

In early March I went to a conference in Madison entitled "New Visions for the Long Pastorate," a workshop designed to encourage and to help pastors stay in the same congregation for an extended number of years.

When our wise, seasoned presenter began talking about what tends to happen when a pastor has been in a congregation for seven to nine years, I started sipping extra coffee and taking more careful notes.

Researchers have identified an interesting dynamic with the help of two questions:

"Do you like your pastor?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Can your pastor lead you to be a bigger, better church?"

"Heavens, no!"

Over time, individual trust in the pastor continues to rise, especially as more and more baptisms and weddings are celebrated, crises weathered, visits made, and prayers said over hospital beds and graduation meals and gravesites...but corporate trust in the pastor as the leader of the community, the head of the church organization, flattens out and often drops.

It is a natural danger of familiarity, and I think it works both ways.

A wise colleague of mine points out that when it comes to asking people to stretch and try new things, we pastors are often the worst.

We think we know our sheep better than we really do, and we get locked into our assumptions and a reflexive over-protectiveness of our people's time and energy.

Both clergy and congregation get comfortable, and we know what we're getting from each other, and what we're not.

The danger, of course, is not only that we settle into shallow ruts that get worn down into intractable trenches, but that we unwittingly dismiss and diminish one another.

Familiarity breeds contentment and temptation: the temptation to undervalue and even overlook the gifts and the glory we cannot see because it is too close and commonplace to us.

Would we be as wonderstruck by celebrities if they were our own family or friends or neighbors?

Where were the celebrations of Michael Jackson's artistry and legacy when he was alive?

Why is it that we fail to appreciate greatness when it is within our reach?

We've not changed all that much, apparently, from that sabbath in the synagogue when Jesus returned to his hometown, local boy gone big-time, and was received with amazing unbelief and hostility.

*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?*

In the rigid social structure of the day, carpenters were in the artisan class, well below teachers and scholars, not quite as honored as peasants, barely above those biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan identifies as the degraded and the expendable.

They also call him the son of Mary, an insult in a culture that names a man as the son of his father, essentially calling him a bastard and then underlining the point by roll-calling all the other children of our lady of perpetual pregnancy.

We would probably say Jesus is white trash...if he were white.

*And they took offense at him.*

*And he could do no deed of power there...and he was amazed at their unbelief.*

They knew him too well to know him, or to take him seriously.

So now Jesus returns to the people who don't know him, which is to say, his disciples.

He returns to that frightened crew of the storm-tossed boat, the ones who have seen his miracles and heard his teaching and still have no faith, the ones who said into the teeth of the raging calm, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

He returns to this group of clueless, faithless followers, his twelve familiar, hand-selected failures, still licking his wounds from the brutal reception at home, and what does he do? *He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.*

*He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts...*

He gives them a promotion.

He gives them authority.

He gives them his trust and his power and his mission.

He gives them support, teaming them in pairs so that when they reach their hometown, they at least have one guy who will still honor them.

And he slashes their budget.

There is no money for conferences in Madison or clever marketing ideas.

There is no money for training, travel expenses or brochures.

Jesus responds to his harrowing brush with familiarity by wildly undervaluing stuff and wildly overvaluing personnel.

Jesus, burned by those who know him best, turns to those he knows best and empowers them, gives them an impossible assignment and expects them to do it...and they do!

Is it any wonder that Jesus ends up dead on a cross?

What society ancient or current can tolerate a presumptuous nobody who values people more than money, truth more than safety, proclaiming the message of God's rule before massaging the powers that be?

How would the world welcome us if we took his leadership seriously, and looked at our world through its dizzying fog of celebrity gossip and financial obsession and claimed one another the most important and wonderful and beautiful and valuable treasure anywhere?

The glory of God is in our midst, but it's hard to see because it is too close and too familiar.

Today we do it again.

It's becoming familiar this summer.

We are baptizing a baby.

She didn't do very well on the doctrinal quiz, so obviously she lacks faith.

She hasn't served on any committees or put much in the offering plate.

She's only a baby, so it is easy to dismiss her.

But we will welcome Elyse Jane Ferraro into the impossible mission we all share, the over-reaching, underfunded, unwelcome mission given by Jesus to disciples as incompetent as her and as dangerously familiar as the faces surrounding us.

He thinks that she, and we, can do it.

Are we so sure he's wrong?