffering than most people. His teenage daughter died of accidental alcohol poisoning, and his marriage failed shortly afterward. Several years later, Ron's girlfriend died during a routine surgery. A few years after that, a girlfriend died in a car accident. Those losses were the demons that Ron disclosed. Only he knows what else might have weighed so heavily that he chose to end his life.

When I was back in Denver last week to complete our moving arrangements, I spoke with several other neighbors who knew Ron. We lamented that his despair had reached this point. I question what word of hope or consolation I could have offered that might have helped.

In this space before our March Presbytery Gathering, we are invited to reflect on our stewardship of the gospel. In particular, we will examine what it means to risk all for the sake of the gospel. As stated in our Book of Order, "The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life." (F-1.03). In the section on compassionate worship, the Book of Order teaches us individually and corporately: "Following the example of Jesus Christ, we pledge that we will respect the dignity of all, reach out to those judged undeserving, receive as well as give, and even risk our lives to show Christ's love." (W-5.0303) How far, then, are we to go in our sharing of the gospel, in word and deed?

Should we risk intruding on another's privacy by asking how a neighbor is truly doing? Should we offer to pray together? Do we share our faith story in a sensitive way that reflects compassion and not judgment? Are we willing to risk alienation of a neighbor who challenges our beliefs?

In the abstract, the answer to all of these questions is an easy and resounding, "Yes!" In practice, have we bit our tongues, thinking it just wasn't the right moment or we didn't have the right words?

We live in a world that desperately needs hope and love, and it needs people willing to be a witness to the gospel. The Church is called to demonstrate all of those gifts, even at the risk of losing its own life. (F-1.0301). When rappers can use the framework of the Grammy's to promote suicide prevention and thank God, surely the Church has a word of hope to offer a hurting world. Surely, I have a word of hope to offer a hurting neighbor.

Together, we will learn what it means to be good stewards of the gospel, preserving it while sharing it abundantly. Entrusting ourselves to God alone, may we find confidence to be the Church.