

KITCHEN COUNTER MUSING

From Pastor Mark for Friday, August 8, 2025

On Identity and Calling

“Hi, I am Chaplain Mark from the Pastoral Care Department.”

That’s my opening line when I walk in a patient’s room. Except when I first started out at the hospital, I always felt I had to dress it up with my “titles.”

Because...

I’m a Reverend, a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, if you must know, or I must tell you.

I am a doctor, of ministry (my mom always says, “my son is a doctor, but not the type that can actually help anybody).

I’m a Presbyterian—PC(USA)—though the Road Church is winning me over to the Congregational polity.

I have three kids: 34, 32 and 30. My wife and I have been married just 12 years. I wait for the math to kick in...

I’m an avid dog walker and bird watcher (I’ll show you some pictures if you ask). I love Country music and swing dancing and am excited when I can combine them. (The answer is The Cartells, a local band of some renown, but perhaps another time...)

All of these self-identifications, and many more, I’ve used in the introductions thinking they would help me make a “connection” with a patient. That is, I felt if we had something in common, or they knew something about me, I might be able to more effectively provide pastoral care.

Except I don’t believe that last sentence in the above paragraph anymore. All of my self-identifiers were simply self-validators because I didn’t believe it was enough just to be a chaplain with a name. I didn’t think it was enough to simply be the chaplain. The title had to be enhanced with, well, with something. And, as such, most visits inevitably included a little bit of my personal resume.

The issue, of course, is ego. I wanted to let the patient know that the chaplain to whom they were talking was worthy of them sharing their spiritual struggles with. I wanted them to know information that they didn’t really need to know in order for me to care for them. I just thought it would make it easier. And it does...make the visit easier. But that’s all it is when we talk about my above resume, a visit. Pastoral care requires the chaplain to get out of the way.

Last week, I was visiting a patient who was talking about her dogs. I so wanted to take my cell phone out of my pocket and show her a picture of my two dogs. Except that it wasn’t important. It wasn’t important that we have a talk about how wonderful our pets are to us. It might be important for her to talk about her dog, but not for me to talk about mine. Why her dogs were important to her, and what her being here at the hospital away from them meant to her, well, that’s important.

So, no pictures. My phone stayed in my pocket. The patient never learned how much I love my dogs or how much we have in common. Because her spiritual care didn’t need any of that stuff. Only my ego did.

“Hi, I’m Chaplain Mark from the Pastoral Care Department.”

It is enough to do the work we have been called to do.