

PRACTICING *Theology*

by JESSI HIGGINBOTHAM '09

The halls of a hospital aren't the type of place you'd think to look for theology. In fact, during my first days of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), I realized that I didn't know enough about theology to be there in the first place. As summer flew by, however, it wasn't long before I realized that I was learning more about theology from the patients, nurses, and doctors than I ever thought I would.



I chose to do CPE at Baptist Medical Center in downtown Jacksonville, FL, because it is in my hometown. My parents and my sister live there, and my sister is an employee of Baptist. We rode to work together every morning and home every afternoon, sometimes in the silence of the heavy day and sometimes in the joy and laughter of eight hours well spent. But it wasn't just the fun of spending time with my family every evening and on weekends that made this summer an amazing experience for me. It was the brilliant presence of the Holy Spirit that seeped through the halls of the hospital as I walked them every day, and every night that I was on-call.

I was just as scared as everyone else on my first day, first week, and first on-call. My hands shook nervously as I knocked on the first door, and the first time I sat with a family after they had lost someone. I cried after sitting with a mother who lost her eight-week-old baby. I know my experience wasn't that different from the CPE experiences of others, but I started to realize that it was a practiced theology and it was making me different.

When I told a family that God was with them in their time of pain, it didn't sound the same anymore. It sounded like truth instead of something I read in a textbook. It sounded sincere instead of practiced or rehearsed. It sounded powerful, instead of flat. And most of all, instead of just repeating it, I believed it. These were real, live people whom I could touch, who shed real tears, who were really hurting. This wasn't about reading, writing, or studying anymore, this was about practicing. Practicing. The most powerful theological concept and the one concept I knew I couldn't learn from a book. What do you say to someone who has just lost a sister, child, father, or friend? Nothing. You say absolutely nothing.

"Nothing" isn't a practice we future pastors necessarily consider. We spend three years meditating over how to read Scripture beautifully and how to preach a heartfelt sermon. We are the talkers of the world. To sit quietly and not speak a single word for an unknown amount of time with a complete stranger might have been the hardest thing I ever had to do. But it was the practicing of this silent theology that awakened within me the awareness of the Holy Spirit, the holy ground of the hospital, the sacred space of the quiet. It was in this silence where I truly heard the voice of God speaking to me, speaking through me and lingering just long enough to touch the lives of those around me. On the last day of CPE, as I rode the employee shuttle away from the entrance of the hospital, I almost felt as though I was being ripped away from the love of my life and I could almost sense the hospital feeling the same way. It's precisely when we pour ourselves into practicing theology that we begin to sense what God has intended for us. It is in the human connection that we make outside the walls of the seminary where we are able to say, "Here I am Lord, I will go Lord if you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart."