

It's not work, even when it's work

By [Scott Alan Johnson](#)

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It was not the best day. It started with an early morning call from the chaplain at our local nursing home, letting me know that one of our church members had just passed away. As I was at the church assembling funeral planning materials before meeting with the family, I received another call from another family, letting me know that another member who had been in hospice care had passed away while I was in the office.

These are holy moments. This is the time when your privilege as a pastor is to walk with the family of the deceased through their grief and sorrow, to give voice to the promises of God in the face of death. And even when you've been in a congregation for a short while, you do get to know people pretty quickly, so you're dealing with your own grief on top of handling other stuff related to your calling. Every pastor I know does their funeral work in the midst of grieving the death of a member. It takes a mental, emotional and spiritual toll on us all—enough for me that on the day of a funeral I usually don't do anything else. Whatever needs doing can wait.

But sometimes you gotta work, too. And that's what made the day less than optimal. It was newsletter printing day, and of course there were a few formatting and printing errors that needed to be handled. Our internet connection went out at the worst possible time. I was waiting on some e-mails from folks related to upcoming ministry stuff. It just felt like the whole day was one minor setback after another.

That's just work. It happens. I posted something about it on social media: how it had been a rough day, and *worst of all, there were two funerals to plan*. Oops. Not my best moment.

I forgot that no matter how bad my day was, I could go home and call my mom or my dad that night. There were two families in our town who couldn't do that. I could go home and hug my girls and not think twice about it. There were two families in our town who won't be hugging Mom or Dad anymore. It was brainless and heartless to even think about my sufferings being somehow worth mentioning in the light of

theirs. Chalk it up to a pastor pushed a little past his limits and not hitting on all mental cylinders as a result. Self-pity is never attractive, but it's particularly ugly when it comes with a total lack of perspective.

This is the great privilege and great burden of ministry: you're always involved in the meaning of people's lives as you do your work. Nothing is unimportant. It's not work, even when it's work. It's more than that. I love my job 99 percent of the time, even when the lifting gets heavy, because of this fact. And the 1 percent of the time when I don't love my job it's usually because I screwed up somewhere along the way. Like that day, when I forgot that my work is people's lives and the meaning in them.

Thankfully, the currency of our realm is forgiveness. Hopefully, when your pastor screws up like I did, you'll offer her/him the same as my people offered me: a gentle correction, forgiveness, and the willingness to keep making our way together. Doing our work—which is really God's work—together. A great blessing, even when it feels like something more burdensome. I received and continue to receive a calling to help people find meaning in the midst of joy, sorrow, pain, elation, and everything that goes on in the lives of our community. Astonishingly, I get paid for it. It's work, but it's not work, and it is beautiful.

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