

EXERPTS FROM PRESENTATION BY MATTHEW SCHLAGETER  
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I want you to think of a recent visit that you dreaded making or one that provoked a strong emotion, not because of the situation that you were walking into, the news the family might have just received but because of who was on the other side of the door. Who was it? Were they of a different religion? Was their English a little 'rough around the edges', from another country? Were they too liberal or conservative for your taste?

In an article entitled *The Psychosocial Roots of Sin and Possibilities for Healing* from the book The Spirituality of Men: Sixteen Christians Write about Their Faith, Stephen Boyd talks about how we project our fears and dismay onto others to keep *them* different than us. He explores how we build barriers between *us* and *them*. Boyd talks about the Christian story of the Good Samaritan, the Christian Scripture story where a person was beaten up and left for dead on the side of the road. Two religious people who, theoretically, should have stopped to render aid didn't, choosing instead to cross on the other side of the street for fear of getting dirty; finally, it was the outcast, the one who society had looked down upon, the Samaritan, who stopped to render aid. Boyd stated that he relates to the person who was beaten up and left on the side of the road. After careful reflection and examination, he goes on to say he was beaten up by society. Beaten up with the barrage of reminders of what separates and divides us, of how we are different. It is only when he encounters *his* Samaritan, the outsider, the one who society had told Boyd was less than, that he realizes that the Samaritan isn't as awful as he had been led to believe, and thus, healing begins. Boyd writes,

Many of us feel like we have been 'bushwhacked,' and the bushwhackers are those African Americans, peaceniks, women, and more recently, gay/lesbian/transgendered (sic) folks, 'tree-huggers,' differently abled people, and the elderly (to name a few)...But for those of us who profess to be followers of Jesus, that's not the end of the story. In fact, Jesus seems to think that these 'strangers' are not the cause of our distress and may well be the source of our healing. (Boyd, 2002)

He goes on to lay out the same situations with his relationships with African-Americans as a Caucasian, with Jews as a Christian and with low-income people as someone from a middle-class family. Are we willing to let down those 'firewalls' that we have so carefully built in order to protect ourselves and be healed by what the Samaritans in our story have to offer us?

In a presentation on April 30, 2016 at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC entitled *Race, Faith, and Place: Understanding our Racial Geography*, Dr. Willie Jennie started his presentation by asking two crucial questions: 'how might we, together, create a new space of belonging in this world? Why is racial belonging more powerful than religious belonging?' (Jennie, 2016) At the end of his presentation, he stated, 'The borders,

boundaries, and fences that were once out there have moved to the inside and keeps us from knowing the other.' As Chaplains we must always be asking, 'How must I be in this space?' How are we impacted by our own biases in interacting with patients and families who are different than we are? What are those fences for you?

In her book, Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church, Mary McClintock Fulkerson writes of her experiences observing a very mixed Methodist church in Raleigh, NC. She wrote of her initial feelings and impressions,

My reactions of discomfort in the presence of darker and 'disabled' bodies signal something more complicated than simple 'good news.' My unaccustomedness to being outnumbered by people 'not like me' has social analogues in a society still largely segregated by race, a society where group homes are zoned out of many neighborhoods. (pg. 6)

In the Spring of 2016, President Obama challenged the graduating class of Howard University stating,

We must expand our moral imaginations to understand and empathize with all people who are struggling, not just black folks who are struggling—the refugee, the immigrant, the rural poor, the transgender person, and yes, the middle-aged white guy who you may think has all the advantages, but over the last several decades has seen his world upended by economic and cultural and technological change, feels powerless to stop it...Change requires more than just speaking out—it requires listening, as well. In particular, it requires listening to those with whom you disagree, and being prepared to compromise...So don't try to shut folks out, don't try to shut them down, no matter how much you might disagree with them. (Obama, 2016)

In talking with some folks who could be seen as others, here is what they wanted you to know:

A chaplain from the Spanish-speaking community encourages us to take time to build trust. Due to the discrimination felt in the outside world, this does take time. It helps to spend time with the patient, show you care. Make a big deal. Introduce yourself to the family and state that you work with people of all faiths. Assure them that you are there not to merely provide a service but because you care about who they are and want to have a relationship with them. When possible, sit and take time.

A colleague who immigrated here in the late 90's mentioned how important community is. If you start seeing a high number of patients from a particular immigrant population who might feel apprehensive in a first visit, it might be that they are trying to warm up to someone who is not from their culture and might not know the nuances of their particular culture. This particular colleague mentioned that when he first came here, he valued that sense of community with people from his native culture. They had a shared language, dress and understanding of things.

How can we help build community while they are in our care to demonstrate that we do care?

A doctor who is Muslim encourages us to not be afraid to acknowledge the faith of those who we minister with, to encounter it, ask about it. She encourages us to create space for them to explore their spirituality within the context of their faith realizing that their faith is expressed very differently as an individual, get to know them individually within their faith. For those of us who serve hospitals who serve children from around the country and the world, she suggested that we should allow families time to consult their faith leaders back home but to also have identified faith leaders where we serve as well. She also encourages us to find the real, tangible things that we can offer Muslims to make them feel welcome: having Korans available, places to pray with rugs and arrows pointing towards Mecca, having identified imams who are willing to come in. She stated this goes a long way towards breaking down barriers.

A colleague and friend of mine from the African-American community wanted to reiterate what some of the others have said. Build relationships with the families. Get to know people from various backgrounds. This will allow us to breakdown stereotypes. She asks that when we encounter people from different backgrounds that, above all, we acknowledge our common humanity. She encourages us that, as we get to know the individual or individuals, find out what influences their decision making.

In our ministry with people from various backgrounds, It is important for us to hear what the folks we are ministering with have to tell us about who they are within, and sometimes independent of, their culture. In his book The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships, Michael Nichols writes, “Our ability to listen, and listen well, creates goodwill that comes back to us. But effective listening is also the best way to enjoy others, to learn from them, and to make them interesting to be with. (pg. 6)” There are times when, by letting go of that which divides us and simply sitting with and listening to whoever our other is, we learn from them. We are able to see beyond that which we presumed to know about them and actually get to know them as an individual within a bigger context.