

I suspect most people think pastors are supposed to be all spiritual and tuned in to God on the Sabbath. But regular people don't know how hard that is to do. They also don't know that there are days when you don't even want to show up. But pastors do it anyway, because they're called and because they know things might change for the better at any point. And that change usually is a gift of grace. And grace is both amazing and unpredictable.

That day I drove along, radio tuned to WDHA, my favorite station. A great metal ballad came on and I belted the thing out. It gave me a shot of enthusiasm. But that enthusiasm dissipated when I pulled into the church lot, turned off the radio, entered the empty building, and braced myself to face the whirlwind that is Sunday morning.

First, I went into Fellowship Hall to set up the creative response area for the cross-generational worship service. The plan that day was to re-build the walls of Jerusalem with large, cardboard building blocks. The sexton already had set up the tables and chairs. Katie, our music director, and Lane, our organist/pianist, entered and we exchanged good mornings. As they went over the music, I got the screen, projector, and computer ready for the songs and responses.

Once I finished those tasks, I scurried out, intent on my next job. As I was passing through the kitchen I waved at Mrs. Carroll, a lovely, cheerful, chubby lady. Instead of waving back, she looked imploringly at me and asked the words that always stopped me cold: "Lindsay, do you know where we keep the coffee urn?"

Allow me to explain. The presence of the coffee urn was an absolute necessity for the fellowship hours that followed each service. However, the coffee urn's location always seemed to be a mystery, especially to the people who were supposed to make the coffee. I never could figure out why that was. In fact, I don't even think God knows why that was.

Used to the pleas for help, I smiled and showed Mrs. Carroll the urn's location. As I was pulling it out of its secret cupboard, the lock of which could only be opened by a secret key that was kept in another secret location, she smiled at me again. "Can you help me set up? Believe it or not, I've never done coffee hour before."

I glanced at the clock. It was 9:15. We were cutting it close. But I smiled encouragingly. "Sure. First, we have to fill the urn to forty cups..."

Ten minutes later I skidded into the church office. Drew was already waiting for me. He gave me a copy of the order of worship and the two of us leaned on the secretary's desk, as he said, "So you're going to do the call to worship, lead sharing time, and read the lesson this week. Right?"

I nodded and circled my parts on the outline. Then off we went to oversee a time of freewheeling, multi-generational worship and learning.

After that, I hurried upstairs to do a quick half-hour Bible study with our 7th-12th graders. This morning was no different from any other. I entered the room to a hail of wadded paper balls and raucous laughter. I tried to say hello over the racket, but they continued to have ten different conversations, even though only eight kids were present. "Hey!" I shouted. "Good morning!"

They all stopped and blinked at me.

"A little courtesy, okay, guys? I mean, you wanted to do this, and we hardly have any time."

"We want to read something in the Old Testament," Artie said.

"But we're not through the Gospel of Mark yet," I replied.

"How come we never read the Old Testament?"

"Because this group has only been together for a month and you said you wanted to read Mark."

"I never said I wanted to read Mark," Rosa Abbey revealed.

“That’s because you were sick that day.” I cast my eyes heavenward. “Come on, guys cut me a break.”

There was a long silence. Then, as one, the Abbey sisters – Harriet, Rosa, and Lena – broke from the pack and swallowed me up in a group hug. It was their M.O. – a sign of affection that they thought screamingly funny. “We love you, Lins,” they chorused.

That, of course, melted me into a puddle. “Aw,” I sighed, “I love you, too.”

A half hour later I was on my way to the office to go over the 11:30 worship service with Drew, when I spotted Carolyn, a young thirty-something parishioner, in the hall. She looked terrible. I stopped to ask her what was wrong and when I did her eyes filled with tears. She told me that her younger sister had been diagnosed with breast cancer and it was stage three and she was terrified.

Time and duties took a back seat. I hugged Carolyn and let her cry on my shoulder. I don’t know how long we stood there, but eventually, I asked if she would like to pray. She nodded, and we stood in the middle of the hall while I asked God to be with Carolyn and with her sister and the rest of her family. I asked that the doctors be granted wisdom and skill and that all those involved with Carolyn’s sister find strength and peace. Then we hugged some more, as curious and caring parishioners looked on. When I left, they moved in and gently began to take care of Carolyn.

By now I had missed the final run-through with the choir. And, with five minutes to spare, I raced into the office, threw open the closet door, and shrugged into my clerical robe. As I turned around, Drew asked if I would like to do the prayer of confession and words of assurance, the Epistle reading, and the offertory prayer. I circled everything on the bulletin and off we went.

Our “traditional” service was comprised of inspiring prayers, stirring hymns and music, a moving sermon, a dynamic choir, and a phenomenal pipe organ played by our equally phenomenal organist, Lane. Afterward, we had a time of fellowship – with more coffee (unfortunately decaf) and cookies – more greeting, listening and talking.

You’d think I would be done for the day. But the thing about ministry is just when you think you’re done, you’re not. In the hallway I ran into Eric, a skinny twenty-something dude with tattoos and piercings. He was pushing a cart upon which sat the dreaded coffee urn. “Hey, Lins,” he called. “Can you give me a hand with this thing? I got no clue how to clean it.” What could I do, but follow him to the kitchen and show him how to clean and store my arch nemesis?