

From 'bless her heart' to 'I will miss her'

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I'm closing in on my 11th year of serving this particular congregation and more so every day I'm convinced there is fruit in ministry that only becomes possible with a longer measure of time.

For instance, a few weeks ago I confirmed about 30 students in our congregation, many of whom I remember from their baptisms and from their day-school years here at the church. The students from my first confirmation class 11 years ago are now in the midst of starting their careers and have since blossomed into adults.

These are all blessings only made possible by the patience and passage of time, blessings our Methodist system of itinerancy rarely affords pastors. Yet of all those, one such example is at the fore of my thoughts.

Recently I was privileged to spend several hours at the deathbed of someone in my congregation. Several years ago, I would've ended any mention of her with the passive-aggressive Southern epilogue "bless her heart."

A few days later Shirley died. And like Jesus, I wept.

I don't cry over most deaths. When you're a pastor, you get used to death. But I cried over Shirley.

I can be honest about the rough edges of our relationship because to pretend otherwise would be to dishonor the grace-filled trajectory of our relationship ultimately took.

She was a thorn in my side and, to my chagrin, I could not avoid being so in hers. She was for me the personification of what pastors and non-churchgoers lament as church politics. She was convinced I didn't know what I was doing, was insufficiently enamored with John Wesley (true), couldn't preach my out of a paper-bag. and would be the ruination of her church, bless her heart.

My less-than-pastoral thoughts generally ran similarly. She has the distinction of being the first parishioner in this particular parish to point a shaky finger at me in frustration and then storm out of my office, slamming the door so hard it knocked my Karl Barth portrait off the bookcase.

And the softie in me hopes no one ever takes that distinction from her. Yet with all that history, something changed between us after the first few years. She first made peace, I think, with the fact that I wasn't going anywhere anytime soon and decided to make the best of it.

She then started earnestly to listen and read my sermons, stealing them from the pulpit lectern (sometimes before I'd preached, teaching me to have a spare copy handy) and concluded that even though I'm not Billy Graham, I'm not without some gospel IQ. Comments on my blog followed after.

When my family adopted our first child, she was the first person to articulate that adoption is the first form of Christian life, and thus natural, making her one of the only people not to ask us when we were going to have kids of our own.

She was the first person in the congregation to call me when I was in the hospital last year to tell me she loved me. And when I last went to see her in the nursing home in Richmond, she said it to me again. Weak, emaciated, and slightly agitated, she smiled when she saw me. She grabbed my hand and tried to hug me. Pulling me close, with her only eye that would open on me, she said the same thing to me: "I love you."

I sat there quietly amazed, thinking of how ten-and-a-half years ago I was about the last person she would've wanted next to her in those moments. I was all the more amazed that now there was absolutely nowhere else I'd rather have been.

It would take me a while to track back through all the deaths and burials I've been a part of since I started out in my little parish back in Princeton. Whatever the number, it's a lot. Children, parents, men no older than me. They cover the gamut from tragedies to welcome, blessed rest, with some well-loved congregants sprinkled in along the way.

But seldom, if ever, has a death hit me the way as this one has.

I'm not quite sure what's behind this.

Is it that I saw in her someone much like myself, someone who, as Martin Luther described, was at once sinner and justified?

Is it that, in both the good and the bad, there was absolutely no pretense about our relationship—something that can be rare in congregations?

Is it that she (or our relationship) was a genuine, identifiable proof of grace, that tempers can ease and relationships can heal?

Is it that with her I'd experienced both how petty church politics can be but also how easily such pettiness pass into irrelevance if we let it?

Probably, I suspect, it's a little of all the above, which is another way of saying that Shirley was like family to me, with all the complexity and joy the word *family* entails.

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