Among the strays: A pastor’s vocation

by Frederick A. Niedner in the July 12, 2011 issue

In my day job I teach theology and grade papers, but I have another line of work. A friend gave this calling a name several years ago when she called to ask if I'd do a funeral for someone who had no church connection or pastor. "Do you still have a ministry to strays?" she asked. As a young man, I had worked for several summers as a truck driver for a nationwide moving company. Later I attended seminary. Now I look back and realize that the driving experience helped prepare me for a churchly vocation that my seminary professors didn't cover in their lectures.

Back when I was one of them, we over-the-road truck drivers endured profound loneliness. As nomads in the world before cell phones, we'd pull into a truck stop looking for casual conversation with perfect strangers. Like us, they were taking a

break from staring at the broken white lines. These truckers and assorted transients seemed destined to spend their lives on the road.

Eventually it dawned on me that truckers and clergy travel a similar metaphoric highway. We discover a measure of our vocation among the "strays"—the wandering, wayward and "beditched" who have no priest or pastor.

Soon after my ordination, when hippies still roamed the country and picking up hitchhikers wasn't yet a sign of insanity, I gave a ride to a young couple and their baby. As we talked, my clergy status came up. After a whispered exchange between the parents, they asked me to baptize their child. I called to mind the relevant fragments of my seminary education and explained that they shouldn't think of baptism as magic or as a vaccination, but as incorporation into a body, a community. When they got back to California, I suggested, they should find a congregation that would baptize their child and make him a member.

I later regretted and repented of that decision, and I still pray for the child whom I failed thanks to my theological correctness. I knew the words. All we needed was water. I should have found some and then pledged to help that pair of vagabond parents find a flesh-and-blood outpost of the body into which I had baptized their baby.

I swore never to repeat that mistake. Since that time, most of the people whom I've baptized on the roadside have found a place within a community of Christians. A few have not. This latter group I entrust, along with many others, to the persistent care of the Holy Spirit, who promises never to quit on anyone marked with the sign of the cross.

By contrast, I probably should have declined a good share of the weddings I've agreed to perform. I have married relatives, friends, friends of friends and relatives, and perfect strangers. I have conducted ceremonies in churches and chapels, in parks and gardens, on beaches and boats—and once in the shadow of Cinderella Castle at Disneyworld. Like everyone else who plays this role, I have joined inebriated grooms, frightened brides, and couples who couldn't bear to touch each other during the previous night's rehearsal.

In other words, I have joined together dozens of couples who had as good a chance of making it as anyone else, despite the fact that very few had a clue about the inescapable trials of the life they were entering or what it would take to tame

infatuation and grow it slowly into love. Some may recall shards of my standard wedding homily, like the line about how much every marriage needs the aid and comfort of a community. All would have to learn the practice of industrial-strength forgiveness and the necessity of dying to their powerful need to be right about everything.

Notary publics and justices of the peace don't offer warranties with their marriage certificates. Neither do clergy. We can, however, promise something those others can't—namely, a place to pour out and lay before the cross every wretched story of heartbreak that happens on the way to starting over.

Thomas Long observes that most clergy would rather preside over funerals than weddings. In weddings we promise faithfulness "till death us do part," foolishly presuming to know what it means to entrust our one chance at life into one person's care. In these situations, clergy are often like circus ringmasters. But when death ushers us from life with a loved one to life without, our tongues get stuck. We understand our need for a guide through the wilderness and a community that remembers words and songs of thankfulness and hope.

Today more and more people have no formal connection to such a community. They enter the wilderness alone and without ceremony. If we clergy are not alert, we may pass them by as we make our way toward Jerusalem.

A clergy friend's first congregation could pay him only half a salary. To support his family, he contacted every mortuary in the area and offered to conduct funerals for anyone who wanted a service but didn't have a church or pastor. The extra income helped, but this pastor soon found this work a meaningful form of ministry. The grieving families, starved for meaning and connection more profoundly than they knew, clung gratefully to the promising words he preached.

Something like that ministry to strays has become part of my calling. The healing message that I freely received I freely give. I've buried perfect strangers known to me only through the hour or two of family storytelling I request before conducting any funeral. Invariably, the stories I hear become the peculiar, sacred form of thanksgiving we offer up for the life we are handing back to God. Moreover, I have yet to hear a life story that couldn't be crossed somehow with the story of the one who said, "I go to prepare a place for you," and who then went directly to places of betrayal, judgment, death and burial. There is no place you can ever go, I promise

the bereaved, where he does not await you and is not Lord for you. No one dies alone. No one grieves alone.

Some of the strays I bury I know almost too well. I married into a large, strange and wonderful family that understood itself to be "spiritual but not religious" long before that line became a demographic category. When they call me, I serve these family members—my intimate but far-flung "parish." These days, as the run of in-law weddings has slowed and death's visits have become more frequent, my wedding stories are working their way into my funeral homilies.

In the truck stops where I once spent evenings making small talk with strangers, I learned the deep truth that in one way or another we're all wanderers and strays. Some of us have heard in a way we could believe, and some haven't, that the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Mary and Joseph and Jesus, wanders about as we clergy do, always looking for the lonely and lost, never giving up until every last stray comes home.