

A delayed meeting

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue



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I was parking my car along the curb when I saw him again. Over the years I'd often seen him, always walking an old black Labrador retriever along the sidewalks of the elegant neighborhood where our church is located. Like the dog, the man had scruffy white whiskers. I wasn't sure who was slowing down for whom, but clearly both were getting on in years. He was using a cane, which was either new or something I hadn't noticed before.

It was a typical gloomy January afternoon in Pittsburgh. Old snow was gray on the ground.

There used to be a bent-over woman with a scarf around her hair, shuffling alongside the man and dog on these walks past our church. But I hadn't seen her for a long time and sometimes wondered about that.

These days I wonder why I wondered about these church neighbors whose names I didn't know. Maybe it was because I live a long way from my mother and would like

to think that someone would notice if she suddenly stopped walking around the block. Maybe the man reminded me of my deceased father. Or maybe I'm just a sucker for an old dog with whiskers. What I do know is that sometimes you get stuck with a person you don't know, and you can spend a lot of time pondering his or her story.

The dog stopped and looked longingly at a squirrel that raced by. The old man chuckled and said something I couldn't hear. Then they resumed their ambling walk.

By the time I got out of the car and hurried to the entrance of the church, I was directly in their path. I had just finished teaching a class at the seminary and was running late for a staff meeting, so I hustled past the old man with a quick "Hi, how ya doing?" He stood there looking at me with yellowed eyes and said nothing.

Now I had a choice. I could rush into the important meeting or I could be a real pastor who stops, turns around, introduces himself and asks this man about his missing wife. I chose to keep moving.

I slid into the meeting, apologized for being late and tried to settle into the agenda. I'm sure my colleagues were presenting profound insights, but all I heard was, "Do you really want to know how I'm doing?"

I felt horrible. Here we were talking about ministry, and I had just refused an opportunity to minister when it was handed to me on a tarnished platter. I wondered if the old man was now in his kitchen, talking to the dog. Was he making a bowl of soup to take to his wife?

Weeks later, as I was leaving an evening board meeting at church, I saw the old man 20 yards away, slowly making his way down the dark sidewalk with his dog beside him.

I unloaded a rehearsed apology for running past him that afternoon weeks before. But he interrupted me with a waving hand and said, "I know how busy you folks are 'cause I see all the cars around this church all the time." I couldn't accept the grace and apologized two or three more times. While I was at it, I told him that I was sorry I didn't know his name, and that led me into an apology for being a bad neighbor. "Oh, and I'm sorry that I haven't introduced myself." He started to smile, placed both hands on the cane now in front of him and asked, "Who's the priest here? You or me?"

I gently asked about the woman who used to walk with him. He smiled and glanced up at the barren tree limbs in the night sky. "That was my wife. She died a while back. Now it's just ol' Sancho and me. But we're getting along pretty well." He jiggled the leash and added, "Aren't we, boy?"

We talked a bit, like neighbors—about the snow, potholes, the price of a nearby home that recently sold. Along the way it occurred to me that I've given lots of sermons focused on the church's mission to those in need. "Love your neighbor," I've echoed from the pulpit. The Bible's exhortation to care for the neighbor isn't necessarily a metaphor. We really do have a responsibility to the people who live near our church. But what exactly is that responsibility?

During a pause in our conversation, the old man looked into me with those yellow eyes and seemed to sense my quandary. "I've never been a churchgoing kind of guy," he said. "It seems hypocritical to start now that I'm so close to being dead myself." He chuckled again, as he had that afternoon when old Sancho looked longingly at a squirrel. "Still, it's a comfort knowing that I live near people who believe in stuff like heaven. I lean a lot these days . . . if you know what I mean."