

Holding Truth and Joy: A Theological Reflection on Pastoral Presence, Lament, and Belonging

It was, by many measures, a good and grace-filled day. Supervision with Pastor Jeff offered grounding and clarity. Time with the Knit Wits and the book group reflected the quiet strength of community formed through shared stories, learning, laughter, and food. Singing again with Jan—laughing at imperfections and noticing small improvements—was a reminder that growth is rarely dramatic, but often faithful and slow. These moments bore witness to a church alive in relationship, presence, and practice.

And yet, the day ended with an unexpected pastoral encounter (finally, some tension to reflect on and grow from). A parishioner reached out to share that she had experienced Sunday worship not as uplifting, but as heavy. What had been nourishing to many felt discouraging to her. Her words unsettled me—not only because they named pain, but because they activated a familiar temptation: the belief that I should be able to meet every spiritual need, hold every expectation, and ensure that everyone leaves worship feeling the same way. In that moment, my familiar companions—perfectionism and people-pleasing—rose quickly. I felt defensive, confused, and unsettled. The pastoral question emerged almost immediately: *What did I do wrong?* Closely followed by the spiritual question: *Am I failing in my call to bring good news? How can I meet everyone's needs?*

Scripture gently but firmly resists this illusion. Even Jesus, whose ministry was marked by compassion and power, was not received the same way by all. Some followed him with joy, others walked away confused or offended (John 6:60–66). Faithfulness, not universal satisfaction, was his measure of obedience. “My food is to do the will of him who sent me,” Jesus says (John 4:34), reminding me that my call is not to be everything to everyone, but to remain rooted in God’s purposes.

The Psalms remind us that worship itself holds a wide range of human experience. Lament and praise live side by side. “How long, O Lord?” (Psalm 13:1) is as faithful a prayer as “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord” (Psalm 150:6). To erase lament in the name of comfort risks offering a fragile hope—one unable to speak honestly about the world people must face when they leave the sanctuary. As a pastor, my call is not to shield the congregation from reality, but to help them trust that God is already present within it.

The parishioner’s longing to feel “beloved,” uplifted, and protected from the sense that the world is falling apart is deeply human and holy. Jesus’ invitation—“Come to me, all you that are weary” (Matthew 11:28)—speaks directly to that desire. At the same time, Jesus does not deny suffering; he names it, enters it, and redeems it. He weeps (John 11:35). He prays in anguish (Luke 22:44). He teaches that truth and hope are not opposites, but companions.

This experience reminded me that pastoral ministry lives in the tension between caring for individuals and serving the community as a whole. What comforts one person may

unsettle another. What feels honest to one may feel overwhelming to someone else. Romans 12:15—“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep”—does not promise that these experiences will always occur at the same moment or in the same way. It calls instead for discernment, humility, and trust in God’s presence beyond my own capacity.

At the heart of the Gospel is not the promise that life will be easy or that worship will always make us feel good, but the assurance that God is with us—fully, faithfully, and redemptively—in the midst of the world as it truly is. The good news Jesus proclaims is that God’s reign has drawn near (Mark 1:15), not as an escape from suffering, but as a transforming presence within it. In Christ, God enters our grief, injustice, fear, and longing, offering not denial but redemption. The resurrection does not erase the wounds of the cross; it transfigures them (John 20:27). To carry the Gospel into our present world, then, is to speak hope that is honest enough to name pain and strong enough to trust that God is still at work. It is to proclaim a love that does not look away, a peace that passes understanding (Philippians 4:7), and a joy that is deep enough to sustain us—not because the world is whole, but because God has not abandoned it.

The exchange that followed became an unexpected gift. The parishioner clarified her concern, acknowledged misunderstanding, and expressed gratitude for conversation and growth. Her final words—“Thanks for being you”—served as a reminder that ministry is not about getting it right every time, but about staying in relationship. Paul writes, “We have this treasure in clay jars” (2 Corinthians 4:7), and I am learning that my limitations are not obstacles to God’s work, but part of the very vessel through which grace flows.

I cannot be everything to everyone. That is neither possible nor faithful. My call is to listen deeply, to minister with compassion to individuals, and to steward the spiritual life of the community as a whole—trusting that God meets each person where they are, even when my words do not. Faithfulness, presence and relationship, not perfection, is the measure of my call. And in that truth, there is both freedom and hope.