

We are more than our jobs

On the good days, this is the best job in the world. Yet, as I wedge my foot into my heels, I must recognize the difficulties of our vocation.

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I don't work in a coal mine.

I repeat the mantra to myself as I tug my tights onto my legs and zip up my dress. I soothe my anxiety as I get ready to meet with someone who has been complaining about me to various members of the congregation.

I ignored the grouching at first. I told the good-natured reporters that if a person has an issue with me, they need to speak with me directly. Then I shrugged the

complaints off, knowing that not everyone is going to like me. But the nastiness has become too loud. The complaints echo from too many people, and they're beginning to obstruct the work we need to get done. And, to be honest, it troubles my soul.

I worry because this person has been trying to get rid of me from the moment I arrived as the pastor and I don't want him recruiting more people for his ouster campaign.

His main complaint is that I'm a woman. I remind people that I didn't hide that fact when the church called me, and there is nothing that I'm willing to do about my gender at this point. But it still angers him to hear a voice approximating his mother's coming out of the pulpit on Sunday mornings.

This grievance always hits me like a sucker punch. I grew up with a calling deep in my belly, while also being immersed in conservative Baptist doctrine that taught that women should keep silent in the church (and preferably everywhere else). I had to overcome years of toxic theology, family rebuffs, and painful shunning in order to go to seminary and become ordained. So, a reptilian fear, tied to decades of past rejection, arises when I hear this particular grievance in my own congregation. If I think about it too much, I feel my blood pressure rise. My face flushes, my head begins to ache, and my eye twitches. I don't want to lose my job.

I smooth out my skirt and look in the mirror for any place I might have come undone. Some people don't like it when I refer to the pastorate as a "job." They say it is a *vocation*, something that transcends the realm of quotidian employment. They argue that I sully the deep nature of God's calling when I refer to it as a mere "job."

As I outline the corners of my mouth with red lipstick and walk into a cloud of floral perfume, I know I need the word *job*. I understand the sentiment of my colleagues' arguments. But I must have the reminder that this particular employment opportunity is smaller than who God made me to be. And though most of the time I derive great joy from being a pastor—way down in my heart and soul—I must use the word *job* as a reminder that even if my career comes crashing down with a smear campaign and a congregational revolt, I'm still human. Being a pastor is not all I am. I have other identities as a partner, a mother, an artist, a writer, and a friend. I was even a decent sales person and business manager before I became ordained. I wonder if that's why some pastors never retire, because they can't see any identity beyond their job.

“I don’t work in a coal mine,” I whisper to the mirror as I notice my heavy eyes, the products of many nights of fitful sleep. My husband and I are both pastors, so we keep this mantra ringing in our house, consoling words when we just don’t feel like we can face the brutal criticism and loneliness. I don’t mean it as any disrespect to coalminers, but rather an acknowledgement of the grave dangers that they face each day. It’s a shorthand reminder that a whole lot of people have it worse. We’re not going to die from black lung when we go to work. Our physical safety is not in jeopardy. We sometimes have medical insurance and usually one of us is contributing to a pension plan. We get time off for vacations and continuing education.

On the good days, this is the best job in the world.

And yet, as I wedge my foot into my heels, I must recognize the difficulties of our vocation. Sometimes we have to name the fact that pastors face constant criticism, power struggles, and swallowed blame. Often, it’s not because we’re bad at this job, but for other reasons—we’re too liberal, not liberal enough, too political, or not political enough. We’re too overbearing, or too wishy washy. Either the church is growing too quickly, or we just keep burying people. Or we deign to pick hymns composed after the 18th century, we don’t wear pearls, or we use “I” in our sermons (real complaints that I received).

In short, it’s simply the nature of the vocation for people to be unsatisfied with us, which is difficult because so many of us come to this job because we want to do good and we love people. It seems that these lofty motivations would incarnate some sort of utopian call.

But sometimes, it’s a job. One that will fail us. And on those days, we must remind ourselves that we are more than our jobs.