

Unwavering Trust

The following is the first in a series of personal reflections on the life of a priest by the Rev. Patrick Gahan, rector of St. Stephen's Church, Wimberley, Texas.

“Would you give me a push,” he asked as soon as he spied me.

I visited Pastor Mendlemann today at the nursing home. I did not plan the visit, but once I got in my truck to go to the bank, I made the detour. The pastor was alone in the dining hall. Lunch had been over for an hour. So when he saw me, he asked, “Would you give me a push?”

Pastor Mendlemann is a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor. He served the same parish in Annapolis, Md., for 36 years. He said the midshipmen from the U.S. Naval Academy kept it fresh for him for all those years.

I was toting under my arm some brief addresses by Evelyn Underhill, the English mystic. I planned to read a few to him, but the Lutheran pastor wanted none of that. As soon as we arrived at his room and I had offered my hello to his Roman Catholic roommate, Pastor Mendlemann pointed to a stately volume on his bedside table, *A World of Beloved Poems*, or some such book. I placed it in the pastor's shaking, shrunken hands and watched warily as he made the turning of each page seem like a Herculean task. The pastor found the page he wanted and lateraled the book back to me. He asked me to read the selection, “Bishop Doane on His Dog.”

Bishop Doane, the speaker in the poem, begins, “I am quite sure he [his dog] thinks that I am God — Since he *is* God, on whom each one depends.” His dog never wavers in his fidelity to the bishop. Neither does the dog's trust in the bishop's benevolence ever falter. Bishop Doane, who actually served as the Episcopal Bishop of New Jersey, laments that his faith in God pales beside that of his dog.

He looks love at me, deep as words e'er spake;
And from me never crumb nor sup will take,
But he wags thanks with his most vocal tail.
And when some crashing noise wakes all his fear,
He is content and quiet, if I am near —
Secure that my protection will prevail.
So, faithful, mindful, thankful, trustful, he
Tells me what I unto my God should be.

An 80-year-old pastor was my prophet on Tuesday afternoon, with his dated, sappy poem about a bishop and a dog. My reading of Evelyn Underhill seemed a little out of place after that. Yet, spurred on by the poem, I read an address Mrs. Underhill gave to English clergy in 1926:



A deep humble contrition, a sense of our creaturely imperfection and unworthiness, gratitude for all that is given us, burning and increasing charity that longs to spend itself on other souls — all these things are signs of spiritual vitality ... Thus it is surely of the first importance for those who are called to exacting lives of service to determine that nothing shall interfere with the development and steady, daily practice of loving and adoring prayer, a prayer full of intimacy and awe. It alone maintains the soul's energy and peace, and checks the temptation to leave God for God's service.

(The Soul's Delight, p. 17, Upper Room, 1998)

Clergy like to think we are taking God along with us, much like we tote our Holy Communion sets under our arms. Then we find God has been waiting for us in a feeble old man in a wheelchair, with translucent skin, bed sores, and a voice so airy and slight that a word or two of every sentence wafts unheard into the ceiling tiles. It is easier, far easier, to carry God in the crook of our arm. Then we don't have to hear that we dash off from His presence every day in the imagination that we are serving him.

Better to think like a dog.

As I was about to take my leave, Pastor Mendlemann took my hands in his and grasped them more tightly than I his. He prayed that we would *adore* God, in raspy words so unadorned that I knew they echoed from his heart. There in a nursing home room, with the aroma of urine and bleach, and the sound of wheelchairs, shuffling feet, and the irritating buzz of the intercom, a man whose body was failing was holding the hands of a younger man whose spirit had faltered.

He gave me a push. □