

The banality of clergy failure

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [June 25, 2014](#) issue

I've traveled a long way. I'm the preacher from across the pond who has dropped everything in the face of tragedy, reached out, and said, "Sure, I'll come to the funeral. How could I not? I'll use air miles. And yes, I'll preach. Be glad to."

At the funeral I'm surrounded by old friends, parishioners, and acquaintances. And then comes a word of recognition: "Sam!" And she's before me, thrilled to see me, full of memories, energy, sadness—about the tragic circumstances—but also bursting with appreciation for my ministry, my moving sermon, and how marvelous I was when I used to be here—all the things pastors pretend people shouldn't say but in fact crave.

And this: I haven't a clue who she is. My mind goes blank. I'm in a different world now, showing hundreds of other people how important they are to God, and—if that's too remote—important at least to me. And maybe my head or more likely my heart can't take any more people, because when I run down my mental checklist of those whose names I may not instantly recall but whose lives I nonetheless deeply cherish, she isn't on it. She's greeting me as if I changed her life, and I'm failing to keep up the pretense that her name will come to me any moment.

Her face falls. Plummets. She's crushed. Here was a pastor, it had seemed, who was different than the others—whom she trusted, to whom she'd poured out her soul (surely if she'd done that I'd at least recognize her), whom she'd put in the trophy cabinet of people who would never let her down. And I just had. Not by some public or private fall from grace, but by something more personal, more painful, more pitiful—by forgetting her.

Half a minute later I glimpse her husband, and glints of recognition dawn. I think I recall that beard . . . But the damage is done. The lie is exposed. I'm all surface and no depth, the pastor who can put on a show but deep down doesn't care enough to remember, who made her feel special but when she was no longer useful moved on elsewhere, who could talk but didn't walk. Maybe God, in the end, was like that too.

This is the banality of clergy failure—that we put ourselves between people and God. That we tacitly assume God is distant, remote, occupied, distracted, and so we, to compensate, must be present, intense, hearty, and inspiring. We must be more human than God. God can't possibly remember this woman's name, her complex story of not having and then having children and their complex story. So we invest deeply in her, utterly professionally, of course, and her melting heart, her trust, her signs of faith and hope—these are the medals of our ministry. Our people need us, need us badly, because only through our sacrificial and immensely thoughtful yet appropriate love can they possibly glimpse a God who seems reluctant to be made known in any explicit and tangible way.

There's a good element to this. Part of the atonement is the discovery that in wounding and lacerating Christ's body on the cross, we matter to God. If we matter negatively, by hurting and killing, then we can matter at least as positively by giving joy and delight. And just as the risen Christ still has the wounds of the tree, so the ascended Lord takes with him the joy we evoke in his heart. The pastor who says, with care, y'all matter to me is showing that we all matter to God.

Of course we're not up to it. We forget her husband was going in for a scan and we should have inquired how it went. We neglect to ask her to read at the carol service. We get talking to someone else after the worship service, and she drifts away disconsolate to her car. But all these things are forgiven. And we know that they're healthy ways of indicating she shouldn't overinvest in us, because it's not really about us, it's about Christ and Christ's body, the church. In fact, we shouldn't be standing between her and God in the first place. God can look after that part without our unique contribution. The pastor's job is not so much in front of the people as behind them, ushering them like sheep into a place where they may encounter God together. It's not about being more interesting than God. Cyprian never said, "Outside the pastor there is no salvation."

When I haven't the faintest idea who she is, and both parties are forced to face up to the illusions of pastoral care, we may both lick our wounds for a while. But maybe later she'll say, "The pastor forgot me today. But God remembers me every day. And always will." And it could be that later I'll say, "I've a feeling she just discovered I'm not God—and started believing in the real God. Perhaps I did too."