

Grateful even at the grave

A good pastor looks for the sacred within the ordinary.

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [January 16, 2019](#) issue



Getty Images

Last month I had conversations with two pastors who were dying. In both cases we knew it would be the last time we talked, so we took our time and chose our words carefully.

It's an honor to be in a conversation with anyone who knows death is coming soon, but it's overwhelming to listen to a dying pastor. After spending most of their lives climbing into pulpits and standing up at countless church dinners when called upon to "offer a few words," dying pastors are ready when the end of life calls for their last words.

As I listened to these two pastors, the most striking thing to me wasn't their fearlessness at dying. Nor was I in awe primarily of their amazingly sturdy faith, which was why they had so little fear. The thing I keep thinking about is what both of

them kept talking about at the end of their lives: gratitude.

They were grateful for their families and for those who loved them through their days of faithfulness and failure over the years. They expressed gratitude to God for the grace of life. And they were very grateful that they got to be pastors.

Both of them had served several congregations over long ministries before becoming members of our seminary's board of trustees. In their later years they became very close friends. It was almost as though they knew they would be leaving life on earth together. When our board had dinner, they would often sit together and exchange stories from their ministries. I loved listening in.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about these stories, except the part where holiness broke through. But they were told as a way of saying, "Can you believe I got to see that?" At the very end these two well-worn pastors were amazed that they got to be used in God's story with the congregations they served. That was their last sermon.

All pastors have a few moments of glory and disaster along the way, but neither of these is what defines their ministries. As I discovered, people rise up to call their pastor blessed at the funeral because their congregation had someone who was with them, in search of God, through all of the ordinary days. There was always another widow holding their arm at the graveside, another confirmation class of bored teenagers, another committee meeting that went on forever and accomplished little. There was always another wedding for a couple who had no idea what they were vowing to do, another hospital visit with someone who teared up during the prayer, another argument with the church treasurer about the need to buy a new copier that wasn't in the budget, and of course another sermon that tried to make holy sense of it all.

This is how pastors spend their lives. And at the end, this is what they remember, and why they die with gratitude on their lips.

They don't tell the stories of their successful capital campaigns or how many new members they found for the church. Nor are they particularly bothered by their ideas that failed badly and almost drove the congregation into the ditch. They believe in grace too much to care about what went well and what did not. But they tell a lot of stories that essentially boil down to another day in the life of the parish, and the great faith in God's faithfulness that was formed along the way.

After wasting far too many years trying to accomplish something impressive, pastors eventually discover that God prefers routine days of service. And that's when they start enjoying their work.

God created routine and loves to watch it unfold over and over again. Creation gives praise to God by doing the same things over and over. Winter, spring, summer, fall—praise God from whom all blessings flow.

The challenge is seeing the blessings that flow onto all of the things we dare to call ordinary and routine. This is why people need a good pastor who has learned to see the sacred subtext of what appears to be just the next thing. The budget shortfalls, the organist who needs to retire, the smell of pot in the church bathroom after youth group, the conflict over preferred styles of worship—the thoughtful pastor sees all these as altars where anxiety must be sacrificed to find a blessing from heaven. Usually that blessing is a call to better arguments, such as, what are we doing with the church?

This is what the old pastors remember, and why they are so grateful at the end of their lives. They got to spend their years functioning essentially as angels who keep saying, “Behold!” They knew the ground of the church was holy even when it was a holy mess.

Near the end of Paul's life, in prison, he too spoke mostly about gratitude. His last words in his letter to the Philippians include telling them to “keep on doing what you have learned and received . . . and the God of peace will be with you.” Keep on doing whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable. Just keep doing what is right. Do it again and again and again. And God will be with you.

That's the real job description of the pastor: revealing the presence of God in the ordinary life of a flawed church. Good pastors give their lives to do it again and again.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Gratitude at the end.”