

## Protagonist Corner

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"What did you do today?" It was the standard opening line of the one-act play we produce almost every night. In that precious hour between pulling the casserole out of the microwave and rushing off to the next committee meeting, my husband and I take turns between bites retelling the events of the day.

But that night, when it was my turn to recount the little successes and failures of that day's laboring in the vineyards, I fell mute. What did I do today? My mind went blank. I must have done *something*. I felt tired. But what had I accomplished? I could not recall any logical order to the day. I could not account for how all of the last nine hours had been spent. There had been staff meeting, phone calls, some visits made, some magazines perused. I'd lunched at the college with some students, I'd checked out some books at the library, I'd selected some hymns for Sunday morning. But there were no signs of souls saved, nor new theological truths uncovered, nor the Kingdom come. There were still homeless people in Atlanta, injustices in El Salvador, wars in the Middle East, and missiles in Europe. Even Sunday's sermon was unfinished! What had I done? I was silent; the routine question for some reason this time had stirred an urgency to find some meaning in the day's activity.

As I pondered the question, playful images began to form around which the hodge-podge events of the day could cluster. A light began to break. "I suppose," I said slowly, "it was a day of cross stitch, and aerobics, and jigsaw puzzles."

"Didn't you go to work today?" Gary looked puzzled, for I had named three of my favorite forms of recreation. Cross Stitching . . . aerobic dancing . . . puzzling over jigsaw pieces . . . these were ways I spent my fun time. They weren't the usual agenda for a day at the church.

These activities, however, could serve as images for the routine, day-to-day, sometimes mundane work of ministry in the local church. They could help me recognize some worth in all that nameless activity that had equaled "today."

*Cross stitching*: tiny threads, slowly stitched into tiny crosses, that eventually form a picture. Sometimes it is a simple pattern—with one eye on the TV screen, during the nine innings of the ballgame one can produce a finished piece. Other patterns take weeks, or even months, to complete. Frequently the picture is indiscernable until all of the colors are stitched in their proper places. There is no way to cut corners, to skip stitches, or to hurry things along. To produce a masterpiece takes one stitch after another, on and on and on. . . .

So much of ministry is done stitch by stitch. To sponsor a soup kitchen, night shelter, or day care center, to form a peacemaking task force, to maintain a Christian education program, is to be engaged in a lot of routine, daily, even

dull motions of maintenance and motivation. Much of the valuable work of ministry is almost unintelligible as we take a stitch or two each day. Sometimes we may never see the finished picture: the children of the confirmation class go off to college; the couples we counsel are transferred; or we move to a different parish before the refugee family arrives. But we keep making the phone calls, visiting the hospitals, preparing the sermons, in faith that God holds the frame for the finished picture. There is, too, a joy just in participating in a part of the creation.

*Aerobics:* stretching, moving, panting—an hour of vigorous exercise for heart and muscles. But it is not much good to exercise only once, or to quit after just a week or two. Aerobic exercise requires commitment. Then after weeks you begin to feel better (and hopefully look better!). If you miss a session you can tell you missed something important. You discover you have more energy. Are there not some daily aerobics of ministry? Reading, study, prayer and meditation, talking theology with colleagues. It is easy to let that kind of exercise lapse, especially if Mr. Jones is having surgery, the phone keeps ringing, and the Kindergarten coffee is this morning. The temptation is to put it off until tomorrow. (“I can read that article later . . . I’ll skip that part of the exegesis this week.”) Sometimes emergencies require that we cancel these aerobics, but after too many tomorrows it starts to show. The congregation sees our sermons get flabby. We notice that when faced with the crises of faith we too quickly are winded and spent. The aerobics of ministry keep our hearts going; they help us stay in shape for the challenges. When recalling the events of the day we may not remember to list the magazine we read, the new book we purchased, or the time of prayer and meditation but when they are omitted we soon notice.

*Puzzles:* In using jigsaw puzzles as an image for the daily routine of ministry, I think particularly of the surprises. After pouring over the puzzle for hours, suddenly you find the missing edge piece. Or, even though you were sure you tried that piece before, *this* time it fits. Or when you’re walking past the puzzle, with no intention of stopping, your eye falls on the little dog-shaped blue piece of sky you had tried to find last night.

In the midst of, and often because of, routine events of ministry, sometimes unexpected pieces fit together and surprises bridge the gap between expectations and reality. The retired army colonel returns from the soup kitchen saying, “Jesus would have been a street person.” A father volunteers to organize the senior high youth group. A circle Bible lesson prompts a grandmother to write her senator protesting military budget increases. These puzzle pieces are not spectacular, and in the broad scope of history they may soon be forgotten. But I believe they are small pieces of the Kingdom, falling into place, and I greet them with cries of joy.

Maybe that is what the routine, day-by-day, sometimes mundane activities of ministry are all about. They don’t take the place of the big events, or the corporate actions. But alongside the spectacular acts we are privileged to be involved in, those simple exercises, those daily routines can miraculously help change lives. Most conversions don’t occur overnight. Wednesday night suppers, church school classes, circle meetings, service projects can slowly reshape

lives and change ways of thinking.

Although this look at ministry grew partly out of a sense of discouragement in not having accomplished “great things,” it is not intended as an apology for lacking a list of achievements. It is certainly not offered as an excuse for expending energy in silly, petty, worthless activity. It is simply an invitation to celebrate the mundane. It is an affirmation of faith that, even when the reply to the question, “What did you do today?” is as dull as last Saturday’s list of household chores, chances are it really matters. The cross stitching, the aerobics, the jigsaw puzzles of parish life all add up, even if we cannot see it today. And maybe, as we drift off to sleep at night, we will hear the affirmation, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little.”