

Odd job: The secret gift of ministry

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [April 6, 2004](#) issue

According to new findings in the Pulpit & Pew National Clergy Survey, a solid majority of clergy is deeply satisfied with the pastoral ministry. Seven out of ten of those surveyed report they have never considered abandoning their vocation. In other words, most pastors claim to have found happiness in the ministry.

Why is this disturbing? Some of us in academia have made a decent living chronicling the malaise of our fellow clergy. For years we've had our students read the appropriate literature—from *Elmer Gantry* to *Wise Blood*—on the implicit assumption that these and other portraits of slightly out-of-whack ministers accurately represent the norm of vocational misery among Protestant clergy. Indeed, the tormented Hazel Motes in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* appears to have more in common with the tormented apostle Paul than those, like us, who have found happiness in ministry.

In 2 Corinthians Paul narrates his ministry as a continuous near-death experience, as if ministry consists of thousands of mini-funerals and mini-Easters—moments of truth when this heartbreak or that betrayal, this breakthrough or that triumph puts the crucified and risen Lord right there with him on the razor's edge of ministry.

“For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh [the flesh of ministry]. So death is at work in us, but life in you.” Later, in a typical 110-word sentence, Paul pushes the envelope of language as he throws out image after ecstatic image of hard times on the mission circuit—of calamities, beatings and imprisonments, of being treated “as unknown and yet are well known”—when he blurts out, “As dying—and look!—we live.”

This is all very dramatic, but many ministers are weary with the overwork and emotional fatigue of the office. They have significant reservations about this cruciform metaphor for ministry. Paul's theology appears to provide a rationale for the victimization of the clergy, what Joseph Sittler called the maceration of the minister.

And yet, what Paul really offers is an escape from the macerating criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of a ministry. He offers a conception of ministry that focuses on the work itself and not on the conditions or the outcomes of the work. His dialectic of death and resurrection suggests a realism that transcends our language of happiness and unhappiness in ministry. Indeed, it forges a tool for critiquing our best notions of happy and unhappy, satisfied and dissatisfied, successful and unsuccessful.

“Having this ministry,” he says, “by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.” The phrase reminds us that this thing we are accustomed to acquire, analyze and discuss at conferences is a blazing fire that cannot be touched. It is holy. It is a gift, as Paul says in Ephesians, a grace “given to me for you.”

The question is, what kind of gift is ministry? It is the kind of gift that requires hours and hours of assembly, the sort of gift that you know, even as you take it out of the box, you will one day be very sorry to have received. You know exactly what kind of gift is coming when the giver says, “Here, this gift is for you. Try not to let it discourage you.”

“Oh, all this heartache for little me—you really shouldn’t have.” It’s as if Paul understands that our truest heartaches, like his, derive not from the culture, the economy or the political climate, but from the ministry. The heartaches are not cured by ministry, they are caused by ministry. Having this ministry is like having children. Yes, in some respects they are an answer to prayer, but they also stimulate a lot of desperate prayers. And all the joy they bring into your life is sharpened by the possibilities of new pain.

One Sunday in our congregation we baptized a baby the day after its mother’s funeral. It fell to our minister to “make sense” of these two events in words. I can still see him pacing up and down the center aisle with the baby in the crook of his arm. Through his tears he spoke of the promises of God, as if to say, “This is the ministry we have. It’s a hard gift. Let’s not lose heart.”

This ministry is like love: it never ends. It never comes to the end of its rope. It never wrings its hands and says, “There’s nothing more to be done.” By its very nature it can never run out of material, because the very conditions of its defeat only create the possibilities for its rebirth.

Can a war defeat ministry? No. War produces an occasion for the ministry of comfort and justice. Can conflicts over sexuality destroy ministry? We are tempted to say yes, but even Paul would say they elicit the ministry of reconciliation. Can death bring ministry to an end? No, as one of Georges Bernanos's characters in *The Diary of a Country Priest* says to the new pastor. "Love is stronger than death—that stands within your books."

There is something about this ministry that cannot be captured even by professionals, which is why, I suspect, Paul refers to it elsewhere as a "secret." I rejoice with the seven in ten who will not renounce their vocation. I rejoice with any who are foolish enough to admit they are satisfied, even happy, in ministry, because they are obviously in on the secret. They must be. If you live in a world like ours whose attitude toward ministry runs the gamut from condescension to contempt, you would have to be crazy to say, "I love the ministry!"—unless, of course, you are in on the secret and have what Paul had. Unless you have glimpsed its holiness and apprehended it for the gift that it is. Unless you too have experienced its hard-won joy.