

Say a few words

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [October 16, 2013](#) issue



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We were about to have another church banquet. The chair of the committee that was organizing the event stopped by my office to review the program. Seated across from me with her iPad in hand, she checked off one item after another as I kept smiling and saying, “That sounds fine.” Then came one of the most familiar questions of my ministry: “Oh, and pastor, will you say a few words?” This question hadn’t even made the checklist. It never does. It’s just a reflexive action of all chairs of church committees responsible for banquet programs.

I’ve never known exactly what is meant by this request. Do they want me to say a few words of inspiration, prophecy, consolation, biblical theology—or just a few words about how much I appreciate the person who asked me to say a few words? Maybe the important point is to use only a few words.

Seminaries teach future pastors how to do careful exegesis of the biblical text, how to explore the wonders of over 2,000 years of theological tradition, how to take seriously the mission of the church, and even a few important insights on how to do pastoral care. But no professor has a lecture in her or his syllabus on “Say a few words.”

I am often tempted to walk to the microphone and to offer these few words: “I’ve got nothing.” If they had asked me to prepare a homily or devotional, or even to offer a few words about Didymus the Blind, I would have known exactly what to do because

I am trained for that. But that's not what the congregation is asking of its pastor at the end of a banquet program that has already run too long.

As I've thought about this for a very long time, and as I've offered many few words along the way, I've become convinced they don't care much what I say. No one will remember these words the next day. And yet it's critically important that I say something.

I'm sure that those who are sitting in a church basement on metal folding chairs, finishing up their desserts and drinking lukewarm coffee, enjoy it if my few words are witty and make them chuckle. They appreciate my appreciation of those who put the banquet together. They're probably OK with a few words that reminded everyone that Jesus is concerned about those who are hungry and who didn't get an invitation to our banquet. Or at least, a pastor saying things like that doesn't surprise them.

Now that I am a seminary president, and attend even more banquets where I'm asked to say a few words, the question continues to bang around in my head—why do they want me to speak at all?

I doubt that the chairs of committees would use these words, but I think the desire to have the leader say a few words is a Protestant effort at finding a blessing. If I were a Roman Catholic priest, I'd be asked to show up at most every event in the life of the parish in my collar and to gently hold up a hand and say a few words of holiness while everyone bowed their heads. Then they would know that heaven and earth were connected at this humble effort at celebration.

The Protestant Reformers rattled the medieval, clerically dominated church with their doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. The ironic legacy of this for most of us outside of the Catholic and Episcopal churches is that we believe that this means we don't have priests. The Reformers were saying just the opposite—every believer has a priestly calling. This would certainly include the leaders of our Christian communities.

In our churches, the priests who have spent time learning how to rightly handle words are the ones we want to speak to us. We ordain them to preach to us, teach us, make holy sense of our weddings and funerals—and even fulfill the nebulous job of saying a few words at another church dinner.

That's because Protestants have always been devoted to words. We trust them, and we believe that they can witness to the Word made flesh. Even a few words can offer the blessing of remembering that God is with us.

So pastors and leaders of Christian ministries have to become comfortable with a part of the job that will never show up in a position description but will always be written on the hearts of those who look to them for a blessing. Sometimes the leadership they need has nothing to do with visions and strategic plans, or even pastoral care and the carefully carved sentences of the Sunday sermon. Sometimes they are just asking the pastor-priest to be the symbol of the Word made flesh. Just as Jesus once made a common wedding in Cana extraordinary, so we hope he will bless our little banquet in the church basement.

"Pastor, say a few words. Bless us."