A different kind of funeral: Requiem for a gangbanger

by Peter W. Marty in the October 17, 2001 issue

When George called to ask for help with his grandson's funeral, I didn't hesitate. I'd do anything for the man. George is a gentle soul, born with an impulse for counting others first. When he's not helping his wife shuffle through her daily maze of Alzheimer's, he's at the hospital, sitting with hurting people for hours on end. I've seen his patience. When the words to match the pain aren't there, he lets the tool of his trade—a small pectoral cross on his tie—do all the talking. At the nursing home, he serves as a private translator. As the visiting pastor, I move in and about the wheelchairs with bread and cup. George whispers to me as we go: "She can do it. She needs help. He can do it." I confidently insert a taste of God into the mouths of those who cannot feed themselves, and act as if I know them as well as George does.

"This is going to be a little different funeral, Pastor," George says. "Jamal didn't have anything to do with the church. But he was a really sweet kid. He just had a habit of hanging around with the wrong crowd." At the funeral home I meet George and his daughter. If George's heart is cracked in two, the boy's mother's heart is a crumpled heap. Pam is the one who brought Jamal into the world with so much hope only 17 years earlier. The funeral director informs me that this will be a large funeral—"huge," he tells me after the family leaves.

Nobody has put together an obituary yet. But the morning paper reports that Jamal was riddled with bullets from a gang-related shooting. Two men show up unannounced in my office the next morning. As if on cue they flip open I.D. badges and ask to talk with me. Henry heads up the local gang unit investigative squad. Bob is the point person for community policing in the neighborhood where Jamal was gunned down. When they give me a quick primer on gang warfare in the city, I feel unusually ignorant.

“We fully expect rival gangs to be attending tomorrow. We’re here to assure you that the two of us will be working on safety inside the church. We’ll have eight squad cars running extra patrols outside the church.” A SWAT team will be standing by in unmarked vans at the back of the church. Revenge killing, the men add, is their greatest concern.

Henry asks if I want to wear a bulletproof vest for the service—it’s standard procedure for them. “But it’s up to you.” I glance at the canvas bag on the floor and decide that this isn’t the time to start fussing with something I don’t understand. Jesus’ instructions come to mind: “Take no bag, no tunic, no sandals, no purse.” I’m sure he meant to include a Kevlar vest on that list. I begin to have visions of the vest bulging awkwardly beneath my white alb. “No thanks,” I tell them politely.

Henry and Bob are back the next day in plainclothes, both of them with radios and small weaponry beneath their jackets. When the mourners began to pour in, the air grows tense. Henry eyes every guest coming through the door, and greets those he knows. When a gang leader and his bodyguards step from a car, Henry elbows me gently, “You’re looking at the most dangerous man in town.” I learn to spot gun holsters under pricey suits. Jamal’s killer hasn’t been identified yet, but Henry tips his head to indicate a young kid standing against the far wall—the leading suspect. He’s also one of the pallbearers.

For two hours, shrieking friends and silent mourners with cold, distant faces file past Jamal. They dump everything from bullets to lavish gold necklaces into the mahogany casket. I wriggle my way through the lobby crowd to check on the progress of the line. A few of the more serious wailers have collapsed on the carpet with dry heaves. The funeral director and his associates are white with fear. I’m trembling.

Nearly 600 people pack into the church. Henry has positioned himself behind the organist in the rear balcony while Bob patrols the lobby. I have predetermined two things: the service will break all records for brevity, and I will conduct the entire ceremony from behind the pulpit (as if the half-inch oak plywood provides protection from gunfire). What on earth do these worshipers in their various stages of rage want to hear from a white pastor who didn’t know Jamal, and who lives his own sheltered existence? As far as I know, these street toughs want nothing to do with a church.

I feel out of place in my own church. But I have resolved to preach the gospel with everything I have to give. After all, George doesn't look as if he is feeling out of place. Why should I? He seems to take the day and the service in stride, probably because he loved his grandson so thoroughly, and loves the Lord so purely. None of the external commotion seems to bother George. If I can absorb even a fraction of the peace that resides in him, seated there in the second pew, maybe the words of the sermon will fall together.

Then the 13-minute funeral service is over. I slip out the pulpit door. Since the police have asked the family not to hold a graveside service, I am officially finished. A small fight breaks out among a few people who want the casket reopened. Henry helps clear the church. George hangs around with his daughter and a few close friends who have come to support him. We trade glances. I walk over to him and we embrace. "Pastor, you'll never know what this means to me."

I may never know how much this means to George. But I know what his presence and this day meant to me. They've changed me. My "pastor's" perspective in uncomfortable settings is not as "bottled up" anymore. There's more of a self-forgetfulness now—I pay less attention to peripheral things. I notice that other people set aside certain hang-ups, even potent ones like hatred and fear, when they get really thirsty for God. Like Jacob wrestling in the night with God at the Jabbok River. Someone jumps him out of nowhere and turns his fear into purpose.

I too have some fresh ways to look at fear, some new ways to size up grace. After Jamal's funeral, it began to occur to me that his friends might be more scared of the church and its potential for good than I ever was of them. I began to wonder if they weren't more nervous about what God might want to say to them than I was about their reaction to me. When Jacob fought with God, he didn't receive a clear victory. But he did discover a new capacity for reliance on God. My own fight to maintain focus on that tough day has not meant that I'm never afraid. But I feel drawn to lean more confidently on God . . . and to absorb some of the peace that resides in grace-filled people like George.