

Dear Apostles Friends,

In his wonderful book, *The Alphabet of Grace*, Frederick Buechner describes feeling uncomfortable and out of place at an elegant dinner party on Long Island. At one point the hostess turns to Frederick and asks, “I understand you are planning to go into ministry. Is this your own idea, or have you been poorly advised?” Her question seems both uncharitable and unkind, but the sentiment behind it was probably genuine. “So, you want to be a pastor? Are you sure you know what you’re getting yourself into?”

It’s a valid question. There are plenty of ex-nurses, ex-teachers, and ex-pastors who failed to appreciate the harsh realities associated with helping professions. Let’s look at pastors in particular. The hours are long and anything but regular: meetings, hospital and home visits, counseling, fund raising, outreach, education, telephone calls at any time of the day or night. You see people occasionally at their best – “I now pronounce you . . .” “I baptize you in the name . . .” – but more frequently at their worst – “I got so angry, I just lost control . . .” “Are you sure heaven is real? I’m scared . . .” “I don’t understand why God took her . . .” Most people are kind and welcoming, but some will never accept you no matter what you do or how hard you work because you’re not as eloquent as the last one, as friendly as the first one, or as organized as the best one. You are held to a higher standard because you’re the pastor, so every mistake you make – and we all make mistakes – is amplified. On the bright side, you never have to worry about what to do with all your money.

“Are you sure you know what you’re getting yourself into?” Being a pastor has many joys, but I feel like those are well chronicled. This message is about the labor, not the reward. Being a pastor is a hard job in the best of times, and these are not the best of times.

How do you tend to your scattered flock when everything you understand about being a shepherd tells you to gather them in? How do you comfort when you first have to deny your instinct to embrace? Our faith is tactile. From the pouring of baptismal water to the breaking of bread in communion, to the anointing with oil of the sick and the laying on of hands, we often experience God’s grace through our sense of touch. How much of that will need to change in the new normal? What can we faithfully reproduce by leveraging technology? What will be lost in translation and what, if anything, can we do about it?

Technology. As if the pastor’s job wasn’t hard enough already, the current emergency has necessitated a crash course in technology for most pastors. A list of ways to continue to “be the church” without embracing available technology is a pretty short list. So embrace it you must, but the learning curve can be steep. The pastor’s skill set, like the skill sets of most professionals, is constantly evolving. COVID-19 is replacing evolution with revolution, and, as a result, pastors are working harder than ever. And this at a time when we’re not even “having church.”

I've had the pleasure of counting members of the clergy among my friends. My father's only real life-long friend was a minister. He married Dad, and buried him, and he was the only person who Dad would listen to when the demons came out. I benefitted immeasurably from having him in my life. I knew a lot about the life of a minister through him and through reading books written by ministers (like Frederick Buechner), but I've learned so much more during my time on Consistory, particularly the last 4 months as president. I'm grateful for the kindness Pastor Narda has shown my family and me, and I am humbled by her faith and the goodness in her heart. This reflection has been about all ministers, not just about her, and I know she wouldn't have it any other way.

*Dear Lord, today we lift up those men and women who willingly endure the burdens of ministry for the joy of following you. We give thanks for their selfless service. We give thanks for our own Pastor Narda and ask that you continue to bless her ministry and grant her a long and happy life.*

Take care,

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