

The funeral I didn't want

By [Diane Roth](#)

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I have been a pastor at the same church for many years, long enough to get to know people, long enough that now I have in confirmation classes some of the children I baptized. Some of my friends are in their third or fourth or fifth call, and here I am, at the same church, still in my second call. There are times, I admit, that I feel a little like a failure.

I have known people for a long time. They have known me for a long time. I don't always know if this is a good thing.

Five years ago I got a call to visit someone in the hospital, a woman I knew well. She made special Scandinavian cookies for my wedding, delicate, delicious cookies with pretty shapes pressed into them. She could also make the most amazing bookmarks, using a fine needlework pattern called *hardangar*. She had a good husband and two beloved children, both of which I had in confirmation. The confirmation and graduation open houses were amazing. (I have recipes.) She was also an accomplished gardener, baker, cook, seamstress, and a nurse by vocation. She attended a regular women's Bible study in her neighborhood and would come to me on occasion with questions with regard to the interpretations used in the Bible study materials.

Five years ago I went to visit her in the hospital, and she told me she had cancer. It was a kind that could not be cured, but could be treated, she said. She told me some of the treatments they had in mind for her. Since she was a nurse, she knew the risks and she knew the possibilities. She had hope, but she also knew that this particular hope would have an end date. Treatable, not curable. That was what they said.

Still, the first treatments worked almost like a miracle. They were difficult treatments, but the results were better than expected. Until last summer, when she went back and had the treatments a second time. She achieved a second remission. The angels rejoiced.

This year, shortly after Easter, I saw her with her husband after church. There was pain in her eyes. "I'm out of remission," she said. That was all she needed to say. I prayed.

Forgive me, but this was my first thought: I do not want to do this funeral.

I am not a coward, at least I don't think so. Well, maybe I am a coward. But I did not want to do this funeral because I did not want her to die, could not imagine her dying. I have known her so well, for so long. I can still see her whole family, standing together behind the altar, when they all came to assist with communion. I can still see her with the common cup, taking it and sharing it.

I know. I was only her pastor. Not her husband, not her friend, not her child. Just her pastor.

A couple of weeks ago, right before I was going on vacation, she started hospice. Her son told me I should come, so I did. We had communion, but she could only take the wine. We talked about the sparrows, about her garden, about her goddaughter who became a pastor. We talked about what Jesus promises, and what he doesn't. He doesn't promise that nothing bad will ever happen to us.

She died while I was on vacation. And they asked me to do her funeral, on a Wednesday afternoon. It was the end of a perfect day. Children from the neighborhood were playing outside. There were 300 people in the church. Her husband and her children gave remembrances. Two of her friends read scripture. During the first hymn, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," I saw her friends crying, and I wasn't sure I could get through the opening prayer.

Her husband said he didn't want me to give a sermon. Instead, he wanted it to be a pastoral reflection. When I asked the difference, he said, "Because you knew her so well, it will be a different kind of message."

"I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly," Jesus said, describing her life. Every day was a gift, and she knew it, and not just when she got sick. Still, I wish there had been more abundance, more time, more gardens, more cookies.

I can still see her, taking the common cup, taking it from me and sharing it with the next person. Abundant life.

I have been at the same congregation for a long time. Long enough to know and be known, even when it is painful. Long enough for my weaknesses to be exposed. Long enough to wonder, sometimes, what I am doing here. Long enough to grieve, to doubt, to believe. Long enough to share abundant life.

*Originally posted at [Faith in Community](#)*