

What I want for Christmas: A prayer rug

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [December 14, 2004](#) issue

I am surprising my wife, Lisa, with a rug for Christmas, and since she isn't a reader of this magazine, I trust my secret is safe with you. We weren't looking for a rug; it just showed up. Terry, from whom I had purchased a rug in Ephesus a couple of years ago, decided to bring his rugs to America and materialized in my driveway. We invited a few neighbors, who tittered with delight over Terry's wonders. Now, after my friends dropped thousands of dollars on rugs they weren't looking for, he likes me even more. Lisa looked disappointed when I didn't buy, so I sneaked Terry a check and squirreled the rug away with my neighbor until Santa can pick it up after my midnight Christmas Eve service.

But then I began to suffer theologically induced guilt (or buyer's remorse). Trying to hatch a sermon amid these pangs, I drew an analogy between a beautiful rug and my parishioners' faith. My parishioners do not disregard faith. They admire its beauty, and they want faith. But then, day by day, they do not really notice their faith any more than they notice their new rug. They walk all over it, at least until a guest pops by and asks, "Oh, where did you get that rug?" Then they beam with pride: "From my Turkish friend Terry." Got faith? Yes we do, and we're proud of it.

As I pursued these sermon thoughts, my intern, who was exploring the ups and downs of ministry, asked, "How do you deal with the fact that you talk about a life-encompassing faith, but then people treat it so casually?" Thanks a lot for reminding me of the futility of my life! This season is bad enough: we clergy are oddly obliged to insinuate ourselves into the dizzying round of raucous parties and frenzied shopping with our boring reminders about Jesus.

Then the Christian Century appeared in my mailbox. I thumbed through and read Will Willimon's piece in which a student on Duke's hypothetically Methodist campus is asked by his Muslim roommate: "Why do you Christians never pray?" That's the best question I've heard in a while. Six times daily, the Muslim student unrolls his

rug, gets down on it and prays. The Christians?

Terry says he knows when he's going to make a sale. Eyes fly open as a particular rug is unfurled; after ooh-ing and ah-ing, they get down on the floor and look at the pattern, brush the threads, dig a finger into the pile, inquire into its history. They assume the posture of the Muslim student, but they are shopping, not praying. I got on my hands and knees, and now we own a new rug.

Perhaps this rug business can help me make sense of the futility of my work. Why don't I ever pray? Does my ministry feel like Terry's salesmanship? Am I one more peddler, teasing folks into buying that Jesus rug? Do I confuse them with what I can offer? And what I can't offer? I know people feel hollow; what have I preached? "Feeling empty? Only Jesus can fill that empty place inside!" People adore this sermon. But am I not unwittingly underlining the notion that "Yes, you really are a consumer, and it's all about you feeling full"?

When people suffer, they turn to us clergy for a word. I have been attentive to people with horrible gashes in their hearts, and especially now: a ferocious darkness haunts sufferers during this Christmas season, when everyone seems so jolly. But what have I offered? "Hurting? Jesus can help you feel better." People like these words. But aren't they a loud invitation to get a Jesus rug and just walk all over it? Is the cavernous space where the cold wind blows through my soul an evil to be fixed? Wasn't God's finest achievement a dark, empty place, a stone tomb which was filled not with presence but with absence?

I shall never forget the first and last time I applied the ineffective balm of "God can help you feel better" on a father whose daughter had died suddenly. Calmly he announced, "I do not want to feel better." Of course: the pain is an index of the depth of the love. To ameliorate the pain might diminish the love; to move on and feel better might cloud the memory.

Last year, I reread Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and was thunderstruck by a letter I'd never noticed before. Bonhoeffer, who sat alone in an empty stone cell on Christmas Eve of 1943, was reflecting upon family he had loved and lost, on his own fate and on his separation from his family. He wrote these jarring, eloquent words:

Nothing can make up for the absence of someone we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it

through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say God fills the gap; he doesn't fill it, but on the contrary, he keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain. . . . The dearer and richer our memories, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude changes the pangs of memory into tranquil joy. The beauties of the past are borne, not as a thorn in the flesh, but as a precious gift in themselves.

Maybe Jesus wants me to get down on my knees and stick with the gap of futility my intern cannot fathom, and to notice in the weave of light and dark the gospel I have closeted away like my wife's present. How did Karl Barth portray the church? "A hollow place . . . a canal through which flows living water. Wherever graves are, there is resurrection. Where the church ends, there is its beginning. Where its unrighteousness is exposed, there its righteousness dawns. The divine demolition of any Church means that every Church arises as a signpost, threshold, and door of hope. Broken, the Church can bear its message with its head erect, for the Gospel belongs to the Church that is lost."

What do I want for Christmas? How about a little brokenness? An empty place I dare not rush to fill? What about a sermon I'd better hear before I preach again—that God keeps the gap empty? Will the multitudes flock in to buy this message? I do not know, but at least the cruciform beauty of the gospel will be spoken truly, and perhaps more helpfully.

Unwrap Thomas Merton's thought, that faith is "not a matter of getting a bulldog grip . . . and not letting the devil pry us loose from it." No, faith is a matter of "letting go rather than keeping hold. I am coming to think God loves and helps best those who are so beat and have so much nothing when they come to die that it is almost as if they had persevered in nothing but had gradually lost everything, piece by piece, until there was nothing left but God. . . . It is a question of his hanging on to us, by the hair of the head, where we cannot see or reach. Who can see the top of his own head?"

What do I want for Christmas? I wasn't shopping for one, but I think I want a rug. I want to answer the Muslim student's question by using the rug, getting down on the thing, noticing its patterns, pressing my fingers into its threads, touching the beauty of the darkness, my head bowed, letting go, being hung on to where I cannot see or

reach.