

"You're so gracious"

By [Diane Roth](#)

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My former congregation had a generous policy about funerals. There were a lot of people who were connected with us, in some way or another, and we could usually find some way to work it out if someone wanted to have their funeral in our sanctuary. But, the congregation has always had two or more pastors, so it was relatively easy to work that into someone's schedule. If it didn't work out for any of the pastors, on one or two occasions the congregation authorized another pastor to come and lead the funeral service.

So it was that one Monday the receptionist got a phone call from a family that desperately wanted their mother's funeral in our sanctuary, even though she had transferred to another congregation many years ago. They also wanted one of the former pastors at their current congregation to preside at the service.

That sounded like a slightly strange request, but it was a funeral, and I am sympathetic with grieving people. We said that one of the pastors of our congregation (probably me) would work with them, along with the pastor that they wanted.

The family said that this makes sense. "After all, it's your church," they said.

We set a time for the family to meet with both pastors. I found out the name of the other pastor. I did not know him, but I did know one thing about him: he came from a faith tradition that does not ordain women as pastors. I had his number and tried to get in touch with him. Finally I left to make a home visit.

When I returned the pastor and the other family were waiting. I sat down with them and took out note paper and a hymnal, so that we could write down hymns and scripture readings. We talked about the policy of the church and how we serve the lunch.

Then the other pastor said, "I am sorry to say this, but I am not allowed to serve in public worship with you. This is the policy of my denomination. My hands are tied."

I was sitting there with this pastor and a grieving family. They knew what I had told them before.

I swallowed hard, and said, "All right then. I will help you plan the service. I will put you in touch with the musician from our congregation. I will help you with the luncheon. I will make sure that the building is prepared for you. I will pray for you."

"You're so gracious," the family said.

"You're so gracious," the other pastor said.

Is that what it was? I had a grieving family with nowhere else to go. I could not pull the rug out from under them now. The most important thing was the proclamation of the resurrection that would take place at this funeral. I knew that it was not about me. I am not the only one who can comfort and proclaim the good news of Jesus' life.

And yet, it sort of felt like it was about me. "You are unacceptable." That's what they were saying. And I stood there and I took it, knowing in my heart of hearts that I was not unacceptable, but feeling slimed nonetheless.

"You're so gracious," they said.

Sometimes, grace is hard. Really hard.

On that Friday I was not allowed to enter the sanctuary of the church where I had been called as pastor. Other people thought it was so wonderful that we showed hospitality to a grieving family. I am glad that we showed this hospitality to a grieving family.

And yet ...

Recently I met with a young woman who wants to have her wedding at the church I now serve. She is not a member of my congregation. She is from another faith tradition, one I am only slightly familiar with. I told her the policy of our congregation is that if the wedding is here, I need to be involved in the ceremony. "Are you sure your pastor is all right with that?" I asked.

She was sure her pastor was all right with that.

I called him. He is not sure that he is all right with that.

Sometimes, being gracious is hard. Really hard.

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