

Sunday morning, and the clock on the wall tells me it's almost time to get started with the service. I am pleased. Any pastor would be pleased to see the room full like this. I can hear the happy voices and the laughter, and some of the six-year olds are wrestling over who gets to sit in the front row. Someone at the door is handing out fresh roses and hugs, and I can tell already that Mothers' Day this year is going to be a good one.

As I scan the room, looking for familiar faces, I am struck with a sense of privilege. What an honor it is to serve these beautiful and complex people, to walk with them through their trials and to rejoice with them in their victories. And what's more, I can feel the smile of God as His people gather in His name. On a day like today, I can't imagine myself doing anything else.

It was just such a day back in September when Laura last visited our church. I was so pleased to see her again after what seemed to be a year or more. Laura used to attend the youth Bible study in my living room when she was in high school, and every now and then she would show up at church and fill me in on her newest adventures.

On that late summer day, the room was packed as well. I was scurrying around after the service, trying to touch base with old friends and new visitors before they took off out the door. And suddenly there she was, bubbly and laughing and all grown up. She caught me on the stairs up to the fellowship room, and we stood there talking for a good 20 minutes. She told me that she was engaged to be married, and that her beau was off in Iraq. I asked about her parents, and how her summer had been, and when we might see her back at church again. It was one of those conversations we pastors have on Sunday mornings - never quite enough time to get really deep, but just enough to hopefully show that we really do care.

Four days later, Laura was dead. Just like that. I remember the awful feeling in the pit of my stomach when I heard the news. I don't even remember who called me first, or how they told me. All I remember is that the little girl I just spoke with on Sunday was gone. Gone. Lost to an abortion gone wrong. An abortion? Laura? I still can't believe it.

I consider myself to be a listener when it comes to God. I have spent my whole life following that still, small voice. I trust Him to guide me, to give me inspiration when I prepare, wisdom when I counsel,

and understanding when things get tricky. On Sunday mornings especially I am looking for that Divine guidance. Why didn't I hear anything this time? Why didn't God give me a hint, or stir me to say something that might have prevented what happened?

I don't know. Maybe I was too busy getting excited about the fact that church was full. Maybe I was too busy trying to greet everyone so they would come back again next week. But then I did talk to her longer than I talked to anyone that day. Why didn't I hear? And why didn't Laura say anything?

The longer I have thought about this, the more I realize that God doesn't wait until the crisis to warn us. Typically He warns us well in advance. His Word is full of exhortation, and it is as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago when it was first written. I couldn't possibly have specific pre-knowledge about all the tragedies about to occur, and even if I did, there would be precious little I could do to stop them all. But God, who does know all these things, adopts a strategy we teachers would do well to follow.

God simply speaks the truth. His intention is clear: He wants to save us from our sins. He is not on some sort of

popularity campaign. He is not trying to impress us with His wisdom and knowledge. If He wanted to do that, He could walk circles around our most brilliant intellectual arguments and show us scientific wonders that would make the most hardened atheists bow their stubborn knees. He is not trying to grow the largest movement or establish the next great ministry. Instead, He speaks plainly and without intimidation. He has to know that a post-modern world will find His message constricting and uncomfortable, and many will reject it. Amazingly, God doesn't change. He tells us as it is, explains how sin will rob us and ultimately kill us, and then He offers us a better way. He speaks the truth, yet no one can doubt His love.

In the days and weeks following Laura's death, I wondered how many times I may have postponed speaking the truth in an attempt to first be loving. Call it tact, call it being 'winsome' or shrewd, but is it perhaps a misunderstanding of the severity of consequences and the power of prevention? It may be that I have not equated warning with love. Discipline with love. Boundaries with love. The answer, "No!" with love.

Since Laura's death, I have become much more bold. I have openly taught about sexuality in church. I have made

more of an effort to impart LIFE as a core value in our congregation. I have been bold to thank pregnant, single young girls for opting to carry their babies. In doing so, I have not compromising on issues of morality, while at the same time offering a safe place for the broken to find forgiveness. I have begun to look out for those who I think may be struggling, and I speak intimately with or without their invitation, because I don't know if I'll have another opportunity tomorrow.

Today would have been Laura's first Mothers' Day. I grieve that as I scan the familiar faces in the room. I can hear a baby whimpering over there in the third row, and just behind the post at the back of the room I can see a toddler crumpling up a bunch of our bright pink bulletins. Two of our young adults are unwed and expecting, and I have some concerns about one of our college kids whose recent disregard for modesty is revealing a deeper crisis of faith. And that young man over there just took his parents' car for a joyride and stayed out all night doing Lord knows what. Ah, I love these kids. I love all these people, and I love them a lot. I guess it's time to put it all on the line and simply tell them the truth. What's that? 10:30 AM? Okay, Lord, I'm hearing You. Give me strength... here I go!

✉ *share this with your pastor!*



Eileen Smith and her daughter Laura

*A pastor's reflection on the death of
Laura Hope Smith
(and the baby in her womb)*

*By Pastor Erik Eskelund
May 11, 2008*

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