

Eavesdropping

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [September 7, 2010](#) issue

I was sitting at a bar. My wife and I were meeting for dinner after a hard day at work. She'd had demanding clients; I'd just wrapped up a difficult committee meeting at church.

I noticed a disheveled and unshaven man in his early fifties a few barstools down from me. Something about him seemed uninviting. He was watching the baseball game on the bar's flat screen while smoking a cigar that was now a smoldering butt. Soon an attractive 40-something woman arrived in a crisp little black dress and perched on the stool next to him. She seemed nervous.

"Ah, there you are," he said without looking at her.

"Sorry I'm a little late," she offered. "I had to wait for the babysitter."

He said nothing.

"You look nice," she lied.

He raised his eyebrows and smiled faintly. The silence hung between them until the bartender came by to ask the woman if she would like a drink.

To many this would be unremarkable bar chatter. To a pastor it was a call to worship. I make my way through the week as if I have a license to eavesdrop. OK, I realize that there actually is no such license, but my urgent need for sermon material often trumps all other realities. So I kept listening.

The bartender said, "Mr. Smith, would you like a fresh cigar?" He responded, "No, Bob. I don't want to offend my date."

The date interjected, "Oh, that's OK. My late husband used to smoke cigars. I still have the humidor I bought for him in St. Bart's. He just loved it when we went anywhere he could buy Cubans."

Her date barked back, "Cubans are overrated. Only guys who know nothing about cigars keep talking about Cubans."

She smiled painfully and adjusted a bra strap. "Well, it's not important," she whispered as she took a sip of her cosmopolitan.

For the next 30 minutes the painful liturgy unfolded as if Woody Allen had written it. She kept trying to make herself appealing to him in desperate, fumbling ways, and he kept acting as if he were beyond finding appeal in anything. She asked questions about his work, to which he gave short evasive replies. She tried commenting on the baseball game, to which he gave a grunt or two.

Why didn't this guy give her a break? Did the rudeness mask his own fear? Was he pushing her away to protect himself? Had he been hurt? When I got that far in my musings, I decided it didn't really matter. This guy was a jerk.

I wanted to jump off my barstool, stand in front of her and say, "Why are you putting up with this?" But instead I remained in my place. I remembered being single, meeting a date at a bar and hoping it wouldn't turn out like this one. I wished my wife would hurry.

I'm not claiming that my life is better than the lives of these other two, but clearly it was easier that night. I do not believe that married people are less desperate than single people; I know better, and I saw other dating pairs at the bar who were lost in a wonderful time together. But I was overwhelmed by the sadness I felt as I realized that this evening was only going to make the woman feel worse about herself.

As a pastor who spends an unforgivable amount of time hanging around the church, it is easy for me to miss the scenes played out in bars and coffee shops. I thought I had just been through a rough meeting about budget cuts, but that was sandbox chatter compared to the demeaning abuse of the widow in the black dress at the bar. Echoes of her experience continued to bang around in my soul the next morning when I returned to my study to prepare the sermon. I stared at the books that line my walls wondering how they would enter last night's conversation. I knew that if these theological texts had any hope to offer such contemporary desperation, it would be buried beneath layers of sophisticated scholarly insight. It would take some digging, but that's my job. I'm a preacher.

Someone who just had a horrible date is probably going to be in church Sunday. But he or she won't bring up that experience when we meet at the door after worship. Preachers cannot respond exclusively to the constructed images people present of themselves on Sundays. Our calling is to peer beneath these images to see the hurt that makes people feel so much less than the beloved of God.

I see shadows of the sad widow and her rude date peering over the biblical commentaries spread across my desk. He scoffs. She reminds me that desperation is not just a theological concept but has faces and stories that'll break your heart. Of this I am sure—it also breaks the heart of God. Psalm 6 comes to mind. "Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping." And so the sermon writing begins.