

WHEN YOUR PREACHER LEAVES: Interim Services for Churches Between Ministers

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Jerrie Barber and John Parker



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“We’ll Call You Next Tuesday Night at 7:00”

by Jerrie Barber

One of the most frustrating experiences that I had several years ago when I was talking with congregations considering me as their next preacher was the statement of those looking for a preacher, “We’ll call you next Tuesday night at 7:00 and let you know something.” When this happened – and it happened more than a dozen times – I would confirm: “Is that Tuesday the 16th? Is 7:00 Central time or Eastern time?” I was living in the Eastern time zone.



I would confirm our appointment: “I’ll be waiting for your call next Tuesday night, February 16th, at 7:00, Eastern standard time.”

I looked forward with great anticipation. Was I still being considered? Would they like me to come for an interview? Have they eliminated me from consideration? Am I their choice and are they ready to make final plans for us to locate to a new work?

Time after time, I would prepare the family: “I have an important call coming at 7:00. No one is to use the phone after 6:30.” This was before call waiting and cell phones. “It is essential that I get this call. I need to talk with an elder calling me about the opportunity to work with a congregation.”

7:00 p.m. EST would come and go. 7:30 would pass. I thought, “Surely I misunderstood. They said Central time. They will call in thirty minutes.” 8:00 passed. 9:00 and still no call. I assumed, “Maybe they meant Wednesday night. That’s when elders usually meet.”

In anticipation, I would prepare my family the next night for clear phone lines. My experience was: no call that night, sometimes a week or two later than promised, and sometimes never.

This was so frustrating and disappointing. That experience was so much the norm that I remember the name of an elder twenty-one years later who was different. Jimmy Vaughn from Amory, Mississippi, talked with me on the phone about their preacher search. He said, “We are talking with one preacher at a time. We would be interested in talking with you if we do not come to an agreement with the one now in consideration. I will call you either way.” He set a time and date to call. Now to my surprise, he called on the night and at the appointed time. It was so unusual, that when I see him now I refer to him as “the elder who tells the truth.”

What am I saying about the selection process? If you are on a search committee or if you are an elder working on the search process:

- Acknowledge each applicant. A form letter is better than ignoring the person as unimportant.
- If you say you are going to call, make a note and call.
- If you don’t have any new information at the appointed time, call at the appointed time and say you don’t have any new information and indicate when that might come.
- When a preacher is no longer under consideration, contact that man and tell him he is no longer under consideration. The rejection hurts. But it hurt me more to learn of it three months after the new preacher had moved and I still had received no communication.
- Thank the person who applied and give a word of encouragement that God has a place in His kingdom for him to work.

The principle Jesus taught was, “But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one” (Matthew 5:37, NKJV).

Next month: What can the preacher do when they don’t call at 7:00 p.m., EST?

Lessons from Othello

by Dr. John Parker

Othello

“Haply, for I am black . . .”

Remember this ditty from your childhood?

*Nobody loves me, everybody hates me,
Guess I’ll go eat worms!*



Most of us manage a cosmetic show of self-confidence and self-assertive egotism in today’s in-your-face world, but behind that inch-thick coat of cool and snappy

witticisms we're usually struggling with major self-doubt. At the root of the problem is this nagging belief: "nobody could really love *me*." And the ultimate fear is this one: "*God* doesn't really love me."

David asked God a question for all of us:

What is man that You are mindful of him? (Psalms 8:5)

What indeed? We're a pretty sorry lot taken on the whole; and each of us knows what his or her particular sorry spots are, don't we? So, we think, why *should* God love us?

But he promises that he does:

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

Do you believe that? Do you really believe that you're lovable? Othello, tragically, didn't, and as a result he let a devil convince him to destroy his life and the life of the best woman he could've hoped for.

But Othello was wrong. Desdemona loved him deeply and exclusively. And you and I are wrong too if we don't think God loves us.

The Play

Othello, a Moor, is general of the armies of Venice at the time when she's a world power. As the play opens he's eloped with Desdemona, daughter of Brabantio, a "powerful senator." The duped father hits the roof: he's always admired Othello, who is by far the finest man in this play, but Othello is black, and there's no way Brabantio will accept him for a son-in-law. He arrests Othello and brings him in the night to the council, which is meeting to deal with a Turkish attack.

These city fathers side with Brabantio on racial attitudes, but they need Othello to fight the Turks, and when Desdemona affirms her love for him Brabantio relents and they send them both off to Cyprus to the wars. By the time they get there, a storm has drowned the Turks, but the domestic storm is about to erupt.

Iago, Othello's aide, hates the general and plots to destroy him. When Othello dismisses his lieutenant Cassio for drunkenness, Iago persuades Cassio to ask Desdemona to intercede for him with her husband. Meanwhile, Iago, who covets both the lieutenant position and Desdemona for himself, insinuates to Othello that the two are lovers. Left alone, Othello betrays that he believes this lie, speculating that because he's black, lacking in high society charms, and considerably older than his wife, she's unfaithful.

Othello begins to abuse Desdemona verbally and even physically, and when Cassio appears with her handkerchief, which Iago has gotten from her maid Emilia (Iago's wife), and planted in the lieutenant's room, Othello plans to murder Desdemona and enlists Iago to kill Cassio. So far Iago has masterminded his plot brilliantly, but now his luck runs out. He only wounds Cassio, and Emilia discovers Othello with the dying Desdemona. When Othello explains why he killed her and mentions the handkerchief, Emilia pieces all together and exposes Iago, who kills her before being seized. Othello, in horror, realizes the truth, eulogizes Desdemona as his true and good wife, and kills himself as the play ends.

This play is so tragic because these events are so unnecessary and heartbreaking. They're caused by the actions and attitudes of the two principal characters. One is Iago, Shakespeare's most intelligent, vicious, and fascinating villain, who does evil for evil's sake out of motives never fully clear. The other's Othello, whose insecurities give Iago the opening to destroy him.

Iago evolves from a medieval character called Vice, a comic villain figure who delights in evil and jokes about it to the audience. Inevitably he reminds us of Satan, who attacks Adam and Eve, Christ, and ultimately all of us by pretending to do good with lying insinuations. As Iago gleefully puts it,

*Divinity of hell!
When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now.*

Iago's temptation of Othello in 3.3 is one of literature's most ingenious seductions into evil.

But neither Iago nor Satan can force his victim to fall (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:13; James 4:7). No, we *let* Satan get to us, often through the same door Othello opens to Iago: fear and insecurity.

In the beginning, Othello appears macho and confident:

*I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege, and my demerits [deserts]
May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune
As this that I have reach'd.*

His calm in preventing a street brawl between his supporters and Brabantio's even reminds us of Christ when he's arrested in Gethsemane. The point is that Othello *is* a great and a good man.

But down deep, Othello, you have a problem. All these racial slurs made by almost everybody in Venice from the Duke to Iago, and all these insinuations that you're damned because you're a Moor have taken their toll. You first reveal a weakness when you tell Iago

*But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the sea's worth.*

You're afraid of the commitment, because it makes you feel vulnerable. Left alone, you might have been all right, but your deceiver, who envies what you have, won't let you alone. Iago reveals his hate and covetousness in a soliloquy:

*Now, I do love her too,
Not out of absolute lust, though peradventure
I stand accountant for as great a sin,
But partly led to diet my revenge,
For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife,
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgment cannot cure.*

Satan gets no real benefit from deceiving us; he'll end up in hell anyway. But he delights in causing us the pain of doubt and fear, and using "honest Iago" and his other good-looking henchmen he'll use our doubts to pull us down if we let him.

But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. . . . For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works. (2 Corinthians 11:3, 12)

Iago does his work in 3.3., not directly and frankly, but with innuendo. This approach really disturbs the frank and open Moor, who says to his ensign

*Thou dost mean something.
I heard thee say even now, thou lik'st not that,
When Cassio left my wife. What didst not like?
And when I told thee he was of my counsel
In my whole course of wooing, thou criest
"Indeed!"*

*And didst contract and purse thy brow together,
As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
Some horrible conceit.*

Compare Iago's masterful lying with that of his spiritual father:

*"Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?"
(Genesis 3:1)*

or

*"If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."
(Matthew 4:3)*

Unlike the Son of God, but like his mother Eve, Othello falls for the lie because of his self-doubt:

*Why did I marry? This honest creature doubtless Sees and knows more,
much more, than he unfolds.*

* * * * *

*Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declin'd
Into the vale of years—yet that's not much—
She's gone. I am abus'd, and my relief
Must be to loathe her.*

He's reasoning this way: "I'm an older black Moor. My wife's a young, beautiful, white Venetian who's had lots of charming young suitors. She can't really love *me*—why would she? Anyway, honest Iago tells me that Venetian women routinely cheat on their husbands. So she must be cheating on me with my lieutenant Cassio, who's handsome, young, and white. My only recourse is to hate them and kill them."

What you're forgetting, general, is that Desdemona has declared her love for you before the entire senate, and has proved it by abandoning her family, her status, her home, and every advantage that she has to elope with you!

But you're not alone, Othello. That's just the reasoning I use today when I doubt God's love for me: "I'm only human; God's divine. I'm a miserable sinner; He's the Almighty God, the Holy One of Israel, the King eternal. He couldn't possibly still love me."

*What is man, that You should magnify him,
That you should set Your heart on him? (Job 7:17)*

What *I'm* forgetting is God's own words,
Can a woman forget her nursing child,

*And not have compassion on the son of her womb?
Surely they may forget,
Yet I will not forget you.*

What *I'm* forgetting is that he created me in his very own image, and graced me with every conceivable blessing in life, culminating in the greatest of blessing of all:

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him (1 John 4:9)

Jesus proved his love for us by leaving an infinitely greater status than Desdemona:

*Who, being in very nature God,
Did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
But made himself nothing,
Taking the very nature of a servant,
Being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:6-7)*

What greater proof of his love for me could I ask?

If I keep on thinking like Othello, I'll destroy my own life and soul like another tragic figure:

Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." . . . Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself.

Othello kills his soul mate, Desdemona, and therefore even though he obtains knowledge of her love for him, he obtains it too late:

*O ill-starr'd wench!
Pale as thy smock! When we shall meet at compt [judgment]
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
And fiends will snatch at it. . . .
Whip me, ye devils,
From the possession of this heavenly sight!
Blow me about in winds! Roast me in sulphur!
Wash me in step-down gulfs of liquid fire!
O Desdemon! Dead, Desdemon! Dead!*

An inherently great and noble man, Othello dies with the knowledge of Desdemona's love for him, and therefore dies a tragic protagonist. In his great suffering his great character emerges.

But this man's suffering itself is *not* good, nor is it necessary! It's caused by his own unjustified insecurities, which make him vulnerable to a corrupt society and to the worst of human devils.

Christ's suffering, in a sense, shouldn't have been necessary either. No man or woman—from Adam and Eve on—ever *had* to sin. Strong as the Iago of Eden and the Judean wilderness was, that potentate of villains couldn't force sin, as Jesus proved by defeating him.

But after we *did* sin, God still loved us! And he showed his love most by suffering in our place so that we don't have to suffer and die eternally:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

After his sin of murdering Desdemona, Othello's destruction, in the context of tragedy, is inevitable. But after my sin, my destruction, in the context of God's grace, is not! My faith in Christ my Savior delivers me from having to suffer eternally:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:1-2)

But our main focus here is that not only do I not have to suffer eternally, I don't have to suffer either from fear that God has rejected me. I have reason to doubt myself, surely. Peter thought that he'd never desert Christ, and then he did. But his bitter tears of remorse, unlike those of Judas or Othello, gave way—not to a certainty of “steep-down gulfs of liquid fire”—but to a faith in God's love for him and of heaven:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation (1 Peter 1:3, 5)

Let's not live in an Othello mode of confidence on the outside and fear on the inside. Instead,

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. Hebrews 10:22-23

Ironically, some of the most talented people are the most afraid people, maybe because they have a keener perspective of both the good and the evil in the world and in their own lives. But talent doesn't always produce confidence.

Love does, or should.

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us. (1 John 4.17-18)

Shakespeare Quotations for Ministers, by John Parker

I am a true laborer: I earn that I eat, get that I wear, owe no man hate, envy no man's happiness, glad of other men's good, content with my harm, and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck. AS YOU LIKE IT 3.2



Who ever loved that loved not at first sight. AS YOU LIKE IT 3.5

The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died in his own person . . . in a love cause. . . . Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love. AS YOU LIKE IT 3.4

'Twas I, but 'tis not I. I do not shame
To tell you what I was, in my conversion
So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am. AS YOU LIKE IT 4.3

Mustard Seeds from Favorite Books, Jerrie Barber

Good to Great, by Jim Collins, Copyright © 2001 by Jim Collins

Good is the enemy of great.
And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great.

We don't have great schools, principally because we have good schools. We don't have great government, principally because we have good government. Few people attain great lives, in large part because it is just so easy to settle



for a good life. The vast majority become quite good – and that is their main problem (page 1).

Throughout our research, we were continually reminded of the “hardiness” research studies done by the International Committee for the Study of Victimization. These studies looked at people who had suffered serious adversity – cancer patients, prisoners of war, accident victims, and so forth – and survived. They found that people fell generally into three categories: those who were permanently dispirited by the event, those who got their life back to normal, and those who used the experience as a defining event that made them stronger. The good-to-great companies were like those in the third group, with the “hardiness factor” (page 82).

Finally, after about a hundred meters of silence, I asked, “Who didn’t make it out?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” he said. “The optimists.”

“The optimists? I don’t understand,” I said, now completely confused, given what he’d said a hundred meters earlier.

“The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart” – Admiral Jim Stockdale (page 85).

Another long pause, and more walking. Then he turned to me and said, “This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be” – Admiral Jim Stockdale (page 85).

Spending time and energy trying to “motivate” people is a waste of effort. The real question is not, “How do we motivate our people?” If you have the right people, they will be self-motivated. The key is to not *de*-motivate them. One of the primary ways to de-motivate people is to ignore the brutal facts of reality (page 89).

Freedom is only part of the story and half the truth....That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplanted by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast – Viktor E. Frankl (page 120).

Shortly before his death, I had the opportunity to meet Dave Packard. Despite being one of Silicon Valley’s first self-made billionaires, he lived in the same small house that he and his wife built for themselves in 1957, overlooking a simple orchard. The tiny kitchen, with its dated linoleum, and the simply furnished living room bespoke a man who needed no material symbols to proclaim “I’m a billionaire. I’m important. I’m successful.” “His idea of a good time,” said Bill Terry, who worked with Packard for thirty-six years, “was to get some of his friends together to string some barbed wire.” Packard bequeathed his \$5.6 billion estate to a charitable foundation and, upon his death, his family created a eulogy pamphlet, with a photo of him sitting on a tractor in farming

clothes. The caption made no reference to his stature as one of the great industrialists of the twentieth century. It simply read: "David Packard, 1912-1996, Rancher, etc" (page 193).

Smile of the Month

An inebriated man came stumbling out of a bar and almost knocked down his minister, who happened to be walking past.

"Oh, Pastor, I'm so sorry for you to see me like this," he said.

"Well, I don't know why you should be sorry for me to see you this way, Sam. After all, the Lord sees you now, doesn't he?"

"Yeah," said the drunk, "but he's not such a blabbermouth as you are" (*The Friendship Factor*, by Alan Loy McGinnis, page 115).



Barber Clippings

We are starting specific activities to prepare for the preacher search. There was a *Family Meeting* Sunday night, February 8. We discussed constructing a time line, preparing an *Introduction to Hendersonville: Church and Community*, and a self-study to think about who we are and what we will be expecting in the next preacher.

I had an opportunity recently to visit a congregation for a weekend and discuss transition plans with them. Their preacher is leaving after more than twenty years. I found there, as in every congregation, them wondering about how and when to proceed. Some think that a period of grieving and evaluation would be profitable. Others are asking what the elders are waiting on. They know the preacher is leaving. Why don't we have someone in here trying out?

When asked if they should start the self-study and search process while the present preacher is in his final weeks with the congregation, I replied, "Using the marriage analogy, starting now would be like looking for your next wife while your present wife is in the care of hospice."

Gail and I continue to enjoy our work. Gail is teaching Tuesday morning ladies' Bible class each week.

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My book with Paul Seawright, *Abide With Me: A Photographic Journey Through the Great British Hymns*, should be published by New Leaf Press by May.

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