

Lame excuse: Pastors and parishioners

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [April 18, 2006](#) issue

One night over burgers and some libation, a seminary classmate declared, “Theology and exegesis won’t matter once you’re in the parish. All that will matter is whether you work hard, and whether they like you or not.” The rest of us scoffed, but now that I’ve been doing parish work for 25 years, I sometimes suspect that he’s right.

Why does the ministry as a profession hang so heavily on something we rarely talk about, namely, “Do they like me or not?” Whether the plumber, civil engineer, cook or forklift operator is liked matters little. But in ministry, sermons by a likable minister are heard attentively, the budget process is smoother, and the minister gets invited to family reunions. Sermons by one who manages to be disliked, on the other hand, thud to the floor. Minuscule budget initiatives are thwarted, and former pastors are asked back for funerals. The disliked pastor can’t get anything done, and grows to understand how Sisyphus felt pushing that rock uphill every day.

Whether I’m liked or not, it bugs me that my friend was right—and that way too often we’re liked (or disliked) for reasons that shouldn’t matter. I want members of my congregation to like my exegetical prowess, my theological construals, my leadership savvy, my tireless labors.

But likability is elusive, isn’t it? We all know clergy who are liked for unworthy reasons. Have you seen him hit a three-wood? Have you noticed her sense of humor as an after-dinner raconteur? He is so urbane; he’s a good ol’ boy; she never talks about homosexuality or the war. I had a new associate who won instant popularity on her third day at work when a crowd witnessed her rather rudely blocking the turnaround jump shot of the senior pastor (that would be me).

Are there good reasons to be liked? Can we devise a theologically meaningful approach to the dynamics? The day before my first Sunday in the ministry I encountered a woman planting flowers outside the sanctuary. “You look nervous,”

she rightly surmised. “I’m just hoping they will like me,” I explained. “Like you? They will show up tomorrow wondering whether you will like them.”

Do I like them? Not as people I’d socialize with were I a free agent, not as dolts to be whipped into shape, not as minions to be unleashed as the background to “my” ministry. Do I see the beauty in them? Am I one person who sees them differently, perhaps as God sees them (even if my vision of this can be a little cloudy)?

In *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner describes a minister who spoke “with a sad, timbrous quality like an alto horn, sinking into their hearts and speaking there again when it had ceased in fading and cumulate echoes.” He had “a meager figure, hunched over upon itself like that of one long immured in striving with the implacable earth, . . . a worn small rock whelmed by the successive waves of his voice. With his body he seemed to feed the voice that, succubus like, had fleshed its teeth in him. And the congregation seemed to watch with its own eyes while the voice consumed him, until he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need for words.” This preacher’s attitude was that of “a serene, tortured crucifix that transcended its shabbiness and insignificance and made it of no moment.”

Perhaps this minister lived so passionately near the intersection of his people’s lives and the kingdom of God that he was “liked”—although “liked” feels a bit lame for how people feel about a serene, tortured crucifix transcending its shabbiness while “their hearts” are “speaking to one another.” Can we be real enough, substantial enough, yet transparent enough to the peculiar beauty of the gospel that we might be toddling yet certain ciphers of the likability of God?

Should a pastor win some popularity, there are perils, of course. But I suspect that our problem as pastors is not being liked too much, or even liked enough, but rather that we haven’t practiced living in ways that might be shabby yet are prompted by some bifocal vision, focused on God and on the beauty of the people. If we could rivet our attention there and there instead of here, then we might almost unintentionally discover that we are in fact liked—in the way the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing.

If we could, if I could, then I might be freed up to engage that person who frankly just doesn’t like me—and simultaneously to avoid getting hooked or cornered by the

one who likes me so very much. If my vision can become more sharply bifocal, gazing as clearly as possible at God and the beauty of the people, then I may be wiser and more comprehending when, as it turns out, I am disliked (as Jesus was) for being faithful to the task. If I can like them for theologically wise reasons, they just might mirror that back and like me in spiritually significant ways. They might learn to value what truly matters in each other, and like each other. Then we'll all grow together in the way we like God.

Over time, I might begin to look and feel like a small, worn rock, the waters of my baptism and their baptism polishing us all so we might notice in each other the likable likeness of God. Jesus did say he would build his church on such a rock. And then my seminary friend would be more right than he had imagined.