

I LOVE MY JOB

A pastor tells about the privilege of pastoring. | MARK PATTIE

I will never forget the hospital visit I made to see an elderly woman in the last few hours of her earthly life. Family members filled the room but had not been able to communicate with her for several days. I talked with them for a few minutes and then suggested we pray. Leaning over the bedside, I placed my hand on her head and, hoping my words might somehow make their way into her consciousness, I said with a loud voice: “Hi, Grace, this is Pastor Mark. I am going to say a prayer for you.”

To everyone’s shock and joy, Grace suddenly sat up, looking from me to the rest of those gathered.

“Mom!” her daughter cried, rushing forward. As I stepped back a bit to allow more room for family members, someone in the group looked at me and said, “Wow, you’ve really got the touch.”

“No,” I replied. “I just work for the Guy. I never know what God has in store.”

You never know what might happen next. This unavoidable reality underlies much of the anxiety we experience in life. Yet for those of us who live by faith in the God of the Bible, it reminds us of something far more important than our limitations. It prompts us again and again to put our hope and confidence where it belongs. As people of faith we know the truth of Lamentations 3:22-23, “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

With our faith grounded in God, every new day is full of possibilities for

good and every bend in the road is an opportunity for hope.

This truth is one reason I find pastoral ministry so engaging. Every time I lead worship or a Bible study, every time I step into the pulpit or spend time with children, every time I go to a meeting or make a pastoral call, I am aware, even hopeful, that God may move in some unexpected way to illuminate and transform the hearts and minds of those I am with—and mine, too.

A few years back, a member of our congregation became furious with just about everyone in our church and town. He felt let down, deserted in his time of need by those he had considered his friends and brothers and sisters in Christ. I called, wrote an email, and then made a pastoral call on him in the parking lot of his business as he returned from lunch.

I was a bit apprehensive, given that I was pretty sure he was angry with me as well. It was one of those times you go into a situation without much of a plan—just lots of prayer and, therefore, enough hope to put one foot in front of the other.

Thankfully, he was willing to stand there with me for a few minutes. We talked about what had happened and how it was affecting him. We talked about anger and its place, and about the appropriateness of being honest with ourselves and others about our feelings. We talked about being open to the possibility that those we feel have wronged us may not be the only ones who have something to learn. And then, there in the parking lot, we took time to pray.

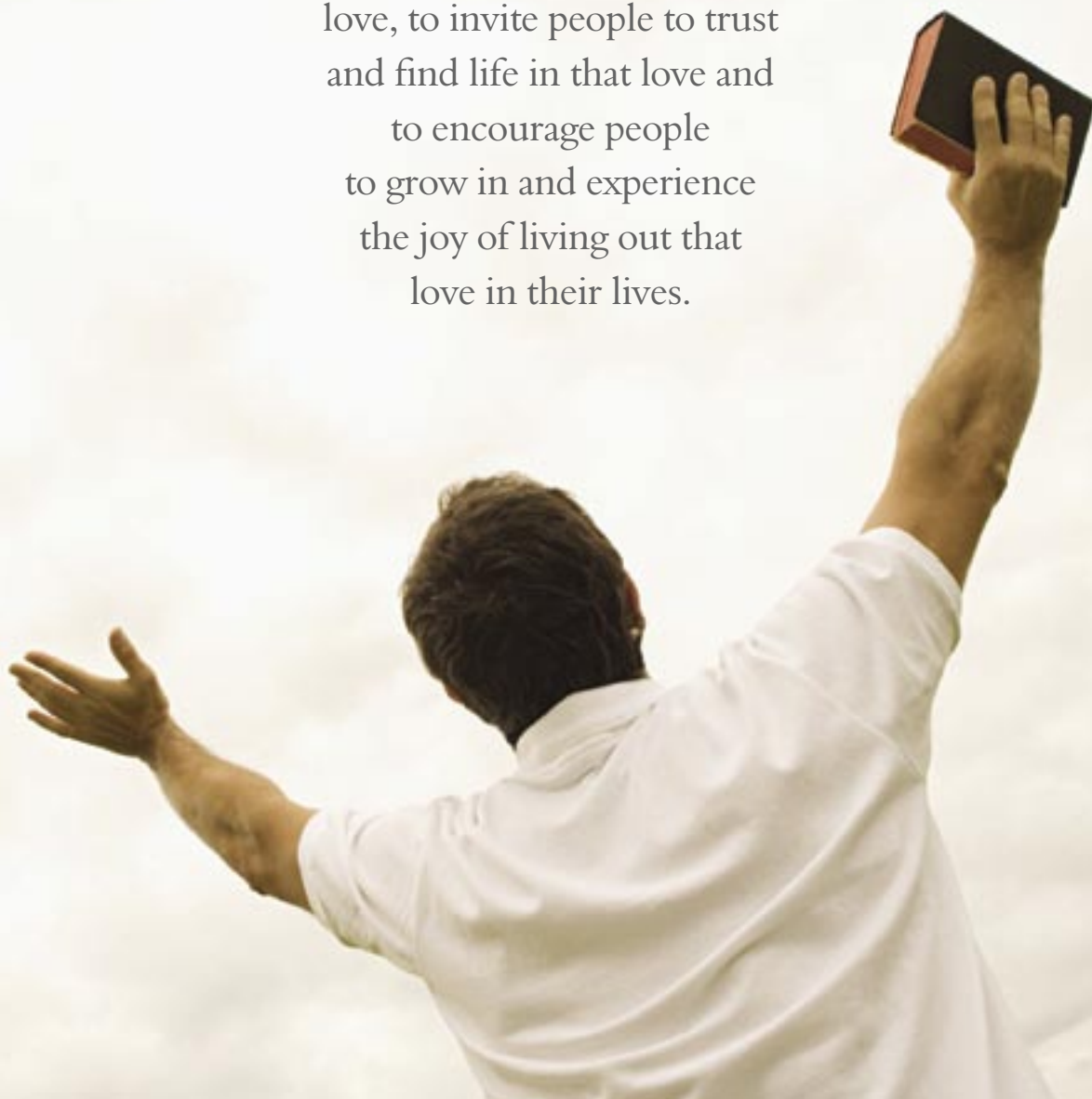
When we were done, he looked at me and said, “Hmm, maybe I should be praying about this.”

Hmm, maybe.

Insight? Illumination? The beginnings of a heart and mind open to God’s grace and teaching? You never know what might happen.

One of the things I love about being a child of God, and about being a pastor in particular, is the opportunity to be a part of what God is doing in our world. We all have the privilege and responsibility of sharing in God’s ministry. But as a pastor, I am blessed

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to have this as my full-time job. Day after day, in a wide variety of settings with a broad array of people, I get to share the good news of God's love, to invite people to trust and find life in that love and to encourage people to grow in and experience the joy of living out that love in their lives.

Our Ash Wednesday service earlier this year was another time I was privileged to proclaim this wonderful life-giving word: "From dust you have come and to dust you will return. Repent and believe the good news." I repeated this to person after person,

looking them in the eye. At times tears welled up in my eyes, as they did a few years ago when my wife came forward with our infant son and I announced in so many words, "You are going to die. It might be today. It might be tomorrow. God willing, it will be 100 years from now, but you will die. Turn to the Lord with all your heart. Put your faith in the God who loves you with a love that will never let you go."

I love my job. At funerals, baptisms, weddings, Sunday morning worship services, visits at the hospital, encounters at the grocery store and park, you

name it. Again and again, I have the chance to proclaim the greatest, life-giving truth of all.

A number of years ago, I took a break from pastoral ministry to be a leadership consultant to business executives. I liked that job well enough. In fact, to be honest, I loved that one, too, though not quite as much as being a pastor. Being a consultant gave me entry into the lives of people who I might never see inside a church. I had the chance to influence people who significantly

Mark Pattie is pastor of Salem Covenant Church in New Brighton, Minnesota.

influenced the lives of hundreds, even thousands, of others.

Yet, I missed being able to pray with them and talk with them about the God whose word lay behind the principles I taught. I missed being free to tell them the good news of the God who loved them and who loved those affected by their decisions, leadership styles, and lifestyles. Most of all, I missed being a pastor in an intergenerational community of diverse people working together over the long haul to grow and serve as God's beloved people.

My first year back in pastoral ministry after leaving the corporate world, the church pianist and I would go to a local nursing home every month to lead worship. I had spent years in seminar rooms with people who were generally mentally and physically well fit. Now I found myself in a room filled with people who had serious limitations. Month after month, we tried to rally residents to sing a verse or two of some old familiar hymns and I would share a devotional seeking to fan the flames of faith and hope. All the while we would watch as those we sought to inspire drifted off to sleep.

Every time as we arrived, we wondered what new interruption would demand our attention or what crisis might require a nurse's assistance. Each visit an emergency would arise, of that we could be sure. What we could not be sure of was whether anyone would actually hear what was said or remember that we had been there. Yet each time we went, I could not help feeling a deep sense that these women and men in the faltering years of their lives were every bit as precious in the eyes of our Lord as were the well-dressed, well-paid people I had been with the year before.

I had a conversation with one of the older women in our congregation recently. She spoke about the seasons of her life, the joys and blessings, the changes and challenges, including some difficulties she was currently having with a couple of family members. As

she shared, she talked about how faithful God had been throughout the past and her confidence that God would see her through both the difficulties of the present and the uncertainties of the future. I found, as has been true so many times, that while I had come to offer her encouragement, I was encouraged and strengthened myself.

Now don't get me wrong. Being a pastor has its downsides and dangers. It can be spiritually, emotionally, and physically exhausting. It is all too easy to step on unforeseen political, social, and theological landmines. It is impossible, even for the best among us—whoever they might be—to adequately meet the expectations, needs, and opportunities that are a part of church life and ministry. We are constantly reminded of our limitations. When those limitations push us into overdrive instead of down to our knees in prayer, burnout, bitterness, and depression come nipping at our heels. We are just like everyone else, experiencing insecurity, uncertainty, problems, and pain. Pastoral ministry is not a particularly safe and secure endeavor, yet it is one that I have found consistently challenging, regularly rewarding, and at times downright fun.

I get to tell stories to schoolchildren, teach confirmation class to teens, and swap memories at lunch with seniors. I get to preach sermons, lead worship, write articles, and speak to groups of various sizes and ages. I get to welcome brothers and sisters into the family of God through baptism and invite them in the name of Jesus to share in God's grace at his Table. I get to pray, dream, and debate with others as we seek God's vision together, and I get to venture forward with them as we strive to live it out.

I get to be a part of men's groups that do things like support shelters, counseling clinics, and educational programs combating domestic violence in our community. And I get to support our women's groups in ways as simple and fun as serving hot apple cider to church

neighbors at a fair raising money to seed ministries that help people all around the world. I get to sweat alongside children and volunteers at vacation Bible school in the summer and play in the snow with fellow campers at all-church retreats in the winter.

I get to sit with those who are struggling, celebrate with those who are rejoicing, pray with those who are dying, and cry, complain, laugh, and just plain listen with those who are trying to make it from day to day. And through it all, I have the privilege of proclaiming the forever fresh, forever true, forever good news of God's faithful love.

What could be better? At Christmas and Easter, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, through every season and every year, the message resounds. We are loved. Rich and poor, young and old, feeble and formidable, we are all the same. Dust. Clay. Mud. Mortal. Loved. Treasured. Cherished. Cared for. Our hope isn't dependent on how hard we try, how powerful we become, how righteous we make ourselves. "Repent and believe the good news," the Scriptures tell us. "Turn to God with all your heart and trust in the love of God."

We are loved. Boy, are we loved! "What can we say about such wonderful things as these?" the Apostle Paul writes. "If God is for us, who can ever be against us?" (Romans 8:31, NLT).

Nothing can separate us from God's love, Paul goes on to say. Not "our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell" (Romans 8:38, NLT).

Another translation put it this way: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39, NRSV).

Whatever happens next, this is good news! News we get to proclaim to the world. I love my job!