

I let the Holy Spirit see my dirty laundry

I was counting on her discretion.

by [Rachel Hackenberg](#) in the [May 9, 2018](#) issue



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The church in which I grew up had an implicit 11th commandment: thou shalt not air dirty laundry.

I was born and raised in rural Pennsylvania, in a place where the air is clear, except on trash-burning days and manure-spreading days. When the weather cooperates, many households dry their washed laundry outdoors on clotheslines. The Amish have the longest lines for their laundry: jeans spread like upside-down Vs waving high on a pulley system between telephone poles, button-down shirts hung by their tails as high as the barn roof and reaching for the ground with their long sleeves. The rest of us have clotheslines strung in our backyards between much shorter poles, maybe only six feet tall with lines sagging low enough that my ten-year-old self could reach up to pin clothes during her after-school chores. Clotheslines are intended for laundry that's been washed, of course. No one wants or expects to see their neighbors' dirty laundry flapping in the wind. Besides, what good is the fresh

air to stained and stinky clothes?

The same principle was sacred in the social expectations at our church. What good was saying life's problems aloud in the open, or naming worries or messes or raw moments unabashedly, except to embarrass those who heard it? Of the struggles that members might consider sharing with their church family, any topic that carried even a blush of sinfulness, by socially and theologically conservative measures, was too taboo to air, like daring to dangle lace panties on the clothesline instead of plain cotton ones. Concerns that were circumstantially beyond control and did not imply guilt could be shared discreetly and without detail. Thus, in worship it was acceptable to ask for prayers related to illness or death, but there were no prayer requests about suicide or sexuality, marital or financial problems. If they were said aloud at all, it was in private to the pastor, or the pastor's wife, or your dearest church friend.

So I learned from a young age that faith always presented a strong and composed face in public and especially at church. You wore your Sunday best, sang your Sunday hymns, learned your Sunday school lessons, got your gold star for Sunday school attendance, and went merrily on your way without telling a single soul that you were bullied in school, or that your sister or daughter was gay, or that you were ready to collapse from parenting, or that your spouse struggled with depression. (Of course, as happens in a family church, even without airing your dirty laundry, eventually the whole congregation knew.)

None of this was pretense or charade. It was a cultural interpretation of the life of faith. In sermons and in Sunday school and in the unspoken habits of church life, I learned that disciples responded to Jesus' call with a stiff upper lip. You followed him across stormy seas and into the time of trial, even up to the place of death, and there was little room along that journey for tears or drama. You might be asked to leave behind your family, to turn away from friends, to give up everything, if Jesus so much as asked, and you shouldn't cry about it if he did. Thankfully, it seemed rare that Jesus actually asked people at church to walk away from their families, and no one I knew in the congregation felt called to give up all of their wealth and security.

Being strong and determined, unflappable and reputable: these were the demonstrations of deep faith. How did I know? Because the little paper disciples on the felt board in Sunday school never talked back to Jesus or said that it was too

hard. Because the pastor never preached that life could kick your ass or that God might actually give you more than you can handle. Because Baby Jesus was born to die for our sins, not to live with our whining. Because the purpose of Sunday school was to know all the answers, not to ask all the questions. Because no one came to church with obvious bruises on their bodies, minds, or spirits. So one day when you're grown and you find yourself yelling in the car at your husband because he has just called your son a *bitch* for the simple sin of being a tired three-year-old, it doesn't occur to you that Jesus cares one whit about your pain because the whole point of discipleship is to carry on bravely no matter what life hands you.

Life handed me—no, let me take responsibility for my own actions—I married a mean and abusive man. He criticized the way I walked. He was alternately annoyed and irate at the way I parented. He demanded the children's playful attention when he was in a good mood and their absolute silence when he was in a foul mood. He required my willingness to cook a full meal at any hour, and when, after several years, I refused, I guaranteed myself an argument or the silent treatment. But no matter; my faith remained a picture of strength. I went to church regularly—not only on Sundays but on weekdays too, because it was my place of employment—and, in good faith, I didn't talk about my bruises.

When Jesus and church conspire to teach you that faith has a stiff upper lip, you turn to the Holy Spirit to hold the secrets you cannot speak: "The Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:26b-27a). The Spirit's discretion is a miraculous ray of hope when you are holding secrets about being afraid at home, about being scared for the safety of your children, about tiptoeing through each day in order to avoid setting off your husband's anger. I held onto Romans 8:26-27 as tightly as I held myself together for those four years. *No one else has to know, but the Spirit understands what I can't articulate.*

The secrets I held could not be uttered in any form. This was no longer a matter of spiritual decorum but of sheer incapability. Sitting in a church nursery one day to talk with a local pastor while my children played nearby, I sobbed and stuttered but could not form the words to express the pain in my household. Although I make sense of life through my pen, even for a writer there are words that are too awful to articulate. *Abuse* wasn't a word I allowed myself to whisper or think until almost five years after the divorce was finalized. I wouldn't, couldn't, write the word in ink or on a blog, because then it would have been visible to the whole world. The other words

about my then husband's behavior were worse. Even today I don't write them down. Bruises are not meant to be seen. And if faith isn't your concealer of choice to cover life's pains, there's a whole makeup industry known as "self-help" for your heart's hurts and your life's blemishes—memes and books and programs to make sure your bruises are masked in socially appropriate ways.

If Romans 8 was a balm to my secrecy, however, the apostle Paul's words also helped me double down on my spiritual rationale for keeping those secrets: "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed" (Rom. 8:18). To paraphrase: "Congratulations, your volatile personal situation will fade in the glory of the last days." I interpreted Paul's writing as dismissive of present sufferings and of the need to name them. In the grand scheme of Christ's fulfillment, of what relevance was my husband's threat to leave our children with total strangers? If truly "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose" (Rom. 8:28), of what use was it to leave a bad marriage? Why air dirty laundry if God would make it clean in the sweet by-and-by?

The Spirit didn't keep my secrets, but whispered them to a few helpful hearts.

Mercifully, we have some measure of control over our actual dirty laundry. Perhaps a stray sock falls out on the floor next to the washing machine and gets dirty all over again. That's OK. Maybe a bra strap strangles a sweater and you're stuck untangling the two in the middle of a Laundromat. Awkward, but manageable. What's the worst that can happen with dirty clothing? It's much harder to control the dirty laundry of life, and a significant part of mine was aired when criminal charges were filed against my then husband. *Pedophile* was a word that the court could say aloud, even though I couldn't make my pen write it. And still I didn't tell my church community. Since it was rare for church members to track daily criminal filings at the local courthouse, no one knew except those I brought into my confidence as a safety net.

I called in sick from my church job on the day of trial, but I went to work the day after he skipped town. I moved out of our apartment on a Saturday so that I could be in church on Sunday. Routine was everything to maintain the appearance of an unfractured faith and an unfractured life.

"In all these things we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us," Paul writes in Romans 8:37. Unable to conquer the dirty laundry of life, I was damn sure

going to conquer the performance of my faith. I spent another year working at the church before I moved to a new state and entered seminary full time, as a single mother. The move out of state and onto a graduate school campus provided some relief from my ex's dirty laundry and an immediate distraction for my stress. With the Spirit holding my trauma in wordless sighs, I threw myself into the academic achievements of faith. Writing papers for class late into the nights meant that I was (usually) too tired for nightmares. Building my professional skills for ministry meant solidifying my abilities to care deeply for "the whole creation . . . groaning in labor pains" (Rom. 8:22), while maintaining also the pastoral composure necessary to remain present to the world's pain.

It was a role well suited for someone steeped in the practice of maintaining spiritual decorum through hell and high water. And, again, the pursuit of faith's fortitude was not insincere. To be strong in the face of suffering, to be unbowed by a storm in life, was a sign of deep grounding in Christ. I had the Spirit who held onto what I could not. I trusted the Spirit to whisper it to God in good time, and until then I forged ahead in the confidence that Christ's glory would not be deterred just because my husband had hurt and abandoned my family. Take that, dirty laundry!

There were still times I could not control which laundry was aired and when. Having my then husband go through a criminal trial meant it was newsworthy when he fled town after the guilty verdict. His name was in the local newspaper. His face made the morning news. I might as well have pinned a pair of grungy, holey socks to the clothesline and sent invitations for everyone to come and see. The sense of threat to my children's safety continued for years after he left, so every time we relocated, I had to talk to the schools' staff about safety protocols. Bright pink bra with sweat stains, flapping in the wind. Most recently, it was a required part of my son's college application process to specifically outline the reasons why his father's financial information was not reported with the financial aid application. I would have rather hung my most stretched-out pair of underwear on a public clothesline.

Still, if the metaphor hasn't already been carried too far, at some point we have to actually deal with our dirty laundry, and not by hanging it on the clothesline in all its filth. We can only buy new underwear for so long before we finally concede to running the washing machine. Perhaps the best result of praying desperately for the Spirit to hold my secrets was that the Spirit didn't actually keep my secrets but whispered them into a few hearts who were willing to be God's presence to me through the crisis. Like a congregation sharing just enough whispers and hints of

dirty laundry to know that a hot meal or a hospital visit was needed, a few dear people held discreet space for the words that I could not say. If, on some days, my faith and determination were completely composed and I looked confident from head to toe, it was fine with them. If, on other days, I had dirty laundry stuck to my pant leg because I had pulled clothes out of the hamper—literally or spiritually—that was OK with them, too.

While I continue to deepen my roots in the practice of spiritual composure, the Spirit continues to hold my quaking. While I continue to attune my spirit outward to the groaning of creation, the Spirit continues to sing lullabies over my own inward groaning. While I continue to earnestly hold my faith together, the Spirit continues to have loose lips, whispering a holy nudging occasionally where it is needed. There are worse things in life than having the Spirit tell your secrets. I suppose I'm OK with the fact that she does.

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