***You picked a fine time to leave me.***

I have always been intrigued with “church planting” – that is – starting a new church. Not everyone has the advantage of living in a rapidly growing part of the country, where placing a church in an area that is projected to grow is not always as challenging as going into existing communities that are static in terms of growth. Many church growth models simply are designed for areas that are growing. “Cast the net – there’s the fish.” The proverbial “rust belt” sells redundant church buildings, and churches in coal mining towns struggle to exist. It was in a struggling, coal mining town where God called me to plant a church.

The initial building that we rented was a rather unique building, with the ground floor space having been a restaurant, and the basement being a tavern. As is the case in hard working mill and mine towns, the tavern is a common gathering place, and many men gather to talk about the good old days when the mines and the mills were active. Occasionally the activity level “in the basement” was more than audible to those of us on the ground floor celebrating Mass. We did settle on a few ground rules: at the Offertory, the people in the basement were not supposed to mill around the congregation trying to sell raffle tickets. We also asked that the juke box be turned down during Mass. Most of the time congeniality ruled.

On the Sunday after the Feast of the Ascension I was led to emphasize to those who had lost so much in their lives economically that Jesus promised that he would not leave us comfortless, and that God would send His Holy Spirit — the Holy Comforter. I went on to say that the Ascension of Jesus did not mean that He was leaving His people, but rather He would be available to all His people as He reigned in Glory. He did not “leave” us. At that moment a “spirited” customer in the Tavern accidentally bumped into the juke box, and blasting, as loud as it could, came the song, ***“You picked a fine time to leave me, —Lucille.”***

After a few nervous moments with a congregation of restrained worshippers, I said that while it was true that many names were applied to our Lord, that I do not believe that “Lucille” was one of them!

Church planting can be an exciting endeavor, but every church planter needs a little time in a shrinking, dispirited location where energized leadership can be a great gift to people who feel deserted, by the Church, by Industry, by the Government. Jesus went into obscure villages and shared the Kingdom. Success is not always measured by numbers – it is often measured by obedient persistence.