

When the Minister Cried

An important lesson for us in Life Care and Century Park is embedded in a story told by a minister in Virginia named Al Hanner.

In the early days of his ministry, Hanner said he came out of seminary ready to be a “super preacher.” Single-handedly, he would solve all the problems of the world. He had been trained, he was well prepared, and now as a pastor in a little community in Virginia, he was ready. He had all the answers, and he would spout them to the world with pious religious authority. That he did as the months passed quickly into years.

Then one morning, the phone rang. The father of his board chairman had suddenly died. As Hanner started to their home, it hit him. “I don’t know what to do. I’m their pastor, and I’m scared. I don’t know what to say to them.” He tried to remember his classes in pastoral care. He tried to recall appropriate Scripture passages to quote. He tried to think of some profound theological message to give these people in their shocked hour of need.

He plotted his strategy. “I know what I’ll do. I’ll go in boldly and take charge. I’ll gather all the family in the living room and quote the 23rd Psalm. That’s what I’ll do,” said Hanner. “That’s the answer.”

But there was one thing Hanner hadn’t counted on. When he got to the home and gathered the family in the living room, he looked at their faces, and their pain became his pain. He suddenly realized how much he loved these wonderful people, and his heart broke with them.

He was overcome with emotion. As he tried to quote the 23rd Psalm, he said, “The Lord is my shepherd” ... and then Al Hanner exploded into tears. He cried so hard that the family had to rush over and minister to him. They helped him over to the couch, mopped his brow with a cold cloth, and brought him a glass of water.

Hanner was so embarrassed, so ashamed. He felt that he had failed miserably. He was humiliated. He got through the funeral and went immediately to the bishop and asked to be moved to another church. And shortly thereafter, Hanner was indeed transferred.

Several years passed, and each year at annual conference, Hanner would hide from the family. He could not face them. But one evening, he came around a corner and there they were. He couldn’t avoid them. He couldn’t hide.

But their faces lit up when they saw Hanner. They ran to him and hugged him warmly. “Oh, Al,” they said. “We are so glad to see you. Our family loves you. We appreciate you so much. We miss you. We talk about you all the time. We have loved all of our pastors, but you are the one who helped us the most.”

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“Oh, really?” Hanner said with genuine surprise. “Oh, yes,” they answered. “We’ll never forget how you came and cried with us when Daddy died.”

Did you catch what just happened in Hanner’s story? When people are in grief – and that happens often in our businesses – they don’t want theological pronouncements. They just want us to come and love them. They just want us to come and cry with them.

Jesus wept with those He loved, and He still does. He hurts with us. He feels our pain. We all face suffering sometime, and when it comes, one thing we can know is that our Lord is hurting with us. In time, He will bring us out of the valley of sorrow to the mountaintop on the other side.

Remember the story about the death of Lazarus, a close friend of Jesus ...

Now when Mary (Lazarus’ sister) came to where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet, saying to Him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in His spirit and greatly troubled. And He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. So the Jews said, “See how He loved him!” (John 11:32-36 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter