

Holy ground: A pastoral call

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [May 19, 2009](#) issue

It had been almost three months since I made a pastoral call on Jack Matthews, who is one of our elderly parishioners now living at Pittsburgh's Westminster Residences. He mentioned this to an elder, who might have said something to a few other church members. Soon I was pulling into Westminster's freshly painted parking lot, lined with small shrubs and promising little trees.

I made my way through the graceful lobby of the assisted-living facility and walked down a series of wide hallways covered with hunter green carpet. This wasn't quite the Marriott, but that style seemed to be what the designers had in mind—except there were none of those large mirrors you always find in hotel hallways. Westminster's walls are adorned with framed prints of the seashore, as if to distract you from where you are.

Along the way I kept passing large arrangements of flowers displayed on Chippendale-wannabe tables along the wall. The nurses and other visitors who walked by me in the hall smiled, also quietly. Even the lighting was subdued. Why is quiet so valued in these places? Finally I got to Jack's room.

The shiny brass number 224 was tacked onto a mahogany-veneered door. There was no screen door, rusty mailbox or newspaper on the porch. The old yellow dog that used to sun in Jack's yard wasn't there to greet me. Now Jack's home is marked only by number 224, on a long hallway with pretty nice carpet.

I knocked on the door and heard Jack wheeze as he invited me inside. He tried to get up when I entered the room, but I motioned for him to stay seated. I took his outstretched hand in mine and said, "It is good to see you." There wasn't a chair, or even room for one, so I sat on the corner of his bed while he remained on the sofa. I took a moment to look around.

On the other side of the mahogany door all resemblances to an upscale hotel were forgotten. The room smelled old, even though it wasn't. It was just slightly larger than a hospital room. The furnishings consisted of a standard dresser, a small sofa rescued from Jack's former home, a television dangling high on the wall and a

hospital bed. Over the sofa hung a mediocre painting of the house where Jack and his wife raised their children. Every time I visited Jack he reminded me that his daughter painted “this beautiful depiction of our home” when she was in college. The sofa was littered with magazines, junk mail, a church newsletter and the TV remote. Jack sat to one side, with the oxygen tank on the floor next to him. Its clear tubes ran up across his neck and into his nostrils.

How many times have I been in this room during my ministry? I’ve served three churches in three states, but there is no escaping this room. The faces and the stories change a bit, but never the room.

This facility is probably the best one in town, and that is saying a lot since senior residences have become a booming industry in our aging city. We can dress up a nursing home quite nicely these days, but if you listen to those who live there they will tell you it’s still a nursing home. All of the upscale hotel wrappings only get in the way of seeing the truth of the human souls waiting behind the doors. And everyone knows what they’re waiting for.

No one is all that interested in dying at the Marriott. Given their druthers, the residents would have preferred to die at home. But they’ve outlived that possibility, so their responsible out-of-town kids do the best they can to make sure their parents are comfortable.

When the children walk through the almost classy hotel-like lobby they are reassured of their choices. And when their aging parents see the relief in the kids’ faces, they’re reassured as well. Parents never stop giving. But the old folks know that they have slid far down the slippery slope of losses. Jack’s small, spartan room makes it painfully clear that in the end we all die stripped of most of the things we spent a lifetime collecting. The room behind the mahog any door looks essentially the same as one at a VA hospital.

Jack and I talked for a while about his advancing Parkinson’s disease, his wife in the Alzheimer’s unit, and some of the church members who were still living in Westminster’s apartments but would eventually make it onto Jack’s floor. I admired the photographs he had of his grandchildren. I tried to correct some of the gossip he had heard about the church. Then Jack said, “Well, you’re a busy man. I’m probably keeping you too long.”

I tried to assure him that I wasn't at all busy and was happy to stay, but he waved toward the door. So I said, "At least let me pray for you." I moved over to the sofa, reached out to take both of his trembling hands and bowed my head. I don't remember the prayer exactly, but I'm sure it wasn't much more than the standard pastor-goes-to-the-nursing-home kind of prayer. "God, make your gracious love evident to Jack at this critical time in his life." When I was done I looked up to find Jack in tears.

I've been at this long enough now to know better than to dishonor those tears by speaking too quickly. So I just sat there holding his hands while the tears fell. Eventually Jack said, "I'm sorry. This is just . . . Never mind."

"This is just what?" I asked.

"This is just so old."

"Yes, Jack. I see that."

"You lose life in pieces. And then one day you find yourself here, and you have a lot of time to wonder: where did it all go?"

We talked about a life lost in pieces for quite a while. I made a few tries at reassuring him that he was never lost to God, whose love for him is eternal. Jack nodded through all of this as if to say, "Of course, but look at me now." Eventually I stopped talking and surrendered to the silence that alone can honor such pathos. Ah, now I remember why these places are so quiet.

Then I left.

As I made my way back through the attractive halls and lobby, I had a nagging suspicion that my visit was little more than theological wallpaper layered over a crisis of the soul. Is pastoral ministry just one pretty distraction to the slow process of dying?

I doubt Jack felt that way. I'm sure he would say that just by showing up I had been a comfort to him. Maybe he would even have called me a witness to the love of God. Clearly my prayer, as officious as it now seemed, had opened something in my parishioner. But by the time I was in the elevator, I was wondering what spiritual words could have possibly stood up to Jack's lament: "You lose your life in pieces. And then one day . . ."

By the time I made it to the parking lot and was able to breathe in the brisk afternoon winter air, I started to regain my balance. I leaned against the hood of my car, looked up at the exterior window to Jack's room, and wondered if perhaps I had just been granted another visit to the Holy of Holies.

The ancient great temple in Jerusalem had many ornate trappings, all designed to allow people to walk through its beautiful halls and courts with dignity and decorum. But the point of the temple was to get to the Holy of Holies, the meeting place with God.

That special room had no trappings, furnishings or reassuring distractions. Just an altar. And on that altar a solitary high priest made his sacrifice to God.

I wasn't the high priest that afternoon at the nursing home. I was only the witness as Jack did what every member of the priesthood of believers eventually has to do. In the end, we all place life on the altar before God. Sometimes all at once. More typically in pieces.

It really isn't very pretty. But my God, it is holy.