

# CEDAR CROSSING

By Marcus Meyer

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## POTLUCK AT ST. JOHN

Ah, the venerable potluck. At some churches, it has almost attained the status of liturgical. Here at St. John in Cedar Crossing, we hold to the conservative potluck of tradition, yet we do not feel limited to the mere culinary version. By remaining open-minded, we have expanded the concept into a more philosophical cuisine. With that thought in mind, we are offering a potluck of stories to the collection that a host of characters, who call themselves members here at St. John, have concocted, stewed, baked, boiled, and grilled.

As the spiritual leader of this small country parish, I inherited the task of preparing this cookbook, so to speak. In the process, I tried to assign some spiritual significance to the exaggerated dishes of the storytellers. Naturally, under this kind of arrangement, I felt the need to contribute a few stories of my own. My times of peak inspiration usually came while looking out the church office window at the herd of buffalo grazing in the field

across the road. I'm not sure if that point carries any significance for either me or the buffalo.

As a bonus, St. Peter's in Jack Valley has graciously allowed us to include some tales from their members in the big city. St. Peter's is the daughter church of St. John and thus has shared members, funds, and potlucks for a few years. To help you better understand the relationship between these two parishes and why they would collaborate on such a volume, I must divert to the side path of St. Peter's inception.

As a small country parish, St. John had enough members with the wisdom and foresight to see that the church's growth would face limitations. Such wisdom found influence in the foundational mind of Walter Konemeyer, a benevolent yet contrary departed soul. Mr. Konemeyer's paradoxical character led him to vote against every proposal ever made during his thirty-year membership at St. John and then, when his time to leave this earthly life arrived, to leave a tidy sum of money to the parish. When news of his gift came out, there were many who believed it to be a bribe of sorts to get

him into heaven, but I maintained that we should exercise Christian charity and give him the benefit of the doubt. In a final gesture of contrariness or outreach, depending on your perspective, he stipulated in his will that no one in the St. John family could benefit from the gift. It had to be used to start a mission church in a more deserving locale. And thus, the wisdom to reach out to the people of Jack Valley came to the members of St. John, and St. Peter's began as a mission church.

Additionally, Pastor Fred Anderson of St. Peter's is a friend of mine and a forthright fellow. He is no more prone to exaggeration than I am. Although I must concede, with a certain amount of envy, that he is much more competent than I am in rearranging the facts to fit the situation.

I remember the time when Fred and I went to a seminar on church growth in Kansas City. During a recess, we ran into the Reverend Edward Cooper, the founder of a megachurch out west. Rev. Cooper was ... well, let's just say he was one of those individuals who always let his ego get in the way of everything he did. After he had filled our ears to

overflowing with all that he had accomplished in building his kingdom, I mean church, he asked us about our parishes. I humbly gave an account of the flock at the small country church where I served. Fred, in his own unique mathematical way, began throwing statistics and numbers about St. Peter's from all different directions. I remain a witness to the fact that there was not one falsehood in Fred's entire response. Rev. Cooper left our presence all red-faced and puffy. We figured he had allowed his conceit to make certain inferences that were baseless according to the facts.

Well, enough about Fred and St. Peter's. I've got a potluck to go to down in the basement.

"Hi, Gladys. Do we have lots of goodies today?"

"Hi, Pastor. Yes, we do. Do you even need to ask?"

"I apologize for the obvious faux pas, dear lady."

"By the power invested in me as President of the Ladies Auxiliary, I forgive you your sin."

"I like it, Gladys. Do you need any help?"

“No, I think we’re fine, but thanks for asking.”

“Hold on, Gladys. Here comes Harley. I wonder whose dish he’s going to confiscate today?”

I could best describe Harley French, euphemistically, as being the most fiscally conscientious member of our congregation. He has held the title for some twenty years, according to several members who have known him longer than I have. He earned that status by bringing a paper bag to potlucks that, in appearance, has some culinary delight, but which, in fact, is empty. When no one is looking, he picks up someone else’s dish, slips it into the bag, and then, feigning having forgotten something, he steps back out. When he returns, he makes sure as many people as possible see what he has brought to the potluck.

“Okay, there he goes. Whose dish did he grab, Gladys?”

“That’s Martha Banks’s tuna casserole. That old fool. Everybody knows he does it.”

“Just part of his mystique, Gladys. Just part of his mystique.”

Walking over to the two long tables filled with homemade delicacies, I prepare a mental scouting report that I refrain from reporting to anyone but myself. The first dish that I can reliably identify by sight is a chicken casserole from Granny Sophie out at The Homestead. I hear she's going to be taking a big trip down to some kinfolk in Florida. Maybe she'll share some of her experiences with a letter or two. Next, there is a large bowl of pretels, undoubtedly from one of the hale and hearty farm folks. I don't recognize the oval bowl of what appears to be a meat dish, so I point to it as Gladys walks by.

"Buford Douglas's buffalo innards," said Gladys.

Buford is an interesting case. For a humble equipment mechanic, he has eclectic tastes in cuisine, and his cosmopolitan views on knowledge seem remarkable. But once you've been in Cedar Crossing long enough, you will find the simple pastoral life here has produced several such individuals.

About midway down the table, I find a rectangular dish of green Jell-O that bears a resemblance to a football field. A sign with the words “Go Crusaders” on it accompanies the dish. It must be from Lorraine Johnson, whose son Eric is quarterback of the Crusaders college football team.

The beverage counter has an array of the usual drinks, with a more than ample supply of tea. Last, but not least, the dessert area occupies about a third of the second table. I’m considering making a resolution at the next council meeting to bump the table space allotted to dessert by 50%, if I don’t run into too much resistance from the ladies in an unofficial straw poll I’m taking.

Yes, as I look at the tables of a simple potluck from buffalo innards to green Jell-O, I see far more than meets the eye. I wish you bon appétit in your journey through the rest of this potluck of stories.

*Pastor Arnold “Arnie” Schmidt*

# YOU COULD SEE VULTURES OVERHEAD

*St. John Lutheran Church in Cedar Crossing recently celebrated their 75th Anniversary. It only seems appropriate to share with you how it all began.*

Rev. Darrell Wolfe spent fourteen hours working on his first sermon. He took the call from a congregation that shared a certain bond of pioneer spirit. Pastor Wolfe and the members of St. John began their relationship in the middle of a corn field that had yielded its last harvest only three days earlier. The rough accommodations of their new venture did not have the slightest dampening effect upon the forty-two people sitting on bales of straw that served as initial pews. They knew that they would build structures, and all the trappings would follow. For the time being, their worship

would take the simplest form possible—the heart of the created, to the heart of the Creator.

While Pastor Wolfe welcomed everyone to the inaugural service, Jimmy Fogel whispered to his grandpa, “Poppop, lookie at Gracie over there.”

“Yes, Jimmy, Grace likes to follow me everywhere.”

Bud Fogel named all his dairy cows after distant relatives. Grace the dairy cow happened to be where she was because Bud’s farm framed the church grounds on three sides. The future home of St. John belonged to Bud’s farm until he gave it to the church. So, Grace looking out over the fence with Bud just a short distance away did not surprise anyone.

With no pump organ to lead, Pastor Wolfe thought he should choose a hymn that everyone would know, so he picked “Amazing Grace” to begin the service. With a resonant baritone voice, Pastor Wolfe set the pace, “Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound.”

As soon as the word “sound” came out of the reverend’s mouth, Grace let loose with a loud, “Mooooo!”

Jimmy Fogel giggled loudly, and the adults had a hard time not joining him with laughter. But for a momentary hesitation, Pastor Wolfe tried to maintain some sense of dignity and continue with the hymn.

“That saved ... a wretch ... like moo!”

The preacher, unaware of his mistake, sang the following verses pretty much alone, because everyone else spent the next couple of minutes asking each other, “Did he say moo?”

Finally, the moment arrived for Pastor Wolfe’s first sermon. He opened with a glorious prayer, urging all those in attendance to listen attentively. In hindsight, some would say that the prefatory prayer lasted as long as the sermon itself. The preacher pulled out his sermon paper and carefully laid it out on the rudimentary lectern that Jacob Dreps built the night before. In writing his sermon, Darrell put a lot of thought into his opening

sentence. He wanted it to grab the congregation and hold their attention.

With perspiration dripping from his forehead, the preacher glanced at his notes and boldly proclaimed, “Don’t let worry kill you—let the church help.”

While that cautionary statement certainly caught the attention of his flock, he quickly realized it wasn’t the opening statement he had penned for his first sermon. Confused thoughts flooded his mind as he looked back down at his notes. The title of the paper in front of him read, “Actual Announcements Taken from Church Bulletins.” He immediately felt his pockets for his sermon, but he found no other paper. Remembering that he had read this humorous list before going to bed, he decided that it had to be a simple case of putting the wrong paper in the wrong place.

In a situation like that, the concept of time can vary between the speaker and the audience. While Pastor Wolfe considered it a lifetime, the congregation regarded it as little more than a moment. The

preacher needed to make a decision. Could he possibly salvage things by using the list in front of him as a basis for a sermon? He quickly looked at items two and three on the list:

2) Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community.

3) The rose bud on the altar this morning is to announce the birth of Gunther James Heber, the son of Rev. and Mrs. Ingmar Heber.

No, no, he couldn't continue with that. Panic blocked any memory of what he had written for his sermon ... the Bible ... yes, he could read something from the Bible and try to improvise. He decided to just open the scriptures and randomly select a passage. While reaching for his Bible, Pastor Wolfe thought he should bridge the significant time gap he perceived with a comment that might prepare them for his improvised sermon.

“Brothers and sisters in Christ, I hope the words I’m now going to read become the starting point of a long and prosperous relationship.”

Feeling like he was on the way to salvaging the moment, the preacher opened the Bible and made his random selection, “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you in the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

As fate would have it, those sitting upon the straw did, at that very moment, sort of stiffen up their necks when they heard those words. When Pastor Wolfe saw the faces of those to whom he had addressed the words, he became deathly silent. It looked like all life had drained from their relationship.

Jimmy Fogel pulled on his grandpa’s sleeve and pointed at a large group of birds circling above the stiff-necked people gathered in the corn field.

“Poppop, what kind of birds are those?”

The young lad’s question echoed in the minds of everyone present, and they all just naturally looked up.

“Those are, uh, vultures, Jimmy,” answered Bud Fogel.

“Oh, we saw them flying over that dead skunk on the trail yesterday,” replied Jimmy.

The minister stumbled through a correction and mercifully ended his sermon with an “Amen”, to which the congregation obediently responded “Amen”, as if it were just a regular part of the planned liturgy.

The good people sitting on the bales of straw took it all in stride. What was, at one point, perceived to be birds of ill omen by those sturdy farmers, constituted but a slight bump in the road to a long and prosperous relationship. Two years after the good reverend passed on, he was posthumously awarded with the recognition of having given the second worst first sermon in the synod’s history.

# ALL OTHER GROUND IS SINKING SAND

One of the first projects that the good people of St. John Lutheran Church in Cedar Crossing took under their wings was the construction of a church building on the farmland donated by Bud Fogel. The Building Committee engaged the services of Randolph P. Farnsenmeir, renowned church architect, to come up with a plan for a modest structure suitable for a small rural congregation on its early legs. A crucial part of Mr. Farnsenmeir's plans included a large basement that would serve as a general use room. This basement provided the best dollar value for space, storm protection, and aesthetic quality.

The construction crew arrived early on the first Monday morning of June. A clearing tractor began scraping the surface of the general area of the building layout. Once the tractor operator finished his work, the construction crew laid out the lines for the church foundation so the excavating

crew would know exactly where to dig. The excavating machine got there later that afternoon to begin the digging work. After just barely scratching the surface, the machine operator quit for the day and said he would get most of the digging done the next day.

The excavator returned on Tuesday morning and filled the first bucket with dark brown, fertile soil. He operated his machine with great dexterity, giving Rev. Wolfe confidence in a smooth start. After about an hour, a loud thud shook the ground so violently it caused Pastor Darrell to spill his morning coffee onto his shirt. The excavator operator got off his machine and walked down into the shallow pit.

Pastor Darrell walked over to the pit and said, “What happened?”

“A rock,” the operator answered. “There’s a huge rock sitting under here. I’m gonna move the machine and see just how far that rock extends into the digging zone.”

“Hopefully, it’s not very big,” Darrell said, while trying to decide if he needed to change his shirt.

The operator nodded and moved his machine. After doing a few more test holes, he parked his machine and walked over to the reverend.

“She’s a big un, Reverend. Extends throughout the foundation area. I’ll finish out the day scraping all the dirt I can off it, so they can come in with some dynamite and break it up.”

“That’s not going to be a problem, is it?” asked Darrell.

“No, Reverend. I run into this a lot, so I know the blasters really good. It’s a little unusual to find a layer of rock so shallow out here in this part of the county, though. But we’ll get that hole dug. Don’t you worry about that.”

Pastor Darrell relayed all the information to the Building Committee, who then held a meeting and concurred with the excavator’s assessment. The blasting crew could not come until the following Monday, so Rev. Wolfe had an extra Sunday

service to seek the prayers and support of the congregation for the unfortunate delay.

The blasting crew did their job on Monday, and the excavator got back to work digging and clearing out the loose rock. By Wednesday he had enough of the rock layer removed so that they could pour the basement. Pastor Darrell breathed a sigh of relief when the machine operator came over to him and said he had finished. Darrell walked over to the edge of the pit and looked down. At first, he really couldn't believe his eyes, but it stood out so clearly that not even the doubting Thomas could have denied it. Somehow, in the blasting and clearing process, a graven image of the crucifix now appeared in the layer of rock remaining in the basement pit.

Pastor Darrell called the Building Committee, and they rushed over to the site. Yes, they all agreed the image stood out clearly. So, the Building Committee appointed a subcommittee to research all options for dealing with such a phenomenon. When the Building Subcommittee for Crucifix Research had contacted everyone they could think of

with knowledge on the subject, and when Rev. Wolfe had talked to everyone in the upper echelon of church superiors, the Building Committee received a report. They then forwarded the report to the voting body of the congregation. Some would say that such protocol was kind of silly since almost everybody in the infant parish belonged to either the Building Committee or its Subcommittee, but that's just how it always went. What came out of the Emergency Voter's Meeting amounted to nothing more than the fact that nobody knew what to do.

On Friday of the following week, Pastor Darrell's battle with anxiety reached its climax. He had a powerful urge to write the seminary and suggest they include a required course in building construction in the curriculum, but he ably fought off the notion. The reverend had to make a decision that would probably cause waves throughout the elite of the synod's inner circles, but their lack of help in the situation forced him to take matters into his own hands. Darrell got up bright and early on Saturday morning, picked up the telephone, and dialed

the number for St. Mary's. Father Paul said he would be glad to come over and look at the image.

"What do you think, Father Paul?" asked Pastor Darrell. "I know you have probably had a great deal more experience than I have with such images."

"Yes, my son, it certainly is very clear."

"What would you do if you were in my place?" asked the fellow theologian.

"I recall a case of something very similar with the Virgin Mother some years back. Those in charge called in the bishop, and he came up with a solution that worked out well."

"What was the solution?" asked the bewildered Rev. Wolfe.

"He suggested that since God himself had created the rock and had taken the time to put the image there, it must therefore behoove us to accept the gift of His creative hand and put it to some productive use."

“But in this case, how do we know that God put the image there? Couldn’t the dynamite or the excavator have caused it?”

“Did you see the dynamite or the excavator create the image?” asked Father Paul.

“Well, no,” answered Pastor Darrell.

“Then we must rely on a certain amount of faith,” replied the priest.

“So, what should we do then, Father Paul?”

“I say let the Church profit from it and use the funds to further the universal mission.”

“Do you mean like charge admission?” asked Pastor Darrell.

“Exactly.”

Rev. Wolfe struggled with Father Paul’s suggestion for the next week. Finally, though, he presented it to the congregation with grave doubts about how they would accept it. The vote was 43 to 0, with only Farley Konemeyer abstaining, to go into an underground partnership with St. Mary’s. Farley’s non-vote didn’t mean much because he

abstained from every vote ever taken for thirty years. His son, Walter Konemeyer, would continue his unique vision years later.

Since the image sat on St. John's site, the members of St. John agreed to take responsibility for the upkeep of the image. St. Mary's would manage marketing for the partnership. St. John had to move its building site over about two hundred feet, but that seemed so insignificant compared to all the other decisions. The partnership agreement between the two congregations stipulated that the admission charge would be \$2.00 for adults and \$1.00 for children under ten years of age. Members of St. John's and St. Mary's would receive a 25% discount on the admission price. Atheists would have to pay a 10% surcharge.

If you visit St. John's today, you will still find the site in immaculate condition, though the image has dulled some from the weathering process. Over the years, many rumors floated about the region as to why the synod never objected to the shrine at St. John's. Adding to those rumors, an anonymous group from the same city as the headquarters of the

synod provided a sign for the entrance to the pit.  
On it were the words:

My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
But wholly trust in Jesus' name.

On Christ the solid rock I stand,  
All other ground is sinking sand;  
All other ground is sinking sand.

## SUNSETS IN THE PUDDLES

The pouring rain beat heavily against the church office window as I tried to finish up the last of my sermon for the coming Sunday. I took a paper towel and wiped clear the foggy window to see what the overall sky looked like. The horizontal rain and bent over small trees told me I should find additional inside work to do. And so, I did. About an hour later, the storm subsided, and I closed the office to head home. Walking outside, I saw that the dark, menacing clouds now appeared to be to the east, maybe even over Profitville/Jack Valley. I wondered if Pastor Fred might now be trying to find additional work to do inside his office. In Cedar Crossing, though, the western sky brought a bright orange setting sun.

Stepping around the many puddles on the way to my car, I suddenly stopped. In my hurry to leave, I realized what a moment I was missing. People have paid good money to go to art museums to absorb the beauty of the painted canvas,

sometimes of glorious sunsets, and here I stepped around a dozen such canvases at my feet. Large and small puddles hosted beautiful reflections of the fiery sun from many different angles. I leaned against the car, even though my pants got wet from the beads of water on the finish, and just absorbed the pictures being painted for me. When the artist finished for the day, I got in the car and headed home.

Later that night, as I sat in the big easy chair in the living room, I began thinking about the scene in the church parking lot. It got me to thinking of a story I had read somewhere. I don't even remember where I had read it, but I do remember that it was titled "Sunsets in the Puddles". The beauty that the title evokes had its roots in the horror of a Nazi death camp. Taken from the memoirs of an Auschwitz survivor, the vignette described how one prisoner standing outside a building became moved by the reflection of a brilliant sunset in the puddles of a recent rain on the camp's compound. He went back into the building housing so many who had lost hope, and he urged those inside to come

outside. He wanted others to see the beauty of the sunset in the puddles, hoping it would strengthen their will to survive. While the account showed that it gave a brief uplift to the people, it also noted that the Nazis eliminated most of those inside less than a week later to make room for a new group of prisoners.

I have often wondered what the large population of German immigrants in the Cedar Crossing area must have been thinking about the land they left during those horrific years. Although my ancestors arrived in America in the mid-1800s, they still had plenty of relatives in Germany. I don't remember any conversations about the subject as I was growing up. I need to go talk to those in the area with any recollections of that time before they are gone—there aren't many left.

The next week I called on Elsie Gutenmeier out at the Randolph farm in Bast Township, just west of Cedar Crossing. Elsie is a member of St. John, but since moving out to her granddaughter's place, she doesn't get into Cedar Crossing much anymore. She's now at age 87, which would have

made her a teenager during those years. Elsie welcomed me inside the house, and her granddaughter offered me some tea, which I gladly accepted. Though the years had severely limited her mobility, it didn't stop her from talking—her words, not mine—made even more amusing by the fact she was always so quiet.

“What can you tell me about life in your family's household during those years, Elsie?” I asked.

“I remember my mother and father spoke a lot of Low German at home, so I picked up bits and pieces here and there,” said Elsie. “But they were very cautious about speaking it in public during the war years, forcing themselves to master the English language.”

“Did you fear for your safety here in America?”

“No, not really,” answered Elsie. “If there was any intimidation, I didn't see it. We spent so much time out here in the country working the farm we had little exposure to anything outside this community, which was largely German immigrants. I

had some cousins in the city that spoke of a few incidents.”

“What about relatives still living in Germany?” I asked. “Did you hear anything from them about life there?”

“I was young and didn’t have that direct connection to anyone over there, but I would hear my mother and father talking sometimes. I know I had an aunt and uncle active in hiding Jews from the Nazis until they got caught and were executed as traitors. The strongest thing that I gathered from their conversations was the absolute hopelessness that many Germans felt. So many of their fellow countrymen had ‘totally lost their moral convictions’ and the decent people felt the nation was so out of control that they felt powerless to change anything. That neighbor you had known and trusted for so many years; that neighbor who helped you rebuild your barn when it burned down; that other neighbor that tended to you when you were sick; now, you had to watch what you said because you didn’t know who would turn against you next.”

“Things we have no concept of now,” I said.

“There were many people that secretly hoped Germany would lose the war, but they also feared what would happen to their nation afterwards,” said Elsie. “The Nazi propaganda machine was so strong.”

Elsie asked me to go over to her bookshelf and find a book titled Two Women and a War. The well-worn binding made it a little difficult to find, but I eventually located it, and I took it to her.

“This book is a two-section volume, one called Diary by Grete Paquin and the other called Pillar of Fire by Renate Hagen,” said Elsie. “It is a very good account of the lives of two women as they try to cope with life amid the Nazi war machine. Their faith in God kept them alive.”

Elsie opened the book to a place where she had a greeting card serving as a bookmark. “I read and reread this book many times when I was a young woman,” said Elsie. “I’d like to read you a diary entry for June 20, 1942. Frau Paquin wrote:

I learned a prayer taught in Nazi kindergarten: *Let's say our prayers now and think of Adolf Hitler, who gives us our daily bread and leads us out of every trouble.*

And Gustav told me from Bremen, "A young teacher ordered an outing for his boys (ten to twelve years old). They were to bring no sandwiches. They walked and then had a rest. He told them about the five thousand who Jesus fed and said, 'Well, I think if we pray, Jesus might feed us well today,' and clapped his hands and called, 'Jesus, Jesus, here are hungry children!' But nothing happened and they went on. At the second rest he did the same, and the children began laughing, but then grew tired and later sullen and bad tempered. When they had come into a village, he said, 'Now let's see if our Leader has got a heart for his youth. Adolph Hitler! Here are hungry German children! Have you got anything to feed them?' They threw the door of the inn open, and young girls of the Hitler youth came out; they had dinner laid inside with lovely food and plenty for all."

Elsie and I just sat in silence for a minute or two. Finally, Elsie said, “That one entry kind of sums up what the decent people of Germany faced in their homeland.”

“Yes, it does, Elsie. Yes, it does.”

We talked for at least another hour, when Elsie abruptly told me it was time for her nap. I laughed, thanked her for sharing that part of her life with me, and wished her a pleasant nap.

When I got home that night, I turned on the television and clicked on a news station. I watched for about five minutes when they showed a montage of a politician making speeches. At the first speech he told the audience something; at the second speech he told the other audience the exact opposite; at a third speech he said something totally different from the first two speeches—and they were all on the same subject. I switched to a different news channel and found them lauding and magnifying the politician for his third speech, citing it as a blueprint for changing the world. The second channel’s news anchor never mentioned the first

two speeches. I went back to the first news channel and saw a story that ‘highlighted’ new curriculum mandates from the federal government for kindergarteners. As I listened to the highlights, I thought what a strange word ‘highlights’—for me they would have been more appropriately termed ‘low-lights’. I thought of something that Abraham Lincoln once said, “The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next.” All the scarier, but slightly more understandable, was the thought that the area where the Reformation was born was also the area that produced Hitler and the Nazis. The deception of propaganda relies heavily on the repetition of the lie until it sounds like the truth. I don’t mind telling you, there is a part of me that worries about my children’s future. Maybe that sounds like a crack in the armor of faith, but sometimes I feel the weight of the daily barrage.

The following afternoon we had another storm rumble through our area. When the skies finally cleared, the day ended with another glorious red sunset. As I once again stepped around several

puddles, I stopped. For there in front of me again was God's canvas, and I remembered the prisoner of the death camp who tried to strengthen those who had lost hope by seeing the beauty of the "Sunset in the Puddles".

Pastor Arnold Schmidt

*Muhlenberg Press published Two Women and a War: Diary by Grete Paquin and Pillar of Fire by Renate Hagen in Philadelphia in 1953.*

# A SKUNK IN THE EQUIPMENT SHED

*There are always going to be challenges in life, no matter where you live. The challenge presented here is rarely experienced by city dwellers.*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

Abraham Lincoln once said, “What kills a skunk is the publicity it gives itself.”

That thought firmly came to mind last Saturday when I went into the equipment shed at church to get the tractor out for an afternoon of mowing. Three steps into the shed, and I came face-to-face with an adventurous skunk. As we stared at each other, I took some comfort in the fact that as long as he was facing me, there was no need to panic. I talked to the critter in a hushed voice so he would remain calm.

“Come on, fella. Why don’t you just come outside and enjoy the fresh air. There’s no need to stay in this stuffy old shed. A shed can be a very dangerous place. There are big machines that could hurt a little skunk like you. I’m sure you have a family that needs you, so if you’re done snooping around, it would be best if you just went on about your way.”

The one-sided conversation continued for a little while longer until he grew tired with what I had to say. He turned his back to me, and I quickly retreated behind the shed door because I couldn’t remember the effective range of a skunk. Fortunately, he wasn’t angry or scared, just bored. As I peered around the protective barrier of the door, I considered trying the Ernest T. Bass method of tossing rocks at him to chase him out, but I didn’t want to provoke him into something I might have to live with the rest of the afternoon while on the tractor.

I walked down the path to the fellowship hall to let my wife know what was going on with my strange behavior. When I opened the door and

walked inside, I found seven ladies working on a quilting project.

Taking a gamble, I bellowed, “Ladies, I need a volunteer.”

“With what?” they asked in unison.

“I have a little problem with something in the equipment shed,” I stated in fading volume.

Their blank stares required me to elaborate further. I mumbled, “I need a volunteer to come get the skunk out of the equipment shed.”

They continued to stare at me blankly, so I raised my voice and said, “I need someone to come get the skunk out of the equipment shed.”

It certainly does not require deep thought to grasp the fact that not a single one of those ladies accompanied me out the door. The most I got was a suggestion that I get my gun and shoot him. A fine suggestion, indeed. But they weren’t out in that shed, talking to a cute little face that, up to that point, had done me no harm. Besides, I might miss and blow a hole in the shed. So, I once again peered

out from behind the shed door to catch a glimpse of him still checking out the many nooks that held appeal to a skunk.

I would like to say that the next ten minutes behind the door provided me with ample time to conceive a successful plan, but I cannot make such a claim. Instead, I spent that time contemplating why God created the skunk as He did. Then I drifted into awe at all the critters on this marvelous planet. My thoughts were interrupted by a sandhill crane who walked right by me and entered the shed. I suppose I could have advised him of the other party, but the sandhill cranes seldom listen to me either. A minute later the bird came strolling back out without any sign of a confrontation.

Retreating to the church office where I could keep an eye on the entrance to the shed, I worked on folding bulletins as part of a waiting strategy. Eventually, the little skunk meandered out the door and went on his merry way. I meandered into the equipment shed, started up the tractor, and went about my merry way of mowing.

While the situation came to a peaceful conclusion, there had to be consideration for the future. I thought about posting a sign at the shed door that said, “No skunks, please”, but what if a future visitor couldn’t read, or what if a future visitor read the sign but paid it no heed, or what if Cousin Virgil came out there and thought the sign referred to him? Posting such a sign could also leave me susceptible to prosecution for the violation of some unknown or underutilized federal law. No, in the end, I would be relegated to the simple and anticlimactic act of closing the shed door behind me.

## A MENAGERIE OF COMMONALITY

New construction always serves as fodder for the rumor mill in Cedar Crossing. The latest subject has entered as a new building out on Route 21, only about a mile from St. John. While those in the Oak County Building Department know the true story, they continue to remain mum so they can enjoy the breadth of speculation. In the brief time since they pounded the survey stakes into the ground, I've heard everything from a new factory for space rockets to a new warehouse for a cookie maker (no, I didn't start that one). The former came from the barbershop and the latter from the hardware store. Add a new McDonald's restaurant claim that originated from a booth in the Chit Chat Café, and you can see how minds starving for enlightenment keep the rumor mill churning. Despite reassurances from an unnamed reliable source that a McDonald's restaurant would be a remote possibility in the middle of farmland ten miles from town, Harvey

the proprietor of the Chit Chat Café has hedged his bets and started serving more generous portions on his lunch specials. With the church so close to the new construction, I am frequently consulted on its progress. After a couple of cups of coffee at the Chit Chat Café, I give highly questionable updates.

Alas, a new sign appeared on the subject property—Coming soon: Hartman’s Veterinary Clinic. Such a revelation just about put the final nail in the coffin of speculation on the matter. I say, “Just about”, for it merely meant that now the focus shifted to the owner, Jeremiah Hartman. Here again, conversations ran the gamut from a disbarred lawyer turned veterinarian to a Chinese spy planting intelligence gathering devices into our dogs, cats, and cows. A certain amount of disappointment came with the news that Jeremiah Hartman came from a farm upstate and loved working with animals.

About a month after the doors to the veterinary clinic opened, I received an urgent phone call.

“Hello, this is Pastor Schmidt.”

“Is this Pastor Schmidt?” the voice asked.

“Yes,” I said, smiling. “Yes, it is. Who do I have the pleasure of talking to?”

“This is Fee-Fee.”

“Um, I don’t believe I know a Fee-Fee,” I replied.

“I don’t mean Fee-Fee,” said the voice. “Pastor, I meant this is Rebecca Long. I’m sorry. I’m a little befuddled right now.”

“Hi, Rebecca. What can I do for you?”

“It’s Fee-Fee, Pastor. Can you come over right away?”

“Fee-Fee? I’m sorry, Rebecca. I don’t understand. Who’s Fee-Fee?”

“Fee-Fee is my baby.”

Rebecca Long is in her 80s, so I felt the need for a little more information.

“Your baby, Rebecca?”

“Yes, Fee-Fee started chasing this toad in the backyard, and then all of a sudden, she collapsed and got really stiff.”

“Can you get her to the hospital, Rebecca?”

“The hospital?” asked Rebecca. “Do they take dogs there? My car broke down yesterday. Should I call an ambulance?”

“Ah, Fee-Fee is your dog ... Okay ... no, don’t call an ambulance. I’ll come over right away and take her to the vet.”

“Thank you, Pastor.”

Sometimes, as a pastor in a small town, you encounter situations that are not covered in an academic setting. Besides, I wanted to meet the new vet, anyway.

Well, Fee-Fee survived, and the doc had some time to talk.

“So, tell me, Dr. Hartman. What brought you to Cedar Crossing?”

“I went to college with a guy by the name of Bret Collins, who grew up here.”

“Sure, I know Bret and the Collins family.”

“Bret always had a copy of The Cedar Crossing Gazette lying around, and I started reading it. I worked in Tennessee for a couple of years after I graduated from veterinary school. Then I got married, had two children, and moved back to this state. In the back of my mind, though, I always thought I might like to live here someday. I talked with Doctor Harris a lot, and when he told me that he wanted to slow down and focus on wildlife in his remaining years, it seemed like the opportune time to make the move.”

“How does your family feel about it?”

“Sadly, my wife passed away last year, but if she were here, I think she’d love it. As a small-town girl, she would have fit right in. My kids are having a ball.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your wife. If you ever need anything, I’m just down the road.”

“I appreciate that, Pastor.”

“Well, we’re glad to have you. And, to think we owe it all to the Cedar Crossing Gazette.”

“A Matisse in the medium of words.”

“That’s good ... We probably better not tell Victor, the publisher that, though. We’d never hear the end of it.”

“I defer to your wisdom in that regard.”

“Of course, you’re always welcome to join us at St. John on Sunday morning. Most of the time, my sermons are short.”

“We might just do that, Pastor. I was raised Catholic, though.”

“Well, if our brand doesn’t quite fit, Father Tom at St. Mary’s would love to have you join them, too ... He does pay me a commission for any referrals.”

“Oh, how much does he pay? I have to see who’s going to offer me the best deal.”

“I’m sorry. Any discussion of that would violate the confidentiality of the confessional.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want you to violate anything like that, Pastor.”

About that time, a young lad came bounding into the room followed by a large Golden Retriever. The boy stopped and turned to face the dog. He gave the dog some signs with his hands, and the dog came over to me. The dog sat down and lifted his paw to greet me. Naturally, I took his paw and said, “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Amos is glad to meet you, too,” said the boy. “But he can’t hear you because he’s deaf.”

The lad then gave Amos some more signs, and the Golden Retriever walked over to the counter and laid down.

Before I could say anything more, the boy blurted out, “Wanna see my horse?”

I looked at Dr. Hartman, and he said, “My son Gary.”

“Sure,” I said.

Following the boy outside, I was led over to a paddock where I saw my first three-legged horse.

Gary whistled, and the horse hobbled over to the fence.

“This is Raven,” said Gary.

Gently patting the horse’s neck, I said, “He’s a beautiful horse, Gary.”

“I named him Raven because he’s all black, and he has a raven friend who’s always flying over and landing on his back.”

“They’re good buddies then?”

“Yes ... and my dad’s working on a leg for Raven in his workshop.”

“I see ... but he still gets around pretty good.”

“Yes.”

Gary put his hand to his mouth, made a screeching sound, and looked up to the sky. He waited a minute and made the sound again. A one-eyed red-tailed hawk soon joined us, landing on the fence. Gary reached into his pocket and pulled out a treat, which the hawk quickly consumed.

“And this would be?” I asked.

“Tuesday,” answered Gary.

“Tuesday?” I asked, looking puzzled.

“Yes. We found him alongside the road on a Tuesday. My dad said he was lucky to be alive. We brought him back here and helped him get better.”

The boy then made another sound and waited. Charging out from under a mulberry bush, a raccoon with no tail eagerly snatched a treat from Gary’s hand. Dr. Hartman came outside and joined us as we conversed with Petunia, the raccoon.

“Are you meeting the rest of the family?” asked Dr. Hartman.

“Yes, they are certainly an affable group,” I answered.

“We’re fortunate to have this place with the acreage because my son finds someone new to adopt every week.”

“Do you get bulk price discounts on the groceries?” I queried.

“I have to.”

As I met each new resident, I noticed a common point.

When Dr. Hartman perceived the wheels of thought expressed on my face, he said, “I call them a menagerie of commonality.”

“Your son seems to have a special place in his heart for the animals, especially those with some disability. What inspired him to ...”

Before I could finish asking the question, Gary got down on the ground and began talking to an earless red fox. He eventually coaxed him to join us by holding out a treat. I continued to watch in wonder as the boy and the fox interacted without speaking. As I started to look back up to Dr. Hartman to finish my question, I noticed the gleam of metal coming out from the bottom of both of Gary’s pant legs.

I felt a sense of awe as I received the answer to my unfinished question. Dr. Hartman looked at me and nodded.

## PRETELS

*If you could travel back in time before the founders laid the first brick on the foundation of St. John, you would have found an infant community of German farmers, some only recently off the ships that brought them to America. These sturdy people eventually laid that first brick on the foundation, and in the years following the establishment of the church, made up the backbone of its congregational membership. You can still find evidence of their influence in the church's social arena with this staple of potluck tables.*

This old German recipe found its way to our hearts and stomachs through my mother. She passed it along in oral form and it rests in written form in a volume titled *The Keepsake Recipe Collection* that sits on our pantry shelf. Every once in a while, my wife will mix up a batch, and we will have a supply in the freezer for a few weeks. I fear that one day it will be illegal to consume it because

of some politically correct dietary law. Until then, it remains the responsibility of our generation to preserve its legacy.

Someone with a little more time on their hands could probably trace its history back before the early 1900s, but that is the time frame of this recollection. The women of the time usually prepared the food for large social gatherings, barn raisings, and communal harvests. They would use huge meat grinders to grind the meat and huge bowls to mix. There was often so much to have to mix in the bowls it required the stronger men to do that part. The product proved to be a sturdy entrée for a sturdy people and gave them the sustenance needed for strong physical work.

While the recipe given below is obviously for a smaller quantity, its qualities of nourishment and memory remain just as large as what came out of those huge mixing bowls.

3 pounds of beef roast

3 pounds of pork

18 ounces of quick oats

Lots of smoked salt and pepper

Lots of ground allspice

Cook beef roast and pork in water for about four hours at a lower temperature until the meat is tender and falling off the bone. Remove the meat and strain the broth.

Add salt, pepper, and allspice to the broth and cook it until boiling. Then add oats to the broth, stir well, and turn off the burner and cover the broth mix.

Grind beef and pork with a fine grinding blade. Mix meat with the oats and broth mix. You can add water if needed until the mix is good and moist.

Let the mix set overnight in the refrigerator. Then divide up and freeze until ready to use.

When cooking for use, you can add eggs and cheese if you want, and it's also good cooked in butter.

**WARNING:** After consuming a large portion of pretels, you may feel the urge to go out and do some serious work or ... take a nap.

## THE PARACHUTE

*Delbert Gomes is a member of our parish here in Cedar Crossing. He recently returned from a trip out west to visit his brother; who's 94 years old. On his way back, he decided to stop at a Lutheran church he had passed on the way out. Fortunately, he got there just before the service started. He told me of his experience and what it reminded him of from his time in the military.*

*Pastor Arnie*

“It was kind of interesting, Pastor,” said Delbert. “The church building looked to be about the same size as ours, but maybe thirty or forty years older. Now I am old. There is little question about that, but I would say I was probably the youngest person there. Some of the people were friendly enough, but many just looked tired. By the time the service started, many pews sat empty. I just had a

feeling that the people making up the congregation had been coming there for 40 or 50 years. I saw no one other than myself who even remotely looked like a visitor.

The liturgy pretty much followed the one from the old blue hymnal. Of course, most of those in the pews didn't bother to follow along with anything printed. They had probably been hearing and reciting it all their lives. All the ingredients were there—an opening hymn; readings from the Old & New Testament; Apostle's Creed; confession; absolution; Gospel reading; sermon; prayers; communion; and so on.

The sermon carried a fine message. I'm sure it met all the parameters established by the higher ups, if you know what I mean. There are no more important words to speak than those that proclaim that Christ has died for our sins. He saved our spirits from certain death. I have known that for over fifty years and I am comfortable with it, so to speak. It is certainly something safe to preach on. When I walked out of that church, I had the feeling, okay, it was a nice conservative service, nothing

controversial'. As I drove away, though, I had a gnawing feeling that it was like preaching to the choir. I don't mean this as a criticism, but if all those people had been going there all their lives, shouldn't they have gotten the point about Christ by now? If they were living every aspect of their lives as followers of Christ, did they need the constant reminder about it? Again, I don't mean to sound like I know better than them or the pastor. Whatever it takes to keep people close to God and following Christ is what's important. But it did kind of remind me of something that happened to me in the war."

"What's that, Delbert?" I asked.

"I was an Air Force pilot in the Vietnam War. Did I ever tell you that, Pastor?"

"No, I had no idea, Delbert," I answered. "You've never talked about it."

"Anyway, they shot us down near the coast. Fortunately, a Navy Seal team was nearby, and they rescued us quickly. Most of my crew were pretty banged up, but all were alive. I had some pretty

severe injuries that kept me in the hospital for nearly six months. In severe pain, they kept me on morphine for a long time. I'm just glad I didn't become addicted to it, but I had some weird hallucinations and dream-like periods. There was one recurring dream that I can still remember to this day.

I had taken some shrapnel and was pretty dazed when I bailed out. I can remember pulling the cord in my mind over and over. My chute opened cleanly, and it seemed like I was floating down to earth forever. Then I eventually hit the ground and the next thing I remember guys were loading me on a stretcher. I remember asking if the other guys were okay and then I blacked out.

When I woke up, instead of being in a hospital, I was back in a pilot training class. The way they set the room up with the chairs and the lectern on a little rise, it reminded me a little of church. When the commander walked to the lectern, we all stood up and saluted. Then the commander pulled out the Air Force Training Manual and read various sections from it. When he finished reading, he closed the manual and sat down. We kind of looked

around at each other and waited for some explanation of what he had read, but it never came. Then we recited our pledge as pilots and patriots of the USA. Then an instructor came out and began giving us instructions on how to operate a parachute. He spent a long time going over every detail of its construction and use. When he finished, the commander dismissed us, and we headed back to our barracks. This happened again every day. The commander would read different sections from the manual, and the same instructor would give us everything we needed to know about the parachute. Then he would dismiss us, and we would head back to our barracks.”

“That’s fascinating, Delbert,” I said. “I’ve never been on morphine, so I can’t relate to the hallucinations, but I’m sure we could tie some of it to the parachute saving your life for real.”

“That’s what I’ve always figured, something subconscious,” said Delbert. “Sometimes I felt like I was falling through the air. The nurses said I would always reach up with my hands and say, ‘I’ve got to pull the cord’. But it gets weirder. Like

I said, the scene from the training class seemed to be on replay over and over. Then the commander finally came out and congratulated us. We were officially certified as pilots. He dismissed us and we went back to our barracks awaiting our orders. The orders finally came, and we reported to the airplane hangars. Looking at the line of planes, we stood there perplexed. We had learned everything anyone would ever want or need to know about the parachute. They reminded us every day of how it could save our lives. But the whole time we were in pilot's school, nobody ever taught us how to fly a plane. We tried to tell everybody we could that nobody had taught us how to fly the airplane. The response was always the same—we were on our own every day in the cockpit. The most important thing was that we knew about the parachute. That's how every hallucination or dream ended every time."

"Hmm ... so you think we get that way in the church sometimes?"

"Not so much with you at St. John," replied Delbert. "But I have been in a lot of churches, such

as the one I visited and told you about, where I think that to be the case.”

“Okay, let me make sure I understand the analogy. The commander reading out of the manual without offering an explanation is like when the scripture is read without an explanation. The robotic pledge as pilots and patriots is like our reciting of the creeds and the responses and the confessions. The instructor talking only about the parachute over and over again is like the sermons that focus on telling us that Christ is our salvation when we need to call upon him but never get around to telling how to apply it to life every day; that we’re kind of on our own to figure it out.”

“That’s pretty much it, Pastor,” said Delbert. “I know it was all the morphine talking to me, but that one has stuck with me. Am I wrong about the comparison?”

“Complicated answer ... I think your parachute story has some valid parallels with the church today. You must remember that you’re dealing with human beings, including members and pastors.

Everyone is different in their approach. To continue with the analogy, it's like every pilot has to do some things the same to keep the plane in the air because of protocol and basic physics. Yet each pilot has their own way of doing other things. Pastors are the same ... take that apparently dying church you visited, it's a little bit like the old chicken and egg question of which came first. Is the church dying because the pastor's way of doing things is rigid, robotic, or ritualistic, causing the young to flee ... or did the pastor become that way because an aging church wants him to be that way?

I remember my vicarage as a young man. I was still learning, and I didn't have a lot of experience in the real world. So, when it came time to give a sermon, I usually stayed with a safe subject as far as what I thought the congregation might accept and that was, of course, something they heard all the time—Christ died for our sins. Youthful inexperience, despite all the schooling, kept me from trying to tell all those older members how to apply that to their lives when they left the building. Then I graduated and took that first call. I was fortunate

to serve with a senior pastor who taught me a lot. A couple of years later, I got married, and we came to St. John. Then we started a family, and I am experiencing a whole other area of life. My first year here, I still had the tendency to play it safe, so to speak, with my sermons. It wasn't until I had really gotten to know the people that I realized they wanted something more than the safe sermon. So, as you know, we started to do things in a little different way, such as explaining the readings, trying to make the creeds and responses come alive, and focusing on practical application of what's given in the sermon. Of course, we still give regular reminders on the parachute, if you will, but ... the people of St. John are unique in many ways. Their ancestry, for the most part, is that of hearty pioneer folk, which you know. Family units are very strong, and the kids grow up without any questions as to right or wrong. I've come to know that the people here would rather I give it to them straight and not dance around the subject. In some ways, it is a little easier for me because I'm leading a fairly homogeneous group of people demographically, politically, and vocationally. And like I said, once I really got to

know the people, I found it easier to put something into a sermon that I knew they could take home and put to use every day because I have a pretty good idea of what their ‘everyday’ is.”

“I can understand that, Pastor,” said Delbert.

“I’ve got a friend who pastors a large, diverse congregation in a large city, and he sometimes tells a little different story about sermons. It’s a highly polarized political atmosphere among his people. He has to be careful about what he says, because what might make sense to a conservative Republican banker might offend a liberal Democrat attorney or vice versa, yet God has given a parachute to both. He and I have talked about it a lot, and we agree that we must always give the truth. My friend has learned to frame that truth with the strongest, most clear aspects of God’s moral law. He admits, though, if I may continue your comparison, that he always steers his vicars towards emphasizing the parachute and not flying the plane.”

“Here, I’ve got something for you,” said Delbert. “It’s a little piece of my parachute. I broke my

leg when I hit the ground, so the Seal medic cut some of my parachute into strips to use with the splint. I'd like you to have it."

"Well, thank you, Delbert. It takes on a greater meaning since I know your story."

"I guess, in the end, Pastor," remarked Delbert. "If we're serious about following Christ with our whole life, then we need to know how to fly the plane and be grateful we have a parachute."

"Couldn't have said it better myself," I answered. "I tell you what I'd like to do, Delbert. I want to put this piece of parachute in a frame and put it on my desk where I usually write my sermons. It should remind me to always remind those in the pews to always wear their parachute when they're flying their plane. And, if you don't mind, I'd like to share your story with some of my pastor friends when the occasion seems to fit."

"I don't mind at all," said Delbert.

"I'm going to drop your brother a line tomorrow. Please let me know if anything changes with him, will you?"

“Thanks, Pastor. I will do that.”

# ASK THE VET

## All Souls Radio

*Here is another show that St. John and St. Peter sponsor on All Souls Radio.*

Vet: Good morning, all you people out there in God's country. It's a beautiful, sunny day as we open the phone lines this morning here on All Souls Radio. Dr. John Tisdale, respectfully, at the mike ready to take your questions on Ask the Vet, our Saturday get together for animal lovers.

Pete: John.

Vet: Yes, Pete.

Pete: John, before I give you your first caller, I want to thank St. Peter Church in Jack Valley/Profitville and St. John Church in Cedar Crossing for their continued sponsorship of our program. I'm also proud to announce a new sponsor on board

for our show this morning: Virgil's Miracle Hand Salve—fully guaranteed to turn those calloused, cracked hands into smooth as silk, healthy, pain-free work tools for years to come. Your cows will love you for it.

Vet: Thanks, Pete. Our first caller this morning is Don Wright in Raccoon Falls. Hi Don, this is Dr. John, what can I do for you?

Don: Doc, I'm calling to get a second opinion on my horse.

Vet: I will certainly do that for you, Don, to the extent I can without seeing the animal.

Don: Sure, Doc, I understand. I was riding the old boy out in the back forty a couple of weeks ago when he stepped into a hole and broke his leg. I mean, it looked bad. I had the local vet come out, and he said there really wasn't anything he could do. He said the best thing would be for me to shoot him. I don't mind telling you, Doc, I got a little tear in my eye for that horse. I asked him again if that was the only thing that could be done. When he said yes, well, I went out and did like the doc said.

Vet: You shot him, Don?

Don: Yes, I did.

Vet: Well, Don, situations like that can always be difficult. I believe God has given mankind responsibility for the animals and all life on this planet. If, in the vet's opinion, that was the only humane way to handle it, then it sounds like you did the right thing.

Don: I don't know, Doc. I'm not so sure. I really don't think it helped his leg any. Now he's down at the vet hospital with a broken leg and a gunshot wound. I reckon if he doesn't get any better, I'll have to shoot him again.

Vet: Uh, Don, I don't think, uh ... I mean that's not what, uh ... I don't want to give you too optimistic an opinion, here, but I would question your vet really well and if he says your horse wouldn't be in too much pain, then I would take your horse home and let him spend the rest of the time the Lord wants to give him in a loving environment out in his pasture.

Don: Thanks, Doc.

Vet: You're welcome, Don. Our next caller is Ed Grant from Appleville. Ed, what can I do for you?

Ed: Yeah, Doc. The little woman has this dog up to the house. I mean, it's a puny little thing, no more than five pounds. A chihuahua, that's what he is. But this puny little thing thinks he's a Great Dane.

Vet: That's not too unusual, Ed. A lot of little dogs have spunky dispositions.

Ed: No, doc. I mean, this dog really thinks he's a Great Dane. I took him to this doggie psychologist in the big city, Dr. Wolfgang Schmidt, a German Lutheran fella. I don't really think he helped the dog much, but I noticed one thing that's different with him.

Vet: What's that, Ed?

Ed: Now the dog thinks he's a German shepherd. What should I do next?

Vet: Well, Ed, almost all families have a member who marches to the beat of a different drum. I don't think I would invest any more money or time in

doggie psychologists. I would just learn to live with it. Just learn to live with it.

Ed: That's what I told the little woman. Well, thanks, Doc.

Vet: You bet, pardner. Our next caller is Betty, and she's from Appleville as well. How can I help you, Betty?

Betty: Hello, Doctor John. My husband just called you about our chihuahua, who now thinks he's a German shepherd.

Vet: Yes, of course, Betty.

Betty: Doctor John, my husband didn't tell you everything.

Vet: What did he leave out?

Betty: We're Catholic, Doctor John. Every year we take our dog to the church for the annual Blessing of the Beasts. I'm worried about our dog since he's come under the influence of that Lutheran doggie psychologist. Do you think it will be okay to keep taking him to our church for the Blessing of the Beasts?

Vet: Betty, the God of Catholicism and the God of Lutheranism are the same God, and He is a gracious God. Any celebration of the wonder of His hand in creating the animal kingdom transcends doctrinal differences. I say keep it up.

Betty: Thanks a lot, Doctor John. I told my husband that's what you'd say.

Vet: You're quite welcome. Who do we have next, Pete?

Pete: Jim from Dogwood Hills.

Vet: Okay, Jim, you're on the air.

Jim: Hey, Doc. How are ya?

Vet: Good, Jim, good. What's on your mind today?

Jim: Doc, I got this here rooster that's done alright by me. He alone has increased the size of my flock by a hundred and sixty-seven chickens.

Vet: Do you have a problem with that? Most farmers would love to have such an efficient rooster.

Jim: No, Doc, I don't have a problem with that. It's just that every time I want to lock up the coop at

night, he's never there. One day I watched that chicken. Sure enough, about two o'clock in the afternoon, he left and went over to my neighbor's place across the street. Doc, why does that chicken cross the road?

Vet: An immortal question, my friend.

Jim: A what?

Vet: Let me answer that with another question. Has your neighbor had a healthy increase in the size of his chicken flock, too?

Jim: Yes, he has ... oh, I gotcha, Doc. Kinda like when God said be fruitful and multiply?

Vet: Well, I think He was talking to Noah at the time. But I suppose it was possible that a rooster was nearby and overheard God and thought He was talking to him.

Jim: Well, thanks a lot, Doc.

Vet: You're welcome. Well, it appears as though our time is up this morning. I'll conclude today's program with this quote from Mark Twain, "A person who has had a bull by the tail once has learned

60 or 70 times as much as a person who hasn't.”  
Until next week, my friends.

## TALK IS CHEEP

Having finished all my catch-up work since coming back from vacation, I decided to make a call in the afternoon on a prospective new member that just moved to the area. Sam Davis retired from his previous career and has chosen to spend his remaining days working a small farm in the Cedar Crossing/Oak County community. The old Compton place, which is only about ten minutes from the church, seemed to fit right into his plans.

I found Sam working back in the barn repairing the big double door leading out to the pasture area.

“Hi, Sam,” I said. “How are you?”

“Hey, Pastor. I’m doing good. How was your vacation?”

“It was great . . . I just wanted to stop by and visit with you a little. I know you’re going to be joining the church, and I just wanted to see if there was anything we could do for you.”

“No, I can’t really think of anything. I’ve got a lot of fixing up to do around here, so that will keep me out of trouble for a while. Do you mind if we walk while we talk? I have a few things I need to check on.”

“No, that’s perfectly all right,” I answered. “Do you have a family, Sam?”

“My wife passed away about three years ago and I have two adult children back in North Carolina.”

“Is that where you were from originally?”

“Yeah, I was born and raised in North Carolina,” said Sam, as he threw a couple of pitchforks of hay to the cow standing at the fence. “But I spent most of my life on the road.”

“Oh, what did you . . .”

“Thanks for the fresh alfalfa hay, Sam,” interrupted a voice coming from the fence area. “It’s quite tasty. Hey, Rev, over here. Come over here.”

I looked at the fence, but the only thing I saw was the cow. Then I looked at Sam, but he just

shrugged his shoulders. My little gray cells deduced an answer to the question that I was about to ask Sam about his career on the road.

“Hey, Rev, do you know any good chicken jokes?” the cow asked.

I decided to play along. “Yes, here’s one. What do you call a rooster who wakes you up at the same time every morning?”

“I don’t know,” answered the cow.

“An alarm cluck,” I said.

“An alarm cluck . . . oh that’s a good one. Here’s a religious question. What does an evil hen lay?”

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“Deviled eggs,” said the cow.

“Cute. Uh . . . how about the farmer who sent his son to the market with some chickens to sell?”

“No, I can’t say I know that one,” replied the cow.

“Well, the crate filled with the chickens slipped out of the boy’s hand and broke open when it hit the ground. The chickens scurried off in different directions, but the determined boy walked all over the neighborhood, scooping up the wayward birds and returning them to the crate he had repaired. By that time the market had closed, so, hoping he had found them all, the boy reluctantly returned home, expecting to get yelled at by his father.”

“Pa, the chickens got loose and by the time I got to the market, it was closed,” the boy confessed sadly. “But I found all twelve of them chickens.”

“Well, you did really well, son,” the farmer beamed.

“You mean you aren’t mad?”

“No, son. We made a good profit today.”

“I don’t understand,” said the boy.

“When you left here this morning, you only had seven chickens and now, we have twelve.”

The cow stood at the fence, chomping away on his hay, and looking me right in the eyes with a blank expression.

“You see, he only had seven to begin with, and when he finished rounding up chickens, he ended up with twelve, so he had accidentally rounded up five of somebody else’s chickens,” I repeated.

The cow continued staring at me while he munched his meal. I looked over at Sam.

“I guess he didn’t get it, Pastor,” Sam said.

“Say, you’re a pastor, aren’t you?” asked the cow.

“Yes.”

“And pastor means shepherd, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s from a Latin word for shepherd,” I answered.

“How about going over there to that sheep and see if you can’t do a little attitude adjustment on her?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, every time I try to have a positive, upbeat conversation with her, you know, bring out the good, all she ever says is ‘Baaaa’”

“Yes, well . . .”

“Oh, he started out with seven chickens and when he finished rounding them up, he had twelve,” exclaimed the cow. “I get it. Very humorous.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know any more chicken jokes,” I said.

“That’s okay,” said the cow. “I’ve enjoyed our conversation. Look, though, if you go over there and try to talk to those baby chicks, well . . . it’s just not worth it.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Because their talk is cheep,” said the cow.

I stood at the fence and stared at the cow with a blank expression.

“Don’t you get it?” asked the cow. “Little chicks say cheep, cheep, cheep.”

“You know, Sam,” I said. “I can’t believe I’m standing here exchanging chicken jokes with a cow.”

Sam shrugged his shoulders and said, “You never know when you might pick up some good sermon material.”

“Sam, there isn’t the slightest possibility that your previous career had anything to do with ventriloquism, is there?”

“Yes, Pastor.”

“You’re very good. Why did you decide to retire from it?”

“The times are different from when I started out. The audience changed. Or maybe I should say the audience’s tastes changed. The last couple of years working at comedy clubs were tough. My G-rated humor didn’t seem to have a chance against the R-rated and X-rated stuff. So, I went back to North Carolina and did the church circuit for a

while. While I was well received in those venues, it just got to the point where the income barely covered the cost of travel.”

“I can understand that. When I find myself watching television, I seem to gravitate to the channels that carry the old programs from even before I was born. Writers back then had to write things that were genuinely funny because they had much more narrow parameters. Nowadays, it seems like if you just say something from the gutter or about sex, it gets a laugh.”

“So, now I’m here on the farm reduced to talking with my animals.”

“Wait a minute, I resent that,” said the cow.

“Sorry, Bovy. That was kind of insensitive.”

“Sam, before I say anything more, is it okay to talk in front of him?” I whispered.

“Oh, sure. The only ones he might tell are the baby chicks and nobody takes them seriously, because as you now know . . .”

“Their talk is cheep,” I said.

“Right.”

“You know, we should have you come do a show at church sometime. I know the people of St. John would love it.”

“I’d love to, but let me ask you a question,” said Sam. “This is a concept I’ve been thinking about for a while, and I’d like to get your opinion on it.”

“Sure, Sam.”

“What if you took the entertainment principle and applied it to a ministry?”

“You mean like Christian music, humor, and such?” I asked.

“Well, sort of. I don’t mean that those art forms would be the ministry, although they certainly do function as that on their own. What if you found someone in your community who was in need, like someone who’s not a member of a church, and you put together a fundraiser or benefit at your church to help them out? You wouldn’t have to limit it to someone like that; you could

certainly do it for someone in your church too; but what if your focus was on reaching out to the community at large? The church could put on a dinner, we could provide entertainment along with it, and you could raise money for someone in need and spread the Gospel to possibly a group of people, like friends and family, that might not otherwise hear it.”

“That’s a very interesting concept, Sam. If you did something like that, basically the church family could come together for a good meal, with good clean entertainment, and know that the money they are raising is going to a good cause in the community. At the same time, you could craft an outreach strategy that would touch others with the Gospel message and what it means to be a Christian organization that asks nothing in return.”

“Yes. Do you think something like that could be viable?”

“I like it, Sam. Would you be willing to sit down with my friend, Pastor Fred Anderson in Jack Valley and me for a brainstorming session?”

“Sure, Pastor.”

“One thing that intrigues me about it is how simply it provides a vehicle, so to speak, for the average parishioner to get engaged in the outreach process. As a shepherd, I don’t mind telling you, it can be a little frustrating trying to lead the congregation in that direction sometimes. I’m only one person who, because of my position, is more often than not around people of faith. The people in the pew are out in the broader world every day, more often than not around people who lack faith. I understand the timidity with talking about religion to co-workers, etc. If we had something like what you’re talking about engaging them, whether it’s simply supplying a name from someone in the community that they know or whether it’s just coming to support at the benefit, I think it would be a good start down the outreach path.”

“Well, you just let me know when you’d like to get together, Pastor Schmidt.”

“I sure will, Sam. The other thing that kind of excites me about it is that I preach about spreading

the Gospel all the time and we talk about it at council meetings and seminars and conferences, and this would kind of put some of that talk into action.”

“Well, Pastor, as you now know, talk is . . .”

“I know, as your cow so enlightened me, talk is cheep.”

# IT'S ALL ABOUT FREEDOM

*Out at The Homestead, there's a large hill called Horse Sense Hill. Sometimes I'll ride up the hill with Clint when I want to sort out the craziness of the week. It's a great place to ponder the realities of the world around us and, occasionally, rekindle an appreciation for things often taken for granted. I wasn't able to go last week, but Clint shared his thoughts with me when he went on up with Jake, his horse.*

*Pastor Arnie Schmidt*

As I ride old Jake up to Horse Sense Hill this morning, I'm aware of the fact that all I'm doing is holding the reins. Old Jake and I have been up this hill so many times lately it has just kind of become a natural part of our life. Jake leads me more than I direct him. The bridle and the bit are a restriction to his freedom, yet I think he accepts that little

restriction as part of being where he is. If I turned him loose into the wild, I think he'd be back at the paddock gate before dark. He's willing to give up a little of his freedom because he knows he's protected from the wolves and the storms back at the stable. Yeah, he has to work some carrying his old friend up the hill from time to time, but he reaps his wage in hay and oats. And I think he has come to a sense of self-worth in his work, for he often comes to the fence and stares at me if I don't come over to saddle up on that day.

I know, perhaps you are thinking I talk to my horse too much, or maybe I'm becoming a bit daffy in reading so much into our time together going up to Horse Sense Hill. You could be right. Watching the news today can make you want to talk to your horse on a different level. Sometimes it makes for a more sensible conversation.

When we get to the top of the hill, we have our routine. I dismount and let Jake stand free. He always neighs in protest if I get too close to the edge of the sharp drop off at the backside of the hill. His horse sense tells him that if you get too

close to that slope, you could fall off. Perhaps he's just worried about where his next meal will come from if I do something stupid.

As I sit down atop Thinking Rock, as good a name as can be for a place that's a rock and where a lot of thinking takes place, I wonder where we should draw the line in giving up our freedom in this land called the United States of America. Every time we give a little more authority to the government for some aspect of our lives, we are giving up a little more of our freedom. Common sense should tell us that we can neither be totally free nor totally controlled. Government has to have some authority to maintain law and order and to protect us from those who would seek to dominate or kill us, whether foreign or domestic.

Mark Twain once said, "Laws control the lesser man ... right conduct controls the greater one." Judging from the number of laws that Congress passes every year, we must be rapidly becoming a nation of lesser men. Or at least in the eyes of those who govern over us. Heard a number the other day of over 75,000 pages in IRS rules and

regulations alone. Since the money we make often represents a measure of our time and the effort we make to live our lives as we choose, then surely a sense of logic or horse-thinking should tell us something is wrong; that perhaps we have crossed the line of freedom if it requires that much law for our government to just collect our taxes.

Laws are the bridle and bit restricting our freedom, directing us where to go, telling us what we have to do, and holding us back. Without them, anarchy and enslavement to the dark side of our human nature reign. With too many of them, we have stagnation, apathy, and enslavement to the elite who think they know better than we do about how we should live our lives. Somewhere in between is that line of freedom. Sadly, I am beginning to feel like the mass of America is numb to where that line is.

Let's face it, there are very few people around today who have actually had to fight for freedom. Except for those who have been in the military "family" that has suffered death or injury from the undeclared wars fought in the last 60 years, I don't

think most of the current generation has any feeling for the price of freedom. The wisdom, or lack of it, in all those military engagements hasn't impacted most Americans' concept of our individual freedom. There are so many who seem to be adrift in the no man's land of feeling entitled to what freedom has produced with no knowledge of how freedom has produced it.

How many more unread 2,000-page laws will the legislature pass before America's freedom slips beyond the grasp of us common folks out here? I don't know. When you see what our children are being taught, or not taught, about freedom, it begins to look like Miller's swamp down the road. The swamp does support life for a few, but it is not a place of prosperity.

And what about God? The USA has become such a melting pot of nationalities, cultures, religions, and non-belief that sometimes it's hard to know where to draw the line of religious freedom. If God created man with a free will, which I believe He did, then there is a very definite parallel relationship between man's spiritual freedom and his

secular, governmental freedom. It's almost humorous that Jesus could say in seven words, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" what it takes our lawmakers hundreds of millions of words to say.

I reckon I kind of lean toward the government just staying out of religion all together. I know that can be kind of a muddy stream sometimes, cause less face it, there are some folks out there who use religion as a veil for all kinds of evil things. Unfortunately, the government has to wade into the stream sometimes when a group that purports to be in the business of saving souls, in reality just wants to suck your soul under the water. And when the stream is muddy, you can't always see the massive sinkhole that the government has created in wading into the water. I reckon that "separation of church and state" can be a good thing properly applied. Nowadays, though, it's no longer just part of a speech that one of our founding fathers gave; it's given precedent as law.

I reckon the stream will become crystal clear in God's due time. Until then, I just wish those folks in government that represent the will of the

people would think about coming up here to Horse Sense Hill before they write more laws to protect us from ourselves. I don't think you'd find anyone in these parts that would want the government to tell you what religious beliefs you must have, but if you were to come up and sit next to them on Thinking Rock, I believe you would have a hard time convincing them that banning the free expression of your belief in God in the public arena, as if doing so is the equivalent of poisoning the creek, makes any kind of sense.

Well, I can hear my wife ringing the dinner bell way up here on Horse Sense Hill, so I best head on back down. What can we do? For now, I guess we'll just have to sit a little taller in the saddle, speak our piece when we need to, talk to God more than we usually do, and ride on. I can only hope that should I begin to lose the mental capacity to exercise that good old "horse sense", that Jake will still be around with his "horse sense" to keep me from getting too close to the back edge of the hill.

## LETTERS FROM GRANNY

*The Homestead is the farm of Clint and Cindy Lincoln, one of our long-standing families here at St. John's in Cedar Crossing. Not only are they devout brothers and sisters in Christ, but they are also good friends. Granny Sophie, who is Cindy's grandmother, had spent her entire life in Cedar Crossing. Having never been to a big city, she finally decided to spend some time with Uncle Vern and Aunt Maudie in Florida. Young daughters, Heather and Lucy, spent a great deal of time helping to take care of Granny when she was at the farm, so they missed her greatly when she left, but Granny had promised to write every week. I include this account of that first letter from Granny that Clint gave me last week at the Men's Bible Class.*

*Pastor Arnie Schmidt*

I walked into the room to see my daughters, Heather and Lucy, alternately standing watch at the bay window in our living room. While one kept watch of the distant road that fronted our farm, the other watched the clock.

“He should have been here by now,” said Heather. “What time is it?”

“It’s one o’clock,” answered Lucy. “Let me look now.”

“Okay. What if it’s too big for the box?”

“Then he’ll come down the driveway to the house,” stated Lucy.

“What are you guys doing?” I asked. “You look as anxious as two long-tailed cats in a room full of rocking chairs.”

“We’re waiting for the mailman,” said Heather. “Mom said the package from Granny should be here today.”

“Oh, I see.”

“There he is, Heather!” exclaimed her sister. “He’s coming down the driveway.”

It's all in the proper motivation, I mused, as they went rushing past me. "Stay on the porch till Mr. Johnson comes to a stop."

Lucy, the older of the two, carried the box that almost equaled her in size.

"Get the door, Heather," yelled Lucy.

They went past me, coming in as fast as they went out. Heading straight for the kitchen, they simultaneously yelled, "It's here, Mom. It's here."

Calling upon my little gray cells, I deduced it was here. Somehow, I felt called to follow them into the kitchen to find out what "it" had inside.

Pulling out my pocketknife, I offered, "May I be of some assistance to you ladies?"

"Yes, you may," answered my wife. "Stand back, girls."

With the lid open, my wife handed out the smaller, wrapped packages that were inside. The two girls made a beeline for their rooms with their packages. Setting Luke's aside for him, she then began opening the last package in the box.

“Nothing for me?” I questioned.

“Sure. You can open the letter.”

Dear young’uns,

We arrived safe and sound at Vern and Maudie’s place. We stopped at several Cracker Barrel restaurants for meals on the way. Funny thing, though, I never found any barrels full of crackers at any of em. I don’t quite understand why they hung so many of their tools from the ceiling. Seems like it’d be kinda hard to get to em when you needed em.

We took it easy on Friday night, getting settled in and all. On Saturday, we went shopping at what they called the Gardens Mall. I kinda liked shopping all indoors like that. I can see where it’d be nicer in the winter, not having to mess with shoveling off the sidewalks and putting salt on the ice. Course, I guess they don’t have to worry about that down here, anyway.

As fancy as all the stores were, though, there sure were a lotta folks that musta just been doing window shopping. Why, there was a bunch of young kids that couldn't even afford decent belts. And they musta not had much in the way of food either, cause with all the weight they lost, their pants was hanging bout down to their knees. Tell Virgil to take him that correspondence course in leather making and come down here. He could probably make a decent living just selling belts if he priced em right.

Of course, it could just be the water down here. There was also a lotta young'uns that musta had something wrong with their hearing, judging from all the wires leading up to their ears. They was flailing with their arms and bobbing their heads as they was walking along, too.

On Sunday, we went to Vern and Maudie's church. It was a nice church and all, with beautiful stained-glass windows and a big cross against the front wall. They musta had some powerful big pot-lucks to raise enough money to put up that building. It almost appeared like they give mosta what

they had to raise that church, cause the men folk, well, there weren't nary a one of them that had enough money left to buy a decent Sunday-go-to-Meeting suit. They was wearing shirts that Maudie called "polo shirts" and some was even wearing shorts. I reckon they got their church, though.

It was an okay service, though I think it was kinda sad. I remember when I brought you young'uns up on that old blue hymnal. Why every one of you learned how to read music with those old hymns. Down here, I don't guess hardly anyone knows how to read music anymore, cause they just put the words up on this big movie screen and I guess you just gotta try and keep up with the lady playing the piano. It was a bit too much for me, cause they didn't play anything I knew, but I reckon it must make em happy.

Come Sunday evening, we went to this meeting at church for a mission group that the church was sending out. After they finished eating and conducting business, they played bingo. Can you imagine playing bingo at church? The packages I sent for Luke, Heather, Lucy, and Cindy are things

I won at bingo. I woulda won something for you, Clint, but they was all kinda looking at me funny by then, you know, just being a visitor and winning all those games. So, I just passed on the last two games.

Well, I guess it's about time to close. I've got all the packages wrapped and Maudie said she'd run me up to the post office tomorrow. I hope that Bob Johnson doesn't try to stuff this box in the mailbox like he did last time. Tell Pastor Schmidt that I'm more partial to his services, though I kinda like the idea of fitting bingo in sometime.

Love,

Granny

# A LITTLE AUTHORITY GOES A LONG WAY

Big Todd Walker was, as the name suggests, a big man. He stood 6'9" and weighed 300 pounds. For all his size, though, he wasn't very big on conversation. Todd farmed 300 acres on the north side of Cedar Crossing and was a member of St. John. One Tuesday afternoon, while repairing his chisel plow, he saw a car pull up next to the barn. The license plate read U.S. Government and the gentleman who stepped out of the car was a small, young man. Of course, most of the people that Todd encountered were small compared to him. The gentleman approached Todd in the barn.

"Good afternoon, sir," said the man. Pulling out his wallet, he showed Todd his identification, and continued saying, "I'm from the Environmental Protection Agency and I'm here today to conduct a farm inspection."

"Farm inspection?" asked Todd. "What exactly is that?"

“Sir, I need to go over every square foot of your farm and make sure it complies with all EPA standards.”

Looking down at the little man, Todd said, “Well, young feller, you may as well have a go at it. As the Good Book says, ‘For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret, except to come to light.’”

The young government man looked at Todd as though he were speaking some foreign language and then nodded. He walked all over checking wet areas, manure piles, septic systems, and water drains. He then went inside the barn and checked storage of chemicals and hazardous waste drums. The countenance of his face remained stern and disciplined as he occasionally made notes on his clipboard. Coming back out of the barn, the inspector walked over to a fence area that had a locked gate.

“Is that your land?” asked the man.

“Yes, sir,” replied Todd. “It goes way back beyond that hill down to a grove of trees.”

“I’ll need to get into that area to inspect it.”

“I’m sorry, young feller, I can’t let you do that,” said Todd.

“What?” asked the inspector. “I demand that you let me in there.”

“It’s best that I don’t,” said Todd.

“Now listen here, I’m an agent with the EPA and I have the authority to inspect that area. Now open it up.”

“I reckon I know who you are,” said Todd. “But it’s still best I don’t let you in there.”

The little man got all red in the face and darn near began jumping up and down. “I have the full authority of the whole United States Government behind me, and I demand you open that gate.”

“Okay, young feller,” replied Todd. “I’ll be right here by the gate working on my tractor in case you need me.”

“I can definitely say I don’t need you to tell me how to do my job,” the young man said arrogantly.

Todd found the key on his key ring, and he opened the lock on the gate. “There you go.” He watched the man walk along the right fence line and eventually disappear over the hill. Todd muttered to himself, “Speak not in the ears of a fool, for he will despise the wisdom of your words.”

Todd continued working on his tractor for a good hour, periodically looking out over the fenced area. He began to get a little worried about the young man. Eventually he noticed what at first looked like one of the common little whirlies seen so often in the area. The whirlwind came up over the hill, twisting a load of dust into the air. But then Todd thought he saw a figure of a man running out ahead of the whirlwind. Now it was a far piece down over that hill and Todd could truthfully say the man was picking ‘em up and laying ‘em down. The closer the man and the whirlwind got to him; the more Todd revised his thinking. By then, it was clear that the whirlwind kicking up a dust storm behind the man consisted of a rather perturbed bull named Jethro.

Todd said a little prayer for the man, “Now, Lord, I know you said, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’ I can’t rightly say that I know whether that little man is pure in heart, though he seemed a might on the arrogant side for a little man with authority. I know he’s been running a long way over that hill, so if it be your will and you choose to let him see you, then so be it. Either way, I reckon he’ll learn something, so if you could just let him get to the gate unharmed, I’ll surely hold it open for him.”

Todd held the gate open as the man and his pursuer got nearer. It looked too close to call, but Todd got himself in position to move quickly. When the man came flying through the gate, Todd slammed it shut and slid the latch over. The bull stopped short of the fence, snorting, and pawing at the dirt. The young man collapsed on the ground and leaned up against the side of the barn.

“Oh, God,” exclaimed the man, gasping for air. “God ... bull ... God ... bull.”

“Relax. Take a deep breath, young feller. You’re safe now.”

“God ... bull.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Todd. “Did you tell him who you were?”

“Yes ... I told him I was from the federal government ... I showed him my I.D. Card ... It just seemed to make him madder.”

“Yeah, old Jethro never took much to schoolin’ and he’s got such fanatical, far right political views when it comes to those in authority.”

“God ... bull.”

“Are you gonna be alright?” asked Todd.

“Just give me a minute ... Can’t you stop that bull from snorting and raising all that dust by the fence?”

“Well, I reckon old Jethro just needs a minute or two to relax, too.”

Jumping to his feet, the young man burst out, “I can’t stand it any longer. I’ve got to get out of

here.” Running to his car and jumping in, I could hear him crying out, “Oh, God ... bull.” His cries soon faded away as he left the farm with his car throwing up rocks and dust almost as high as the whirlwind he had previously run across.

Todd called out to him as loud as he could, “What about your clipboard here? Are you coming back for it?” But the young man paid him no heed. Todd looked at the clipboard with its 53 pages of checklists and comment boxes and, flipping to the last page, he saw written in huge print, diagonally across the page ‘GOD BULL’.

The big farmer then commenced to speak with the Lord again, “Lord, I want to thank you for saving that little feller full of authority. I reckon he must have had a little time to do some thinking as he ran that long away across the field. I still don’t know for sure about how pure his heart was, cause he seemed a little confused about the difference between you and that bull, but I reckon only you would know the answer to that.”

Todd Walker has had no further communication from the Environmental Protection Agency.

*I have no reason to doubt anything in this story, as Todd Walker is not prone to tall tales. For him to say as much as he did in this story is quite remarkable. I think the account is a good example of the limitations of earthly authority.*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

## LITTLE BEAR

The cool, crisp mountain air added to the ambience of the smell of pine and the crackling fire that the Andrews family sat around. Everyone looked forward to the brief hiatus from the routine of making a living and the “torture” of school. The moments spent around the campfire gave them an opportunity to kick back and talk about things that there never seemed to be enough time for otherwise.

James lifted his binoculars and focused on a distant mountain. “Here, Brian, look at the tall pine just to the right of that outcropping of rocks.”

“Cool,” said Brian. “It looks like a bear cub climbing that tree.”

“Yeah,” said James. “You know, guys, that reminds me of a story that my dad told me about the legend of Mountain Mike and the bear cub. I think it’s from the time that he and his brother spent out there in Wyoming. I can remember it so vividly

down to the last detail. Maybe it was the way my dad told it that made such an impression on me. At any rate, it goes like this:

Nearing the seventh month of his current stay in Wildcat Canyon, Mountain Mike, whose proper name was Michael O'Reilly, began preparing to move out. Mountain Mike called Wildcat Canyon home for approximately nine months of the year. The rest of the time he spent on higher ground. A strapping man, fully bearded and as rugged as they come, he knew the canyon as well as he knew the back of his large hand.

As Mike carefully made sure his campfire no longer held any live embers, he heard a rustling in the mulberry bushes to his right. A young bear cub slowly emerged from beneath the foliage. Keenly aware of the temperament of mama bears, Mike quickly saddled his horse in anticipation of a speedy retreat. Swinging his leg over the saddle, he continued watching the bear cub and the surrounding area for signs of mama. After fifteen minutes

without spotting the big she-bear, Mike feared the worst. The young bear cried plaintively with no response coming from the surrounding vegetation.

Dismounting from his horse, Mike slowly walked over to the cub and talked softly, “Are you a stray, little one?” Pulling out a small piece of dried fish he had in his belt pouch, Mike held it out to the young bear as he continued talking, “It’s okay, little one. I won’t hurt you. I’m a friend to all the creatures in this country.”

The bear must have sensed what Mike told him because she took the fish from Mike’s hand. When the mountain man turned to go get some more food from the pack on his horse, he felt the cub right on his heel. The friendship between Mike and the bear grew over the course of the next month. It got to the point where Mike could turn the cub over on her back and rub her tummy. The first time that Mike did that, he noticed a large light brown heart shape on the cub’s chest. The unusual shape led Mike to name the bear Shononee Amet, which in the tongue of the local Indian tribe meant “little bear with big heart”.

One night over a crackling fire, Mike began talking to his new friend about life in Wildcat Canyon. Talking to animals was nothing new to Michael O'Reilly.

“You know, little bear, it’s getting close to the time when we’ll have to leave this place. Soon, the powers that be will open the dam on the other side of the mountains and when the water breaks, we’ll know it’s the moment. Hopefully, they won’t open it early and we can stay the full term, but just in case, it’s always best to travel light at this stage. Tomorrow, I’ll show you the gap in the rock where we can get out of the canyon.”

The next morning Mike got up early and rode over to the nearest ridge where he could see the dam. Just as reached the lookout point, he felt a rumble coming from the earth beneath his feet. Looking across to the dam confirmed his fear. The early opening of the dam had now induced an early exit from the canyon. He quickly rode back to camp, gathered his few belongings, and scooped up the little bear into his strong arms. Pushing his horse to the limit, he headed straight for the pass.

When they reached the gap in the rocks, Mike let the little bear down and then got off his horse.

“I’m sorry, little friend, I wish I had the time earlier to talk to you about what lies beyond this opening. It’s called civilization, a name that sometimes just doesn’t seem to fit. I can’t go with you right now, because I’ve got several friends I have to check on, and time is of the essence. Hopefully, your mama will be out there, and she’ll protect you. A mama bear can be a formidable foe if she wants to protect her cubs. But there are many dangers out there, especially if she’s not there for you. Some will try to kill you so they can harvest parts of your body like your hide. Some will try to kill you because they think you’re bad for the tourist business. Campers, picnickers, and such just think the presence of a bear cub creates an inconvenience for them in what they want to do. There are others who might want to kill you because you’re a she-bear, instead of a male. It can be scary for one so small. If your mama’s not there for you, there are some people who will help you, if they can make it past the law.”

Mike held the cub's snout in his hand, sighed, and then said, "I don't know why I'm telling you all this. I know you can't understand what I'm saying. Maybe it's for my own peace of mind. Somehow, I suppose I hope to be able to understand it all myself. Maybe I'll write it all down someday, so that civilization will look back and ask why it had to be that way. May the Creator be with you, Shononee Amet."

Several years later, when Mike came down from Simmons Peak, he ran into some bear tracks on his way through Bullet Pass. He eased up on the reins of Heartbeat, his big horse, and looked around. The stretch of pass where he paused ran very tight with dense forest on either side. A man and his horse would have a very hard time maneuvering if something popped out in front of them. He got down to study the tracks to see how fresh they were. It looked like two bears had passed through recently. With one set larger than the other, it had to be a mama and her cub. He looked at the fast-setting sun and hoped he could make it through the pass before dark. Then the dusky line of clouds

revealed shapes that made Mike somewhat uneasy. Looming large against the gray sky, a mama bear blocked his path. He looked to the rear for a place to turn around while he reached for his shotgun on the left side of his saddle. In seconds, the big she-bear stood right before him and looked him straight in the eyes. Fully aware that death inside Wildcat Canyon is a sad reality, Mike had time to fire his weapon, but he chose not to. There was something familiar about that bear. Then Mike saw the light brown patch resembling a heart on her chest and he knew it was Shononee Amet. The mama bear then reached down, grabbed her cub, deposited her at the feet of Heartbeat, and ran back into the dense forest. Mike had been around animals all his life, yet he struggled to grasp what had just happened. Why did she leave her cub? What did she know? Why didn't the cub run after her mama?

While the answers to such questions remained a mystery to Mike, he knew he had to take care of the cub. Perhaps the key to unlocking the unknown would be given to him when he traveled through his final pass from Wildcat Canyon.

Perhaps not. Mike wasn't the type to dwell on things he couldn't change. He knew there must have been a reason, and he knew what was right and what was wrong. He knew that as long as there was life given, he would protect it.

The last few rays of the fading light shone down on a big mountain man riding a big horse, leaving a narrow path with a bear cub draped across his saddle. The silence of the forest magnified the plaintive and unanswered cries of a little bear cub. Between those mournful cries could be heard the gentle, encouraging whispers of one of God's earthly caretakers.

*Thanks to James Andrews and his family for passing along this account. May we all grasp that life can be a mystery at times, but as long as there is life given, we should protect it.*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

## STRANGER AT THE DOOR

Driving back from a farm expo, I began looking for the next rest stop on the interstate. Mile marker 84 showed a rest stop 2 miles ahead. Pulling into a parking spot next to a well-traveled van with a rear bumper and door that proudly bore stickers of destinations it had visited, I smiled as I tried to envision what the owners looked like. Were they old-timers spending their golden years as nomads traveling across this magnificent land of ours? Were they off-beat former Wall Street types who had simply had enough? They were surely strangers wherever they went.

As I opened the truck door, I took in the sweet smell of some plant in bloom. I couldn't see what was producing the aroma, but I did see an enormous bank of azaleas in bloom at the edge of the woods. The cool morning air refreshed my body and invigorated my spirit as I headed for the restrooms. I passed an older bearded man and a gray-haired woman on the walk and greeted them with a

good morning. A return nod and grin acknowledged my words. After I walked a few steps, I stopped and turned around to see the couple get into the aforementioned van. Smiling, I couldn't help but think that though they were strangers to me, somehow, with that good morning, return nod and grin, we had bridged a gap.

When I got ready to get back into my truck, I glanced at my watch and noticed it was nine o'clock. Cindy would be sitting in the pew at church by this time if she'd finished setting the last of the communion ware on the altar. I fired old Goldie back up and headed for the interstate on-ramp.

About twenty miles down the road, I saw a sign for Advent Lutheran Church just off to the right of the interstate showing worship services at 8 and 10 AM. I looked at my watch and decided I could make the 10 o'clock service easily, and so I pulled off at the next exit and worked my way back to the church.

The parking lot looked to be about half full, so I had no trouble finding a spot for my long pickup truck. When I walked into the narthex, the official greeter shook my hand and said good morning. I stopped at the edge of the back pew and visually studied the interior of the church. The elaborate stained-glass windows on each side depicted many scenes from the scriptures. Hanging directly behind the altar, a large screen flashed news of upcoming events on the calendar. As a stranger, I took a moderate approach to selecting a pew—not so bold as to go right up front, yet regarding the labels reserving the back for young children and late arrivals. There were approximately an equal number of people who could see me enter as there were those with their backs to me.

When the organist finished playing the prelude, the minister came out and with a booming voice said, “Good morning. Let us praise the Lord with song.”

Simultaneously, I reached for the hymnal and the bulletin to see what hymn number to find. I noticed that they must have recently gotten new

hymnals because the binding and pages hardly looked used. When the light from the screen caught my eye and the melody from the piano caught my ear, I realized why the hymnals looked so new. The words to a contemporary song filled the screen and electric guitars joined the piano. It's not that I speak disparagingly of that, but it just seemed strangely out of place to me. I glanced around at those seated near me to see if anyone else had trouble getting into the melody. The band played enthusiastically, at least from a volume perspective, but very few people were singing with gusto.

When the song concluded, the pastor told the congregation to take a few minutes and greet those in the pews near them. The people in the pew in front of me turned around and shook my hand, as did those behind me when I turned to them. Then the service moved on to creeds and prayers.

The pastor based his sermon on the parable of the lost sheep. After the sermon, a member of the Outreach Committee spoke about all the plans they had for going into the community and “reaching out” to any that would listen. They had hired a

specialist to come into the parish and craft a plan for that endeavor. The words did sound noble.

With the Benediction spoken and the exit song finished, the people left the pews to stand in line to shake the minister's hand. After approximately five minutes standing in line, I walked back to my pickup truck. One person commented on the out-of-state license plate of my truck and that encompassed the entirety of any conversation I had.

About thirty miles down the interstate, I started thinking about my experience at that church. I kept trying to imagine myself as a visitor who had no faith background. Would I have left with any sense of what things meant in the fast-paced liturgy? That question often lingered in my mind at the traditional service at my church, too. Would a visitor have understood anything that we did, or would it have just seemed like another set of robotic rituals?

To be fair about the lack of conversation with anyone at the church, I could have been more outgoing and introduced myself, but if I had been

someone without a faith background seeking to know more about their God, it is more probable that I would have remained quiet. But how would anyone in the church have known my background?

The church had spent money hiring someone to come into their parish and teach them how to go out into the community and spread the gospel. Yet there was a stranger at the door that mostly went unacknowledged. If I had been an unbeliever seeking God, it would have been like that old saying, “I was standing knee deep in the river and dying of thirst.” I thought back to all the times I failed to go out of my way and extend a hand to a visitor that I knew nothing about, for the seemingly paradoxical reason that they were on the other side of the church, and I had to take care of the Lord’s work and clean up the left-behind bulletins in the pews.

That stranger at the door had come to them. They didn’t even have to make grand and noble community outreach plans. It suddenly all seemed so simple. I vowed to never be so blind again.

Clint Lincoln

The Homestead

## A STEEL TRAP

*One of the more interesting aspects of being a pastor is the rich diversity of people who make up your flock. Every parish has its share of ... well, just decide for yourself.*

*Pastor Arnie Schmidt*

With most of the long day behind him, Pastor Schmidt settled down behind the desk in his den, intent on finishing up some paperwork. He heard the doorbell ring, and he started to get up when he saw that Mary, his wife, had already opened the door.

“Oh, hi, Tony,” said Mary.

“Hi, Mary. Is Arnie home?”

“Arnie, Tony is here,” announced Mary.  
“He’s in the den. Go ahead on back.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, Tony,” said Arnie. “What’s up?”

“Are you busy, Pastor?” asked Tony. “I don’t want to interrupt anything.”

“That’s okay, Tony,” said Arnie. “Just doing a little never-ending paperwork.”

“Well, I won’t take up too much of your time. I was doing a little cleaning up at my house and I found this old Sunday School book. It just reminded me of a lot of things way back then, and so I thought I’d drop by and show it to you.”

Taking the book from Tony, Pastor Schmidt said, “Yeah, boy. That was a long time ago. It does bring back a lot of memories.”

“Do you remember Nancy Thomas?” asked Tony.

“Nancy Thomas ... yeah,” replied Arnie. “I wonder whatever happened to her.”

“Do you remember that you and I both had a crush on her?”

“No-oo,” said Pastor Schmidt. “I can’t say that I remember that.”

Looking a little indignant, Tony said, “Well, we did. And I still remember when they took that group Sunday School picture, and you pushed me aside so you could stand next to her.”

“I don’t remember that either. If I did, I’m sorry, but that was so long ago. You aren’t still holding a grudge for that, are you?”

“No, of course not. I just want you to know that I still remember it. You know, it’s kind of remarkable how much of this old book I remember. Here, why don’t you test me?”

“Oh, Tony, I don’t really have time right now, uh ...”

“Aw, come on, Arnie. You’ll probably find it amazing.”

“Oh, okay. Let’s see ... alright. The Ten Commandments.”

“The Ten Commandments,” repeated Tony confidently. “The Ten Commandments ... the Ten Commandments. I suppose we should start with the First Commandment.”

“I think so,” stated Pastor Arnie.

“The First Commandment is ... the First Commandment ...” Leaning over to Arnie, Tony spoke in a hushed voice, “Can you just give me the first word to kind of get me started?”

“Sure. It’s thou.”

“Thou?” questioned Tony. “Are you sure?”

“I’m looking right at it, Tony.”

“Thou ... maybe you could just give me the second word.”

“Shall.”

“Thou shall,” repeated Tony. “Not. Thou shall not.”

“Well, that’s close,” said Arnie. “Thou shall have no other Gods before me.”

“Thou shall have no other Gods before me,” stated Tony, with a smug look on his face.

“That’s good, Tony. Now, the Second Commandment.”

“The Second Commandment ... the Second Commandment is ...”

“Thou,” said Arnie.

“Of course, it’s thou,” said Tony. “Thou shall not take ... wait ... thou shall not take the name of the Lord, Thy God, in vain.”

“Al-l-l right, Tony. You’re on a roll now. The Third Commandment.”

“The Third Commandment is Thou shall not ...”

“No.”

“Thou shall no?” questioned Tony.

“No, Tony. It doesn’t start with Thou shall not.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Remember,” reminded Arnie.

“Remember what?” asked Tony.

“Remember the Sabbath.”

“Remember the Sabbath ... Remember the Sabbath ... Re-mem-ber the Sab-bath ...”

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” said Arnie. “The Fourth Commandment.”

“The Fourth Commandment is ... the Fourth is ...”

“Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother, that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.”

“Well, okay, Pastor. I suppose if you want to use the King James version.”

“The Fifth Commandment,” said Arnie.

“The Fifth Commandment is ... the Fifth Commandment is ...”

“Thou shalt not kill.”

“Thou shalt not kill,” repeated Tony.

“The Sixth Commandment is: Thou shalt not commit adultery,” said Pastor Schmidt. “The Seventh Commandment is: Thou shalt not steal. The Eighth is: Thou shalt not bear false witness against

thy neighbor. The Ninth is: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house. The Tenth Commandment is: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his cattle, nor anything that is thy neighbor's." Looking up at Tony, who sat back in his chair with a smug grin on his face, Arnie asked, "Do you think you've got it, or do you want to go over it again?"

"I've got it," bragged Tony. Pointing to his head, he said, "Once it enters up here, it's like it's in a steel trap."

"Amazing," said Pastor Arnie.

# FALL, FRIDAY NIGHT, AND FOOTBALL

The town is all abuzz about Friday night. The Cedar Crossing Bears are 8–0 and have the home field advantage over conference rival Martinsburg, who are also 8–0 on the season. Smaller towns generally take their football seriously in this neck of the woods.

I went into the barber shop the other day and the big matchup was all everybody talked about. Most of the men talking grew up here in Cedar Crossing, never played football, or have no children playing football (I take that back, sort of, as one man has a grandchild playing on the Cedar Crossing Bears team), but they never miss a home game. As far as any of those ancient fans could recall, there had never been an occasion where these two teams both had perfect records so late in the season.

After I left the barbershop, I stopped by the hardware store and found Jess Hawkins and Tom Mallory having a somewhat heated argument about whether today's 8-0 team could beat the 8-0 team of 1969.

Across the street at the Cedar Crossing Gazette newspaper office, you could see a big sign in the window that said, "See you Friday night at the game. Go, Bears!".

My own interest, besides that required as a resident, came about because my daughter is a cheerleader and I have invested a lot of gas and time in picking her up from cheerleading practice. Not only that, but I labored hard with the principal to get just a tad more modesty in the cheerleaders' outfits. I tried to do my pleading in a low-key, behind-the-scenes approach. I question my furtiveness, though, ever since Barbie Weatherspoon, my daughter's best friend, fellow cheerleader, and member of our parish, accidentally misspoke my name. Instead of Pastor Arnie, she said Pastor Blarney. I let it slide, though, because as her pastor, she knows I will take retribution later.

Friday night eventually came around and the stadium overflowed with fanatics, I mean fans, of the hallowed sport of football. A good number of brave souls from Martinsburg filled the south bleachers. Bear brown or black dominated everything else. My wife and I sat at about the 40-yard line halfway up the stands. The drummer from the Bears' marching band stirred the passion of the home crowd, as if they really needed firing up. Nevertheless, tradition mandated such stirring as part of the pregame program. When the drummer finished the warmup exercise, the teams came charging out onto the field. My wife said something to me, but the crowd noise completely drowned her out.

After a period of stretching, jumping up and down, slamming shoulder pads, and butting helmets, the teams stretched out along the sidelines. The announcer blared over the loudspeaker to stand for the color guard and join in the singing of the national anthem.

When the color guard marched off the field, each team gathered in a huddle for a prayer—yes,

they still do that in most of small-town America. I served for a couple of years as the team chaplain, but I always had an awkward feeling about the pregame prayer. In the middle of a group of fired-up testosterone cases eager to get started, I often found what words I spoke of kindness and peace somewhat at odds with going out to obliterate your opponent. I know many other clergy didn't have that problem, but I did. By necessity, the prayer was pretty generic. I much preferred working with the kids on non-game days. I could then remind them to extend a hand to the opposing players that they just knocked on their rears.

Tonight, we'll be watching our daughter, of course, but also #76—Riley Wolfe, the hulking son of Jack and Margo Wolfe, two of our hard-working farmers and parish members. We'll likewise be watching for #16—Thomas Coffers and #23—Roger Monroe, both also members of our parish, but as sophomores, probably won't be starting tonight.

While the game will hopefully be a good battle and fun to watch, sometimes it can also be fun to watch the people in the stands watching the

game. Fellow students come with an array of team colors, attire, signs, and symbols. Two lads wore full bear costumes and were probably the warmest people at the game. I had a teacher in our parish who once made the comment to me that she wished a few of her students could be half as creative in English class as they were at football games. Inter-class competition to cheer the loudest added to the boisterous environment.

My daughter and my wife both informed me that I could not wear any type of clerical garb at a football game. They seemed rather insistent about it, though I've seen no sign stating that prohibition. Little do they know that I'm wearing a football jersey under my coat that promotes the football program of Westchester Lutheran, the college where I did the first four years of my theological studies. If I get too warm, I may just unzip my jacket. I am aware of the rights granted to me by the U.S. Constitution—I think.

Two rows down from where we sat, I saw Eleanor MacPherson, a demure, petite mother of four athletic boys. Prior to last year, when her oldest son

first began playing varsity football, I had not known of her particular condition. It seems this lovely, charming woman, when entering a football stadium, becomes a ... well ... a boisterous, aggressively loud partisan fan in the stands. The next day, when seen on the street, she is once again the shy wife and mother. No one has yet fully investigated this metamorphosis. I, for one, shall remain merely an observer.

About midway through the first quarter, my wife and I detected the easily recognizable smell of beer. Inconspicuously turning around as if I was looking farther up in the stands, I found the man sitting directly behind us to be Billie Edwards. Billie knows there is no alcohol allowed in the stadium, but he brings it in anyway. Eventually, someone will see him taking a swig from a brown paper bag and report him to security. Then security will come and escort him out of the stadium. By now, security knows him and will always check him at the gate. It is with a small amount of admiration that I look at Billie and his creativity in continuing to get in while concealing the beer, and yet it is with

great sadness that I see the complete waste of such creative thought.

Halftime eventually rolls around, and the bands get to do their thing. The brief rest period will enable both teams to regroup and adjust their strategies. So far, the match has lived up to expectations with the score tied at 14–14. Fortunately, I hit the concession stand just before the half ended and safely managed to come away with two fat dogs, I mean hot dogs, 1 coke, and 1 diet coke (according to my wife the diet coke counteracts the fat in the hot dog, but I am grateful that such thoughts never enter my head). My wife has rather pathetic tastes in hot dogs, preferring hers plain. I, on the other hand, load up with generous amounts of every topping available in order to get my money's worth. I know, the concession stand's profits end up supporting the athletic program, but it's the principle involved. Besides, with the crisp fall air, all the extra toppings help to conserve the warmth of the hot dog, making it taste even better.

Midway through the third quarter, Roger Monroe, the sophomore from our parish, caught a

pass at the 50-yard line and outran the defender to score a long touchdown. When the crowd on our side of the field finally settled down, I spotted Barb and Jack Monroe, proud parents of the lad, a few rows up and gave them a thumbs-up. The fourth quarter saw a goal-line stand by each team, and so Roger's touchdown run ended up being the decisive score in a hard-fought victory for the Cedar Crossing Bears.

When we finally got back to our car, I pulled out my small black notebook and made a note to call Pastor Eric Lingefelter and offer a word of encouragement for the loss. Pastor Lingefelter's son plays linebacker for the losing Martinsburg team. The synodical ethics and policy manual requires that we offer support for our fellow clergy in certain circumstances. Of course, it doesn't specify high school football losses, but you have to read between the lines sometimes. I felt that this was one of those discretionary moments when it was important to remind Eric many times that Roger Monroe, a member of my parish, scored the winning touchdown. He should at least take solace in

that it wasn't an atheist that put the nail in their coffin.

The Bears won their last game of the season the next week by the score of 52 – 0 and ended up ranked #2 in the state for smaller schools. The Cedar Crossing community continued to talk about the season for months afterwards. I even added to the spirit by elaborating in a sermon how we, as Christians, should handle winning in the secular world. I also talked about how we should handle losses as well (I thoughtfully mailed a copy of that sermon to Rev. Lingefelter in Martinsburg).

A week or two before Christmas, we received a Christmas card from the Lingefelters, and it showed no ill feelings towards us for Cedar Crossing's glorious victory over Martinsburg. It seemed a little odd, though, that Eric included a listing of the scores for every meeting between Cedar Crossing and Martinsburg over the last 50 years. When I showed it to my wife, she just rolled her eyes.

Sitting in front of a crackling fire on a cold January evening with a hot cocoa in hand, I began

contemplating if we, as bearers of the Gospel, could learn anything from football. I know it's a stretch, but if you can't think outside the box in front of a crackling fire with a hot cocoa in hand, when would you ever be able to.

I actually planted the seed for such thought while sitting in the stands of the big game between Cedar Crossing and Martinsburg. As I looked out across the stadium, I saw nary an empty spot in the bleachers. Compare that to the average church on Sunday morning when you would find nary a full pew. I suppose, to be fair, that if you took the biggest church building in the area and had all the different denominations come into that church at the same time, it might look much more encouraging. But, of course, that will never happen as the church has fallen victim to Satan's strategic plan of divide and conquer. What then is the draw that will fill a stadium and leave a church half empty?

Most assuredly, a perfect winning season would fill a stadium, and a losing season would not. So, if the contrast between winning and losing can make that big a difference in attendance for the

game of football, how does that compare to the success or failure of the church? A win in football is plain enough, but what should we consider a win in Christianity? The answer, of course, is bringing a person's soul to Christ. Paul had numerous instances when he referred to winning people for Christ. Sadly, though, we don't really celebrate that win in the church with the same fervor that a community celebrates a win on the football field. I know, I know. It's just not the same. One is just a game. The other involves the life of the human spirit. Hardly a fair comparison, but remember, I'm just ruminating. Some church statisticians will cite the growth in numbers of the megachurches, but they rarely mention the losses of precious souls.

"I'm going to bed, Arnie," said my wife. "Are you coming?"

"Not yet, dear. I'm ruminating a little right now."

"Well, don't stay up too late, sweetie. Remember, even the cows sleep."

"Very funny ... goodnight."

Now, where was I? Oh, yeah. I had a colleague once, who with a church very similar to the one here in Cedar Crossing, often lamented about the numbers in his church. The members of his congregation were largely conservative-minded farmers who liked to do things the way they'd done them for two hundred years. Not that he necessarily had a problem with that, but it didn't lend itself to much flexibility in spreading the Gospel. It would kind of be like giving the ball to the fullback and having him run the same play off tackle every time. The one number that he had the most problem with was new members who joined the church by profession of faith as compared to transfer or birth. In the last five years of his ministry there, they only had one person join who was not already a believer or born into a family of believers. Transfers were almost nonexistent because of the nature of the community and, with an aging congregation, deaths outnumbered births. I never really had a good answer for him as to how to change that. I guess I could compare it to a high school with a football team that perpetually had losing seasons. The stands are rarely filled, and high school

football is rarely the talk at the local barber shop. The coaches have tried a multitude of different strategies, but to no avail. It's almost like they're waiting for some messiah to give them the answer.

In an odd sort of way, maybe we need to study the transformation of Eleanor MacPherson, the demure and petite mother of four athletic boys that I previously mentioned ... but my cup of cocoa is empty and maybe I'm just getting tired and should join the cows who have stopped ruminating ... I only hope Pastor Lingefelter can appreciate the compassion I showed him in his time of loss when he has the home field advantage next year.

## RECYCLED GOOD NEWS

*Some of you may already be familiar with Buford. For those who have never discovered the valuable insight he provides, let me give a brief bio. Buford Douglas is an equipment mechanic out at The Homestead, the farm of Clint and Cindy Lincoln. Clint, Cindy, their children, and Buford, are all members of St. John Lutheran Church in Cedar Crossing. The folks around Cedar Crossing and Oak County have long absorbed the wisdom of this remarkable man on an array of subjects. The following is an account of Buford's little-known foray into the world of art.*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

Regular visitors to The Homestead are aware of the vast repository of knowledge that Buford the

mechanic possesses. His willingness to dispense his storehouse of valuable tips and information is well documented. The tremendous personal satisfaction that Buford has derived from his construction of the world's largest nativity scene made entirely of used oil filters has not previously been well-publicized.

As an equipment mechanic, he has always had an ample supply of oil filters on hand. The idea for their use in the fabrication of a nativity scene did not occur to him until the fall of 2002, when a bolt of lightning struck him while he welded a four-bottom plow out in the field. Fortunately, the bulk of the current passed through the welding circuit, so he suffered little physical injury. But he has had remarkable clarity in his thinking since that incident.

The day after the lightning strike, Buford looked at the almost full barrel of used oil filters sitting in the shop and, being a frugal person at heart, decided there must be a way to save the expense of paying someone to haul them away and turn it into a positive investment instead.

If asked how he came up with the idea for a nativity scene, he makes no claim of personal creative genius, for he is a humble man. He prefers to say, “The Lord works in mysterious ways.”

The project started out with that full barrel of filters and slowly grew by one or two filters each day, depending on how much maintenance work he did that day. Buford worked on the scene without fanfare until Christmas time came around. When he put colored lights on it, people took notice. As word spread through the channels of hardware store to barber shop, other townsfolk started bringing Buford all their filters. The mechanic used his week of vacation time from The Homestead to catch up on construction, adding a cow, six sheep, and two camels. He took the time to rework a few of the figures since he had accumulated so many more filters. He made the baby Jesus out of Baldwin fuel filters, Mary out of Napa oil filters, and Joseph out of Fram oil filters. Such changes helped to project a more consistent biological perspective.

No one really knows when the title of “World’s Largest Nativity Scene Made Entirely of

Used Oil Filters” came into being. One of the most plausible theories lies at the feet of Mabel Franz, gossipier extraordinaire and female malcontent, who made a derogatory comment about it in the beauty shop one day. Somehow, when it filtered through the chain of others inclined to repeat such comments, it reached the men in the barber shop where it went through further transformation until it reached the point of honor. At least that’s one possible explanation.

As the years went by, Buford began adding all kinds of lighting effects to the scene. By inserting a high intensity red light into the back of the filter that made up the head of baby Jesus, the rays of light coming through the pleats and mesh of the filter produced an eerie glow. With Buford’s small farm being in a little valley away from any town light, the nights were especially dark, making the dramatic effect of the light coming from Jesus that much stronger. Some have even called it a point of visually prophetic symbolism.

It soon reached a point where Buford could no longer take care of it all by himself, so he hired

his cousin Bobby Ray to come twice a week and continue working on the construction. Seth Johnson of Johnson's Advertising and Marketing, LLC talked Buford into signing a marketing contract, giving him sole rights to promote the scene. He set up a website and scheduled Buford for a series of radio program guest spots.

As further testament to Buford's assertion that the Lord works in mysterious ways, it is interesting to note a few e-mails received on the website's e-mail account:

Sarah, from Billington, North Dakota, wrote, "My husband likes to restore old tractors, and he frequently skipped church to work on them on Sunday mornings. Since visiting 'The World's Largest Nativity Scene Made Entirely from Used Oil Filters', he has come to church with me every Sunday. He says that every time he looked at the filters on the tractor engine, he felt guilty."

Mayor Robb Jackson, from Cedar Crossing, wrote, "I consider it a miracle. Community and spiritual enthusiasm and pride in our village has

skyrocketed since the formalization of this magnificent work of spiritual art.”

Sheila, from Baltimore, Maryland, wrote, “Since touching the display on a recent tour visit with our ladies’ group from church, my arthritis has disappeared, and I’m now able to quilt again. We just finished a series of quilts to send to our Missionary at Large.”

The increase in publicity over time resulted in more people bringing more used filters to Buford’s farm. There are plans to expand to a passion scene in the coming summer. The county commission has applied to the state for official authorization to designate the site as a point of interest spot in its tourist brochure.

As previously mentioned, Buford derives a great deal of satisfaction from the entire project, yet he remains humble and ever aware of that fateful day out in the field. The mechanic rarely ever refers to it as “The World’s Largest Nativity Scene Made Entirely from Used Oil Filters”, preferring instead the name, “Recycled Good News”.

## LAST WEEK'S STEW

With his wife, Mary, out of town for the weekend at the Women's Missionary Conference and with the kids at his parents, Pastor Schmidt suffered through having to fend for himself for a couple of days. His suffering clustered near the hours of 6:00 AM, noon, and 6:00 PM. Coincidentally, he usually ate his meals at these times.

At 7:00 PM on Saturday night, his prayers remained unanswered. He had given very specific instructions to his wife to pass the word discreetly around before she left of his impending condition for the weekend. It proved small consolation that most of the other men in the congregation could also be suffering. He always had the option of going down to the bowling alley and grabbing a sandwich, but the humility of such an action gnawed at his pride. He thought he would save that as a last resort for Sunday night in case the subtle appeals in his sermon fell on deaf ears. So, he found himself staring at the contents of the refrigerator,

pondering the meaning of life. Sometimes women just didn't understand the deeper facets of life. To them, the contents of a refrigerator loomed as just another chore. To a man, it stood as sustenance to fight another battle.

He finally gathered the courage to look into a large, covered dish toward the back of the bottom shelf. The contents looked vaguely familiar; it appeared to be last week's stew. As he calculated the complexity of this selection, he cast his eyes toward the microwave. Yes, the stew had a good mix of the essentials necessary for survival. A quick glance into the freezer confirmed that there was still ice cream available to cap off the meal. He opened the cupboard, pulled out a medium-sized bowl, and filled it with a good portion of stew. Looking at the bowl, he decided he needed a bigger bowl, so he emptied that bowl into a larger bowl, added another couple of scoops, and put the dirty, medium-sized bowl in the sink. Then came the decision of how long to nuke the stew. A logical approach would be to start at 30 seconds, then test it. After nine such trial-and-error cycles, he

concluded it was warm enough. After consuming the stew and a double serving of chocolate ice cream, he felt proud of himself. Yes, he could survive if he had to.

As the evening wore on, the stew seemed to cause him a little digestive distress. He could not get to sleep, so he got up, went into the living room, and turned on the television. With the amazing technology of satellites, they could get five hundred channels even in a small country town. After browsing four-hundred and ninety-nine channels, he hoped the last one would have something worth watching. Channel 500 featured Professor Lawrence MacDonald and his traveling classroom. This evening's episode took the viewer into a little-known small town in upper North Dakota, where the professor prepared to lead a tour of the Red Plains Quote Museum. The museum occupied a building that originally held a combination barber shop and saloon. When the barber passed away and the county went dry, the community felt it needed to do something about all the wisdom that they would lose without those two establishments. So,

they formed a committee of former patrons to preserve the educational heritage of the town in a manner that would be worthy of national recognition. Thus, a quote museum arose from the ashes of the barber shop and saloon. As you can imagine, such a display of quotes would have to cover a wide variety of subjects with diverse levels of understanding.

Pastor Schmidt felt the show held more promise than anything else he had seen, so he set down the remote and opened his mind. Professor MacDonald opened the show standing in front of a brick building that sat on the town square. To the professor's right, Arnie could see several signs in the window. One said, "Haircuts 25¢". Another said, "No credit, except for Harley Davis". The last one said, "No horses served". As the camera panned the inside of the room, Arnie felt as though he had entered another era in time with the old-time barber chairs and the rich dark wood and gilded décor of the bar still in place. A long hallway showed that several rooms held special significance.

Professor MacDonald, dressed in a bow tie and tweed jacket, then took his hand carved wooden pointer and directed the camera to a sign above an ornate statue behind the bar that said, “If after a nominal time at the bar, you get the feeling that you are covered all over with gold paint, it’s probably just a guilt complex.”

Pastor Schmidt thought it a humorous, yet astute observation of man when he gives himself to strong drink.

For the next hour, Professor MacDonald led the tour through one portal of enlightenment after the other. The illumination and the fame of those quoted merited a great deal of respect from Pastor Schmidt. The founding committee’s claim that all those quoted had at some time in their history actually been physically present at the barber shop or saloon merited a great deal of skepticism from the theologian. His doubt of the latter grew out of the fact that the quotes ranged from Martin Luther to Mark Twain to Yogi Berra. But the claim did not detract from the wisdom presented. It merely added a stroke of authenticity to the ambiance. Professor

MacDonald deferred the balance of the program to merely pointing his hand carved wooden pointer at each quote in rhythm to classical background music.

As the program drew to a close, Pastor Schmidt began pondering the sampling of quotes presented. He concluded that the women and the more sober-minded citizens of the community had a greater influence on the selection of quotes to include in the museum than the founding committee. Perhaps that's why the committee of former patrons of the barber shop and saloon remained steadfast in their singular claim that all the authors uttered the quotes while on the premises. When Professor MacDonald ended the show, he urged viewers to tune in the next night as he probes the philosophical and theological wit of Bullwinkle the moose and Rocky the flying squirrel.

Pastor Schmidt survived the weekend without any serious health issues. At 1:00AM the next night, he found himself in front of the television set tuned to channel 500.

When his wife came out of the bedroom, she asked him, “What are you doing? It’s one o’clock in the morning.”

“Just having a little of last week’s stew and watching an educational program.”

As she bent over and gave him a kiss, she said, “Well, I love you dear, but I’m going back to bed.”

“Good night, dear,” he said. When she was out of sight, he murmured to himself, “Sometimes women just don’t understand the deeper facets of life.”

## RENDERINGS OF AN ATTIC

My wife verbally informed me three weeks in advance of the scheduled clean out day. She circled it in red on the scenic calendar in my den. She circled it red on the church calendar I carry in my briefcase. She left numerous messages with the church secretary. I had to face it; a better opponent beat me.

The annual Ladies of St. John Rummage Sale for Foreign Missions preceded any governmental recycling program by years. Cut-off plastic milk jugs held tomato plants for sale by Judi Krautmeire. They reused plastic bags for bagging sale items. There were a few items that had become so familiar that several of the boys placed small wagers on the side as to who would get them this year. I remember seeing my carved wooden eagle lamp at Johnny Rondo's house one year. The next year it occupied the stand next to Milt Carson's sofa. The following year found it at Bob & Jean Colbert's place.

Once in a great while, something new would surface at this sale. It usually came about from one of two sources. Someone new arrived in town or someone cleaned out an attic. You see, attic merchandise did not make the rounds as often as it occupied the upper dust collecting section of the house. Always more difficult to access, it had a relatively stable life up there. The garage generally wound up being the more common source for upcoming sales. So, while I had to put up a certain amount of resistance to such work, an attic offered new ground or new adventures.

Putting on my oldest clothes, I readied myself for the first hurdle in the adventure—opening the door to the attic without the steps coming down and hitting me in the head. Over the years, I’ve made numerous mental notes to fix that problem, but the visit to the attic is so rare that once I’ve completed whatever I had to do up there, the urgency to fix it drifts into seldom used sections of the brain.

Surviving the first hurdle of the ladder, I stepped up into a world of ... well, a world of dust. I turned on the flashlight to help me find the cord

that operated the switch of the attic light. The shadows cast by the attic light, still today at my age, harbor eerie recollections of ghosts that survive only on dust and little children. Fortunately, I am neither.

The first box I encountered had the usual contents—old skates that no one in their right mind would ever try to skate with, a jack in the box that I had when I was six years old (of course it no longer worked; that's what attics are for, aren't they?), and a cigar box full of baseball cards. I set the baseball cards aside for further reading in my den and left the rest of the contents in its tomb.

The next box contained various items belonging to my wife, so I took them down for the sale, relying on the well-oiled excuse of ignorance as backup. You have to give the illusion that you're doing a yeoman's job of cleaning out, or she might question your selections for leaving alone. I did likewise with several boxes containing items belonging to my children. Decisions on items of such ownership ultimately left one between a rock and a hard place. If you don't bring it down, your wife

gets mad at you. If you do bring it down, your children get mad at you. So, I relied on ignorance again and let them hash it out.

Over in the far corners of the attic world, I found an old chest. If I had ever known what the chest contained, I had long forgotten, so it provided more fodder for an inquiring mind. Brushing the dust off the top, I opened it up and discovered contents that would delight a history detective for months. Since this had the potential of serious decision-making, I brought it over to the light and pulled up an old box to sit upon.

My first selection comprised an old photo album. When I opened it up, half of the pictures fell off the page. No sheet protectors in those days, and the glue just wasn't the same as today's high-tech stuff. The recaptured images lacked the grandeur of glossy color and digitized detail. Those premiums came after the image entered your head and the quality varied with the limits of your imagination.

I carefully picked up the picture that fell the farthest distance away and turned it over to see my

grandpa and his brother standing next to an old airplane. In the years following the war, they had operated a local flight school, as well as a farm. It reminded me of the story when they flew to the small town where many of my grandpa's relatives lived. The small towns rarely had landing strips, so pastures, if you knew the owner, often served as such. They had landed on the pasture of my grandpa's cousin and were coming to a stop when they hit a muddy spot. The plane tipped forward on its nose and bent the propeller. My grandpa unbolted the propeller and took it into the blacksmith's shop. He straightened it up and my grandpa bolted it back on the plane. An unsophisticated repair by current standards, but they flew it back home.

Next, I came upon a picture of my great uncle sitting in the seat of an old bus. During the war, there were few young men available to help with work on the farms. My grandpa had arranged a deal with the army to use German prisoners of war from a local camp for farm labor in exchange for providing food for the camp. My great uncle would drive the old bus to the camp and pick up a load of

prisoners to bring to the farm. He said one time the guard accompanying them had him stop at a gas station because he needed to use the restroom. Before he got off the bus, the guard handed his gun to one of the prisoners. When he came back, the prisoner handed the gun back to him.

An early attempt at colorizing photos found its way into my hands with a picture of Baby, a runt Golden Retriever, that my grandpa and grandma had on the farm. Baby was a ‘digger’, who, if she couldn’t be found, was sure to be at the bottom of a hole somewhere on the farm. My dad said they nicknamed her ‘Gator’, because sometimes all you saw was a pair of alligator eyes peering out of the hole.

At the back of the photo album, I found some old letters. In one of them, my dad had written to his sister one spring about everything that he still had to do to get ready for planting. He described an incident where he got up on the combine to start it for harvesting the winter wheat. He hadn’t run it for three or four months, so he dropped in a fully charged battery and filled it with fresh fuel. When

he hit the starter and the engine fired up, something came flying out of the chute. Apparently, a possum had sought a winter haven in the combine. When the possum hit the ground some twenty feet away, he took off running and never looked back.

I'm not sure how these letters found their way back to our family's house, but I'm glad they did. In another, my mom had written to her sister about the time when they were out by the big pond on the farm feeding our ducks, Lucy and Ethel. She described a moment in which I was running down the path beside the pond away from her. Having just recently learned to walk, I followed Lucy and Ethel as they waddled down the path. With diaper enhanced little britches, I was indistinguishable from Lucy and Ethel from the rear as we three waddled together.

The second album in the chest had more recent family photos, including one of my dad, my mom, and myself sitting on a bench outside the house. My dad held Snoopy, a stray Beagle that they adopted. My mom held Hunter, a Cairn terrier and a fierce protector of house and home. I held

Smoky, a stray cat that considered the farm her new home.

Hunter and Smoky held onto the more traditional dog/cat relationship. Snoopy, who was about as friendly a dog as you could have, and Smoky had a relationship predicated on a single swipe by Smoky at Snoopy's nose. It became immediately clear to Snoopy to keep his distance. Snoopy had a bit of wanderlust in him sometimes. When he went into the neighbor's corn field, Smoky would follow him as far as the fence and then she would jump up onto the top of a fence post and watch him. Occasionally, she would look back towards the house as if to say, "Isn't somebody going to do something about him?"

My exploring momentarily stopped when I heard my wife calling me from below. I had the foresight to have a box of items ready to go at my side. When she called a second time, I descended the steps with a box in hand and said, "You called me, dear?"

Seeing that I was still actively engaged in the clean out process, she said, “Yes, but never mind.”

When I reached the garage with the box, my wife dispatched me to get the pickup truck, back it up into the driveway, and start loading boxes that she had already sorted. Sometimes, as a pastor, it seemed like you always had to prod and direct your parishioners to get things done. In a strange, twisted sort of way, it felt good to not have that responsibility on certain occasions. To be on the receiving end of prodding and directing, almost felt good, within certain limits of course. The Ladies of St. John Annual Rummage Sale for Foreign Missions fell into such a category. To borrow the expression, “Don’t Mess with Texas”, this time of year, around here, it’s “Don’t Mess with TLSJARSFFM”. I suppose if you lived in Texas, it could be, “Don’t Mess with TLSJARSFFM in Texas”.

Having loaded all the sorted boxes, I started to head back to the attic when I saw Elmer White driving into our driveway. Using my deductive powers, I surmised he would need something

pertaining to TLSJARSFFM. Correct in my deduction, I gave him three extra empty boxes we had. Just before he pulled away, he leaned out the window of his pickup truck and said, “Do you want in on this year’s pool on the eagle lamp, Pastor?”

I answered, “I’ll need to pass on that this time, due to the SEC’s rules on insider trading.”

When I got back into the house, I took a detour into the kitchen for a light snack so I could continue my task with full physical effort. When I once again climbed the attic steps, I felt as though I had returned to a world of my own, a home within a home. Being careful not to bump my head for a third time, I resumed my place on the box near the chest under the light. At that point, the sun came out from behind the clouds that had been holding it hostage all morning. The sudden burst of light coming through the soffit vents added a different dimension to that small space in the attic. It was almost as if I had been given a window into a painting in progress. Could it be God rendering a work of art that said to hold on to the past; relish it; learn from it; use it as a light into the future? I believed

that the Creator of all had let me know that the joy of life was here and that I should abound in its memories and that above all I should thank him eternally for life.

And I did. Until my wife called me again for another box of attic renderings.

# TEXAS LIARS CLUB

## CEDAR CROSSING CHAPTER

I met Pastor Fred in his office on Friday night. This was the first chance that he and I have had to attend one of these meetings together. When we go, which is not very often, I attend the meeting in Cedar Crossing, and he attends the meeting in Profitville. Tonight, however, because of the big-name guest, Cedar Crossing had to have a much larger hall, and St. Peter's large room fit the bill. Our aim is always to offer our spiritual guidance to anyone needing it, keep abreast of our members attending, and occasionally pick up some new material for sermons.

Neither the Cedar Crossing Chapter nor the Profitville Chapter are major players in the movement, and usually the subject matter leans toward the amateurish, but tonight we have a true professional, Senator Randolph Clivewell, with us. Naturally, we do not wear any clerical attire to these meetings as we do not want to influence the

participants unduly or make them feel uneasy. Sitting mid row and about halfway down to the stage, we could feel the excitement in the air. As the appointed hour neared, it looked like it was going to be a standing-room-only crowd. President Billings rapped his gavel for the meeting to start.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to call this meeting of the Texas Liars Club, Cedar Crossing Chapter, to order,” said President Billings. “I would like to thank Pastor Fred Anderson and St. Peter Church for allowing us to use their fine hall on this momentous occasion. Since we have so many guests with us tonight, we are going to dispense with attendance and move straight into old business. Mr. Secretary, would you read the minutes from our last meeting, please?”

The secretary spent a couple of minutes with the legalities and then moved to the featured story for the last meeting, which went like this:

Pastor Schmidt recently spent a couple of vacation weeks visiting relatives at various locations around the country. He always tried to stop at the

local church that his relatives attended and introduce himself. The first church he stopped at was in Denver, Colorado. He met the pastor, introduced himself, and asked the local pastor a question.

“I noticed that gold phone on the wall in the narthex with the sign saying ‘\$10,000 per minute’. What is that exactly?”

“It’s a direct line to God up in heaven,” answered the pastor.

Pastor Schmidt just kind of nodded and later said to himself, “Amusing.”

The next relative Pastor Schmidt visited lived in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Oddly, he noticed the same gold phone with the same sign saying \$10,000 per minute at the local church. The same scene occurred at Enid, Oklahoma and Kansas City, Kansas. Pastor Schmidt wondered if they were that far behind in Cedar Crossing that they didn’t have one of those at St. John.

The last stop on his vacation was in Dallas, Texas, where his sister lived. As usual, he went to the local church and saw the same gold phone, but

this time the sign was different. He immediately sought out the pastor and asked him a question.

“I’ve been seeing these gold phones in churches all across this country and they all say \$10,000 per minute for a direct call to God in heaven, but your sign says 25 cents per minute. Why is it only 25 cents per minute here?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” said the minister. “You’re in Texas now and it’s a local call from here.”

A rousing round of applause followed, and the secretary concluded by saying, “I’d like to say Pastor Arnold Schmidt of St. John wrote this ...”

A voice about mid row, halfway down from the stage yelled out, “I object.”

“As I was trying to say before someone interrupted me,” replied the secretary. “I’d like to say Pastor Arnold Schmidt of St. John wrote this, or I could say we don’t know who the author was, but this is a liars club, so it probably doesn’t matter who I say wrote it.”

*Disclaimer addendum:*

*My objection is not rooted in any dishonor at an association with this excellent fabrication. I lay no claim to the originality of the lie. It is, in fact, a well-known lie that has been around for a while. A good lie must be widely disseminated and repeated regularly to maintain the title of well-known. The membership of the Texas Liars Club – Cedar Crossing Chapter is happy to be a part of this process. The truth as to the original author is rather murky, and the truth is seldom covered in this setting. So, kudos to the author for a lie that has withstood the test of time.*

*Rev. Arnold Schmidt*

The president then asked for a motion to accept the minutes as read. Receiving a prompt second and approval, the president moved on.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen,” said President Billings. “For our new business tonight, we are blessed to have a true professional among us, the Honorable Senator Randolph Clivewell.” The

walls of the hall literally shook from the thunderous applause. "It's all yours, Senator."

"Thank you, President Billings," said the legislator. "My dear constituents, it is with all humility that I stand before you tonight."

Somewhere in the back of the hall, someone yelled out, "Liar." And the house roared.

"Why else would I be here?" countered the senator. "My colleagues in the Senate send their greetings, many wishing they could be here with me tonight, were it not for the heavy burden of having to read legislation to know what's in it before passing it. Just last week, I sponsored a bill that gained rare bipartisan support. The 'Wind Conservation Bill' is now established law."

"What's in it?" yelled out someone.

"My dear friend, I'm glad you asked. Except for some funds for a snowboarding school in Florida and a research project on why some Major League baseball players hit more home runs than others, we felt that we needed to monitor the amount of wind being consumed by small family

farms across this great land. This legislation gives much needed authority to the Department of the Interior to monitor farms with six or more windmills on their property. During periods of low wind activity, the Department can require that the owner of said windmills turn off a maximum of half of their windmills during such calmer days in order to conserve our precious natural resource of wind.”

A smattering of applause came at first, followed by a slight pause—as if the crowd needed time to contemplate what the senator said—but then ended with a heartier response.

“Furthermore, last week, the Honorable Senator Barron asked me if I would co-sponsor a fiduciary bill to increase the funding for and expand the scope of the ‘Cognitive Charities Fund of the Senate’. I told him his request greatly moved me and that I would certainly co-sponsor it.”

“What’s in it?” yelled out someone.

“My dear friend, I’m glad you asked. The terrible plight of an extremely poor and downtrodden family inspired this bill in Senator Barron’s home

district. There were eight children and two invalid grandparents in the family. Sadly, the father had just passed away, and the mother had just contracted a rare and usually fatal disease. While they barely got enough food from the local church pantries, there was no money to pay the rent. They were in danger of being turned out into the streets in frigid weather unless someone could come up with the \$600 to pay the rent due. Fortunately, this legislation passed, closing a loophole in the law, and allowing the Senate to use your precious tax dollars to pay the rent and save this family. We owe a great debt to Senator Barron for getting this through. And to show how miracles do indeed happen, if Senator Barron hadn't been the landlord of their property, we would have never known about this family."

That last one was probably true, but in a liar's club even the truth can sound like a lie.

"My friends, the great Milton Friedman once said, 'If you put the federal government in charge of the Sahara Desert, in five years there'd be a shortage of sand.' Well, I am sponsoring legislation

to fund a special task force within the State Department to address that issue.”

“How much is that going to cost?” yelled someone from the back of the room.

“My estimate is only eighty billion, give or take a few billion, depending on some additional input from some select constituents in this fair district.”

“Boondoggle!” yelled numerous people.

“Yes, I am confident that with the Saharan Sand Depletion and Boondoggle Act, we can accomplish Mr. Friedman’s assessment in three years instead of five.”

On and on it went. Senator Clivewell has great speaking endurance, as he is a veteran at the filibuster. And, of course, his position supplies him with great material. When it was over, I said good-night to Fred, and we agreed to share notes at another time.

On the way back to my car, I laughed frequently to myself when I thought about some of the

things said. I must admit, in one way, it is pure fun. Nobody goes to one of those meetings expecting to believe anything, for they are clear-cut in the handling of truth and are “As Advertised”. In real life, they often advertise the truth as being clear-cut, yet it proves to be more of a tragicomedy version of what I heard tonight. It seems I am always saying to myself after watching the news, “If it wasn’t so pathetic, it would be funny.”

As I approached the car, Ronnie Carter caught my attention.

“How would you like to have that big a crowd every Sunday morning, Pastor?” asked Ronnie. “I think we should have a church service at our next Texas Liars Club – Cedar Crossing Chapter meeting.”

I refrained from endorsing any part of Ronnie’s suggestion ... There was too much truth in the thought.

## BAPTISM OF A FISHERMAN

I left Mel's Barber Shop and Sam's General Store after a haircut and an hour of uncharacteristically mundane conversation. I arrived at my new destination in short order. The Chit Chat Café looked like a human traffic jam, again such an unusual occurrence for a small-town diner. I could think of no specific occasion to merit such a crowd. Harvey's coffee always hit the spot, but ... perhaps it was the cold temperatures and Grace's homemade chili. At any rate, my standing in the community garnered me no special early entrance. I engaged in casual conversation with those next to me in line, but it didn't prove enlightening as to the draw for all those people.

A table finally opened up, but I let the family of four with two young kids have it. Over in the corner I saw a familiar figure, Pastor Dave Wolfe from First Baptist. I strolled over to his booth and stood there. He was working intently with pen and paper.

“Man, Harvey should be happy about this,” I said.

“What? ... Oh, hi, Arnie,” he said. “Yes, I’m sure he’s loving it.” Seeing me scan for a seat, he offered, “Please, sit down, Arnie.”

“Working on this week’s sermon?” I asked.

“No ... no ... no. Just making some notes on all the references to fishing and fisherman in the Bible.”

“What brought that on?” I asked. “I don’t recall you being an avid fisherman.”

“Arnie, I want to talk to you about Baptism.”

“If it’s something theological, I’m not sure I have much to offer above the doctrinal differences between Baptists and Lutherans.”

“You know Ruddy Parker, don’t you?”

“Yes, I see him around occasionally. Don’t he and Fess Baker have some kind of intense fishing rivalry?”

“Very much so,” replied Pastor Wolfe. “Fess is an official member of First Baptist, and Ruddy could be considered a member of my flock, but not officially. We’ve been trying to get Ruddy baptized for over ten years. In some ways, I think of it as one of my greatest failures.”

“That’s not on you, Dave.”

“I know, not fully. That’s why I said, ‘In some ways’. He has been a stubborn master of resistance. Well, last Wednesday, December 4<sup>th</sup>, I received a phone call at 8:03 pm. Ruddy Parker declared to me that it was time for him to get baptized. I heard a lot of clamor in the background, and someone yelled out ‘Barkeep, another round for my friends’. I knew that Ruddy was in the Gold Nugget Saloon.”

“Whoa ... wait a minute. I thought your flock were all teetotalers.”

“They are. It’s an official church rule.”

“Hmm,” I mused.

“However, there is an exception granted in those rules. A one-hour grace period is given when returning from a fishing trip. The consumption of spirited beverages is allowed for that one hour.”

“I see,” I said. “I can understand that. Fishing tales with that hour are colorful. Without it, they are in black and white.”

“I don’t condone it, but it’s there for all to see.”

“Those who wrote the church rules were all fishermen?” I posed.

“Exactly. Now Ruddy didn’t sound drunk, so I had to assume that he was serious about it. We agreed to meet the following Tuesday to discuss it. I couldn’t help but wonder what might have motivated him to take that step. Had he lost a fishing bet? Had I said something in the previous week’s sermon that moved him? Maybe he just got tired of Doris nagging him about it. We met on Tuesday, and I came away with the feeling that he genuinely wanted to be baptized. I tried to subtly ask

questions that might reveal what motivated him, but he kept steadfastly silent about it.”

“So did he finally get baptized?”

“The next Sunday I led the congregation out back to the lake. It was cold, but the crowd’s spirit warmed the air around us. Ruddy walked on my right side and Fess Baker walked on my left. Ruddy and I waded into the lake, and we began the Baptism. Up to that point everything proceeded normally without a hitch.”

“I assume it then started to unravel?”

“I wouldn’t say it unraveled, but it did take a strange turn. In all my days, I’ve never seen anything like it. When Ruddy came up out of the water, the man had a fish in his mouth. Now, Arnie, you know me. I’ve rarely ever stood speechless in my life, but I couldn’t even remember the closing words. Yet, I fail to see any spiritual significance with it.”

“Yeah.”

“When Fess Baker saw what happened, he turned around and headed back to his pickup truck.”

Virgil Thomas took my arm and asked, “What’s up with Fess, Pastor?”

“What? ... What do you mean?”

“I heard him mumbling to himself,” said Virgil. “It sounded like, ‘If he’s gonna have that kind of help, I know I’m licked’. What do you think he meant?”

“I told Virgil I wasn’t sure. Then Fess came back with his prize fishing rod and reel in hand. He held it out to Ruddy like a defeated warrior would when surrendering his sword.”

“Well, Dave, I wish I could come up with some pearls of wisdom for you. ‘The Lord works in mysterious ways’ almost sounds too much like a cliché. It’s certainly something to share with your colleagues at your next convention ... if they’ll believe it. As I see it, the bottom line is we take them however the Lord sends them to us.”

“You got that right, brother.”

“What kind of fish was it, Dave?”

“I don’t know. What difference does that make?”

“You just need to make sure you have all your bases covered before you repeat this story. I mean, if it was a Lutheran fish, you could have a serious problem.”

“It was a Baptist fish ... definitely a Baptist fish,” asserted Pastor Dave.

## DESSERT

As a purveyor of Biblical and spiritual wisdom, Pastor Schmidt spent more than a modicum of time counseling people on a wide variety of subjects. While a small-town parish in a farming community often brought subjects uncommon to big city congregations, issues still surfaced that could be considered universal to humanity as a whole.

As he sat in his den contemplating his next sermon topic, he looked over at the shelves full of resource books. His pride and joy, so to speak, was *The Complete Works of Martin Luther*, a 55-volume set published jointly by Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House. He had everything in print by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and some translations of Melancthon. He also had reference books on Spurgeon's sermons, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, and a complete guide to Wesley's hymns. Many more such learned men of God provided him with centuries of study in the relationship between God and His Creation of mankind. Still, as

formidable as this team of theologians was in providing counsel, occasionally situations arose that required the good pastor to draw on the wisdom of common sense or some other mundane source.

Pastor Schmidt, of late, seemed more fascinated with the human mind and its interaction with the spirit. He marveled at the complexity of the brain, and he marveled at those who insisted it came into being by some chance chemicals floating around in space. The last year found him absorbing numerous volumes on improving the memory, especially of the elderly. Last week he visited Alma and Rudolph Limpke at their farm in the valley. Getting on in years, Rudy had suffered a brain injury when he fell off his combine a while back. Things like that proved hard for Pastor Schmidt sometimes, especially when he had known Rudy's active philosophical wit so intimately. His time at their farm seemed to center on their life with Rudy's condition. Rudy couldn't remember anything he had done in the last hour, or the last week, for that matter. Yet he could spend hours telling you

every last detail of a farming story from thirty years ago.

Two days after visiting the Limpke's, Pastor Schmidt had a session with Doug Waters in his office at the church. A high school senior, Doug wanted some advice on choosing the career path in his life. The young man could fix anything that moved, and he had a compassionate heart for life. One visit to the Waters' farm and the "zoo", as his mother called it, revealed his natural abilities and his passion for animals. Doug would make a great veterinarian, but he struggled with a spiritual calling that he perceived to be the ministry. Pastor Schmidt had never seriously counseled anyone about taking the path that he himself had chosen, so there lurked a certain amount of anxiety in his words of counsel. He enjoyed talking with Doug, especially when the young man expressed himself in the way that only youth can. Pastor Schmidt gave him a brief review of the course of studies and what types of positions might be available. He spent the larger portion of time talking about Doug and his aspirations. As their talk neared an end, a

picture arose in Pastor Schmidt's mind of that vast collection of spiritual wisdom sitting on the shelves in his den. He could see Martin Luther counseling some student of theology so many years ago. He consciously searched the woods and fields of his mind for just the right words to send Doug on the right path for his life. Did his search find those words in the fertile minds of those who lined his bookshelf? No, those precious words came from a well-known personality who had not yet made a name in theological circles. And the words of counsel that Pastor Schmidt used to embolden the young man came from none other than Kermit the Frog, "You must look deep inside your heart and ask what you really want. If your immediate answer is 'dessert', you probably missed your heart and went directly to your stomach."

Doug Waters left Pastor Schmidt's office fully intending to enroll in a Pre-Seminary program. Pastor Schmidt knew he would make a fine emissary of the Lord.

What did concern Pastor Schmidt somewhat had to do with the last words of counsel he had

given the future theologian. He finally reconciled his worry with the words and how his mind could have possibly submitted them to his mouth by recalling when the Lord sent out his twelve disciples.

In Matthew 10, it was written, “These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, ... ‘When they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you’.”

So, if the Lord wanted him to cite Kermit the Frog as spiritual encouragement, then it’s entirely possible that the Spirit of the Father put those words in his mouth. He would not question it any further.

The hour grew late, and Pastor Schmidt had let his mind wander back to events unrelated to what should have been his current focus, that of his sermon. He needed something to break the writing impasse with his sermon. As his eyes scanned all the volumes of wisdom on his shelf, he felt an

awkwardness in his thought. Then he stood up, walked into the bedroom, and kissed his wife, who was getting ready for a restful night of sleep. Apologizing for the late hour, he said he still had some work to do on his sermon.

Then he walked down the hall, opened the door to his daughter Heather's bedroom and looked in on her. Just before closing the door, his eye caught a glimpse of a book that his daughter had left open on her desk. His mind once again posed the question of how the Spirit of the Father communicates. It almost seemed too eerie, too coincidental. Yet, it called him, and he felt, in an open-minded sort of way, that he should at least consider the possibility that it was the Holy Spirit offering him an option. He walked softly into the room, picked up the book, and carried it back to his den.

Pastor Schmidt unfolded the book to the pages that he had seen open. At the top of the left-hand page, he found a quote from the Great Gonzo, "That which doesn't kill us makes us stronger, even as it exponentially increases our health insurance premiums."

On the following page, the lead shepherd of St. John came across some recollections and observations of the main subject of the book, Kermit the Frog: “My parents urged every one of us to follow our dreams—or at least to go someplace else to play so they could finish their dinner in peace.”; “WOW is MOM spelled upside down. I noticed that, but then again, I spend a lot of hours sitting on logs waiting for fireflies to tire out so I can grab a light snack.”

Just below that, he read Kermit’s words about dessert that he used in counseling Doug Waters the week before. Pastor Schmidt began mulling over whether he should go in the door that appeared to open to him. Had anything happened recently that might add impetus to such a path?

His mind uncovered a fragment of an event that had involved the aspect of dessert. Last month the church had a potluck prior to the annual voter’s meeting. He remembered walking into the fellowship hall and seeing the ladies putting out all the dishes on the two long tables. As best as he could recall, he did his usual inspection of all the

delicacies, paying particular attention to the deserts. Sometimes he succumbed to the Opie Taylor theory regarding dessert, that being one of eating the apple pie first to make sure you don't get full from eating everything else and not have room for the pie. At the potluck in question, he saw James Tolbert standing very close to the food tables and, as soon as the prayer concluded, almost running to the dessert end and loading up. Of course, his strategy had become well-known and accepted. Being the youngest of eight boys in a farm family, he often got the short end of the stick when it came to dessert.

Still, the clergyman pondered whether any spiritual parallel existed regarding dessert, including the theory of eating it first. Plenty of dessert on the potluck tables carried a certain magnetism that attracted most everyone in the room, especially when everyone needed a pick-me-up. While there might have been ample leftovers from the dozen different mixtures of chicken casserole that inevitably populated a potluck, a crumb of leftover dessert rarely existed.

Just as he sometimes felt a little shame if he took too much dessert on the first pass, he felt pangs of minor guilt regarding this entire line of thinking that some might think trivialized the powerful work of the Spirit. Yet he could not remember any scriptural evidence that showed the Spirit was incapable of working in any domain on this earth. So, he must think; he must try to open every neural doorway in his mind. Surely the Spirit would knock, and he would open. Of course, he grew tired with the late hour and all. Maybe he was just grasping at straws.

Then he heard a knock. He spoke loudly and fervently, “Yes, come in, Lord.” But it was only his wife seeing if he knew what time he’d be coming to bed. He assured her it would be shortly. He fell asleep in his chair in the den while a thunderstorm brewed outside. At some point the power went out and when it came back on, the bright fluorescent lights in his den gave a sudden unique radiance to the room. Whether it was a pure coincidence or not, at the moment the lights shone brightly, he awoke with an idea.

What was the sweetest spiritual gift given to humankind? The gift of Grace, of course. New Testament scripture abounded in good news, like the good news that plenty of dessert graced the potluck table. Sometimes the Old Testament could be likened to broccoli, you know; it's good and necessary for the health of the spirit, but if you don't always eat the broccoli like you should, the New Testament still gave you, through Christ, the dessert of eternal life with God. And if he worked in the Opie Taylor dessert theory with something like a spiritual equivalent of always consuming God's word first and then, if you aren't yet full, having the secular food of life. Yes, he could build a sermon around that. Yes, he could.

After he completed the first page of his sermon, he pulled out the church calendar he always carried in his briefcase. When he looked at the upcoming month, he felt disappointed. It would not do; he must find something. He looked at the scenic calendar on the wall and found satisfaction. The 29th showed that day as a Bank Holiday in the United Kingdom. He pulled out his memo pad and

jotted down a note to have Jane Walter, the church secretary, schedule a potluck at church in honor of all the brothers and sisters in the United Kingdom. She should make a personal telephone call to Rebecca Caldwell so she would be aware of it with plenty of advance notice. She was always good for at least three pies. Then he made a second note to himself as a reminder to pick up a copy of *Before You Leap: A Frog's-Eye View of Life's Greatest Lessons* for the bookshelf in his den, just in case. You never know when or how the Holy Spirit will speak to you.

## A SECOND HELPING

For those of you brave enough to come back for a second helping of potluck stories from St. John and Cedar Crossing, I applaud your courage. Let me refresh your memory on two key points with any church potluck. First, always know which dish is from the pastor's wife, and always make sure there is nothing left over from it. Second, if ever given the opportunity to vote for an increase in the table allotment for desserts (especially pies), always vote for it. Of course, there are many other nuances to learn, but these two will carry you through the bulk of most potlucks.

The original discourse on the many benefits of attending a potluck, both here at St. John and at our daughter church, St. Peter in Jack Valley, surfaced two years back. To say that we've experienced a massive spike in attendance at these occasions since then is a monumental understatement. Speaking for just St. John, I can say with all statistical candor that we've had 8 births and 2 deaths over the last two years. That fact alone accounts for

a 400% increase. I could cite several other conclusive actuarial and dubious mathematical formulas, but I don't want to confuse the issue. Besides, I should defer to Pastor Fred Anderson of St. Peter for more precise numerical analysis, as he is the better mathematician.

Rest assured, though, that despite the additional hungry souls, little else has changed. We've consistently had plenty of Jell-O, casseroles, iced tea, and sliced celery to grace our tables. Buford Douglas continues to tantalize our taste buds with a variety of meat dishes, depending on what hunting season is open. Probably the biggest news is that the proposal to increase the table space for desserts passed the general voters' assembly. It was a close vote, split strictly along gender lines—men ayes “76”, nays “0” and the women ayes “0”, nays “67”. We do still have some diplomacy issues to refine before we implement the change, but we've formed a committee for that task.

One of the advantages to having a few years of potlucks at the same church under your belt is that you can grasp the significance of the many

people patterns. Those who bring the most culinary conservative dishes are the most doctrinally or liturgically conservative. Others like Buford Douglas who supply us with exotic dishes are the most evangelical, as they are not afraid to reach out with new dishes, and they are not afraid to talk to new people and tell it like it is. Ones like Lorraine Johnson, who bring rah-rah to potlucks with green bowls of Jell-O shaped like football fields to support the Crusaders college football team, well, they tend to be the most enthusiastic workers in the church.

There is one man that I've never been quite able to get a handle on, and that's Jeremiah Wilson. Jeremiah has a small farm east of the church and can usually be found in his workshop. He has no family and less liberal minded folks frequently label him as eccentric. He is, without a doubt, the most inventive man I have ever known. Unfortunately, on a percentage basis, 99 out of 100 of the things he invents are just not practical or economically workable. Occasionally, though, he'll hit on something that provides him with the financial

means to continue in what he does. With his often-unkempt appearance and cartoonish blond hair that sticks straight up six inches from his head, he fits within the physical parameters of eccentricity. Jeremiah does not let his wildly inconsistent and expansive mind get in the way of certain habits which live in stone. For example, at every potluck he would offer a standard complaint of the paper plates being way too small. (There is an unwritten rule of polite society that does not allow for one person to take two plates at a time unless the second one is for a young one or an elderly person. Even eccentric people obey this rule.) He insisted that he had the right to take a small sampling of every dish on the table. But with the standard size paper plates, he could not get everything on the first go-round. Then when he'd go back the second time to get what he couldn't get the first time, there would be some empty dishes. This irritated him to where he complained about it at every potluck and at every midweek service during Lent. His creative mind finally arrived at a solution which came when he started bringing his own plate that was half again as big as the standard paper plate.

(Apparently, there is no unwritten rule of polite society regarding larger plates of one's own.)

Another habit of Jeremiah's that he rigidly held to consisted of the fact that he sat midway down the front pew of every service. Although St. John is not an enormous church, as a pastor looking out from the pulpit every Sunday, you don't always notice when someone is not in attendance. Because of his appearance and his seating habit, I always knew when Jeremiah wasn't there. He had not been at church for two straight Sundays, and he missed the last potluck. I paid him a visit to make sure he was okay.

When I arrived at his farm, I went straight to his workshop. I saw him feverishly working on his latest project.

"Hi, Jeremiah," I said. "We missed you the last couple of Sundays and I just wanted to stop by and see if you were okay."

"Oh, hi, Pastor," replied Jeremiah. "Yeah, everything's all right. I apologize, but I've been

working night and day on this project that could have some significant spiritual use.”

“Oh, what would that be?”

“Well, before I get into what it does, I just want to tell you that from a cost standpoint, I can build this unit with salvaged parts from old computers.”

“That sounds like a good approach to start,” I said. “What exactly does this device do?”

“I call this my ‘Sin-O-Meter’.”

“I see ... uh, how does it work?” I asked.

“We install this in the front of the church and turn it on just before Communion. When people come up to partake of the Lord’s Supper, they have to pass by the meter, and if they are impenitent or they’ve offended their neighbor and have not corrected it, then the meter detects it and the red light above the meter goes on letting you know, so you can come down to determine if they’re worthy to come up for Communion or not.”

“I see ... well ... I can see where we would probably have some savings in expenses for Communion supplies, but ... while Luther cited Paul when he said, ‘He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself ...’, I don’t really think he meant for the examination to be of such a ... public nature. You know, Jeremiah, I certainly think your ‘Sin-O-Meter’ has some merit, but I think you’re looking at an extremely narrow market. It could be fifty years before a decision passes through all the district and synod committees. I think you need to look at some other markets instead.”

“I appreciate your forthright advice, Pastor. As it happens, I have a couple of alternate plans that merely require some slight tweaking of the software program. Version 2 is what I call ‘Sense-O-Meter’. I would have to go to Washington, D.C. to market it, though.”

“I see ... uh, what exactly would it do?” I asked.

“We install master ‘Sense-O-Meters’ at the entrances to the Senate, House of Representatives, White House, and Supreme Court. We would also install secondary ones at all administrative offices. To get into those buildings, everyone would have to pass by the meters. If they have too much ‘Common Sense’, then the meter detects it and the red light above the meter goes on and a camera would take their picture, so all the voters would know who they are.”

“I see ... well ... I absolutely think that is something that is ... needed, but ... I just don’t think you’d have the demand to make it pay; in fact, I’m almost sure there wouldn’t be enough to detect to make it worthwhile for them to buy it ... besides, you’d probably be in the grave before it got through all the advisors, subcommittees, committees, and chambers. What is your third plan?”

“Version 3 is what I call ‘Dish-O-Meter’. Its primary use would be at potluck dinners, but I don’t have all the bugs worked out of the program for it yet.”

“And how would it work?”

“We put sensors under each dish, and we enter data into the computer such as the number of people in attendance, the number of dishes, weight of each dish, and so on. If someone takes a helping that exceeds the allotted portion, then the ‘Dish-O-Meter’ detects it and the red light above the meter goes on and an elder makes them put a little back.”

“I see ... so, let me make sure I understand this. If, for example, I had finished my first plate, and I wanted to go back to get some dessert and there were 4 or 5 people ahead of me and if one of them took too much pie, then that would activate the red light, and they’d have to put some back?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” said Jeremiah. “And if there was plenty of pie left after everyone had a share, then you could get a second helping by swiping your second-helping card, and if you hadn’t abused the second-helping privilege, then you could get some more pie without it activating the sensor. Of course, it wouldn’t apply just to pie.”

“Oh, of course. Of course. You know, Jeremiah, you might just have something there. But I just don’t think there’s ...”

“Enough of a market,” said Jeremiah.

“That’s right. Now I don’t make even the slightest claim to understanding the technology of your device, Jeremiah, but if it will really detect some things you say it will, then I think you might have something extraordinary. Maybe you should shoot for something small, something more readily achievable. I was talking to Milt Coward the other day. You know Milt, don’t you? Milt’s a very progressive dairy farmer, and he’s got all kinds of computerized production records. He was telling me that he wished he had a way of detecting when a cow’s milk output was going to decline just a little earlier in time to increase efficiency. If you could come up with a way of detecting that with your meter, well, I’m sure he’d work with you on it to test it out.”

“Thank you, Pastor. I’ll get with him if I can get it worked out.”

“Oh, and while I think your device has possibilities, I don’t think there is enough of an urgency about it to miss Sunday services. Right?”

“Right. See you Sunday, Pastor.”

As I drove back to the church, I thoughtfully considered all the benefits of Jeremiah’s invention—the third version, of course. “Second-helping card, ‘Dish-O-Meter’, less stress about missing out on something,” I said aloud. “What’s so eccentric about those?” But that’s so hard to read with Jeremiah. There is no real pattern with what he brings to potlucks either. When will his next folly turn out to be something revolutionary? I don’t know. Garages and little workshops have produced some amazing things in this world.

Pastor Arnold Schmidt

*At any rate, feast on a second helping of the potluck dishes that follow. Lest I forget, Pastor Fred Anderson has also forwarded some dishes*

*from St. Peter in Jack Valley. On a personal note, I've noticed that one can see much deeper within these stories while consuming a piece of pie.*

## HYMN 342

*Jess Harper is a jack-of-all trades at the Cedar Crossing Gazette. He's also a member at St. John parish. I did everything I could to keep this story hidden in that dark place that everyone has—that place where all those dumb things done as a youth never see the light of day. At some point, I must have weakened, and Jess wheedled it out of me. While he begins the story, I eventually take over and despite regretting having done so, at least I kept it within the bounds of historical truth. I am, in fact, the victim, and I suffer about every other week when someone in the congregation makes a request to sing Hymn 342.*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

My Aunt Felicia spent eighty-three years on this earthly journey, most of it within a fifty-mile radius of Cedar Crossing. When my wife and I

arrived at her home out on County Road C, we found cousins Connie and Steve already sorting out decades of accumulated memorabilia. Aunt Felicia taught school in Cedar Crossing, and she loved to record things in diary form. At some point in the afternoon, I slipped into my inquisitive reporter mode and opened one of her diaries. A lot of the entries almost seem humorous now, given society as it is today. About halfway through the diary, I ran across the name of Arnold Schmidt. I asked Connie and Steve if they knew if it was our Pastor Arnold Schmidt. After a brief discussion, everyone agreed that the time frame fit. I took it upon myself to dig a little deeper into the story behind the entry into her diary.

The last Sunday of May, I cornered Pastor Schmidt after late service. Showing him the entry in Aunt Felicia's diary, I suggested we talk, and we did the following Tuesday. After first claiming to not remember anything about the incident, he eventually came around to the inevitability of having to come clean. The rest of this story is his account of

the incident and, as far as I can tell, his version seems reasonable enough.

Jess Harper, *Cedar Crossing Gazette*

I was in the sixth grade at the time and should have started sprouting the early stages of good sense. I know that after the whole incident was over; I experienced a flush of excellent moral sense.

Jack Owens called himself a friend of mine, though I can't say a good friend. What friendship we had faded rather quickly after sixth grade. Aggressive and outgoing, Jack always stirred a little envy within my shy personality. Consequently, I followed along after him with a lot of the things he did. Regarding the incident in question, he led, and I followed.

One Saturday afternoon in the early part of September, my father dropped Jack and me off at the door to the church so we could fulfill the duties

assigned to the sixth-grade Sunday School class. We opened the door and walked inside, where we found Pastor Wolfe at the altar.

“Good afternoon, boys,” said Pastor Wolfe. We nodded and continued looking at our instructions. “Nothing special required for today, so just do the usual job of straightening up the hymnals and checking the racks for pencils, envelopes, and such. I’ll be in my office for about half an hour, and then I’ll come back to check on you.”

As soon as Pastor Wolfe left the sanctuary, Jack called me over and said, “Go to the door and watch out for anyone coming.”

I did what Jack told me to do, but I also tried to keep an eye on what he was doing. He pulled out a hymnal from the rack, and then he pulled out a piece of paper from his knapsack. I couldn’t see exactly what he did, but I can say he had a strange look of joy on his face while he did it. Finishing up, he then called me back over.

“Look at the hymn board,” instructed Jack. “What number do you see as the first hymn?”

“342,” I answered. “Why?”

“I stopped by here on Thursday and saw that number listed on the board for this coming Sunday. Now, open one of those hymnals to hymn number 342.”

“Okay, so what am I looking for?”

“Now look at hymn number 342 in the hymnal I have.”

At first glance, I saw nothing unusual, until I started reading the words. I won’t repeat what I read, but I will say it contained about every word my father told me he never wanted to hear me say.

“Don’t you get it?” asked Jack. “Old Lady Watkins always sits here. When we stand to sing that first hymn and she opens this hymnal and starts reading—it’ll be a riot.”

“I don’t know, Jack,” I protested mildly. “Suppose somebody finds out we did this. We’ll get in big trouble.”

“Who’s going to find out? It’s just you and me, right?”

“Well . . .”

And so, we went ahead with the plan. When Pastor Wolfe told the congregation to stand for the first hymn, everybody stood up and opened their hymnals. Just as the organist started to play, Miss Watkins screamed and fainted into the arms of Mr. Appleby. Jack could hardly control himself. I literally shook with worry.

In thinking back on it today, I must say that Jack had a remarkable artistic talent. His version of hymn 342 matched everything perfectly on the page of the real hymn, except, of course, for the words. Unfortunately, somewhere in his plan, there was a flaw. That fact became clear while we were sitting in Pastor Wolfe’s office with our parents waiting to hear our punishment.

“Now, boys,” said the pastor. “I’m going to give you a choice. You can either come back here on Saturday morning and paint the whole fence around the playground area, or I can let you speak with the chairman of the Board of Elders to see if

he might have an alternate punishment. Which will it be?”

Before I could even open my mouth, Jack said, “We’ll take the Board of Elders.”

“Okay,” he replied. Picking up the telephone, he dialed a number, and when the other party picked up, he said, “Carl, it’s Pastor Wolfe. I’ve got those two boys here who pulled that prank I told you about, and they prefer to take their punishment from you ... sure ... okay, I’ll have them here next Saturday morning at nine o’clock ... thanks ... goodbye. Okay, boys, you heard me—Saturday at nine o’clock.”

Jack gave me a ‘thumbs up’ down near his leg so nobody else could see. Too worried, I did not give him one back.

“Oh, boys,” said Pastor Wolfe. “The chairman of the Board of Elders is a man by the name of Carl Thompson. He usually comes to the late service, so you may or may not know him, but I’m sure you’ll recognize him when you see him.”

I didn't like the sound of that. The name Thompson rang a certain ominous bell in my boyish brain. The only Thompson I knew was ... no, it couldn't be him.

As is so often the case with young boys (and perhaps even some older men) and their lack of interest in certain details, I had been going to Cedar Crossing Elementary School for six years and I had never fully read the school's sign out by the road. We had to pass by the school on the way home, so I forced myself to be more fully engaged ... there it stood. The death notice for Arnold Schmidt. No, it didn't actually say that, but it could have, for the last line on the sign read, "Carl Thompson, Principal." If I had been a hymn writer, perhaps I would have said something like, "Oh, Dread, of all dread. I await the sting of approaching death."

Just how serious was this enlightenment? I recall as a first grader when my brother and some of his sixth-grade buddies gave me an introduction to Cedar Crossing Elementary. They strongly recommended that I never, never, never, ever, get into trouble, because if you got sent down to the

principal's office, you were dead meat. They added that the man I see walking around the halls and stuff shouldn't fool me, because when he gets back to his office he changes into an incredible monster. According to them, in his office he stood over eight feet tall, had a big hairy chest, and carried a twenty-foot-long paddle with ten-inch steel spikes on it. By the time I reached the sixth grade, I knew that most of what they told me wasn't true. In reality, he stood no more than seven feet tall, and his paddle wasn't any longer than twelve feet without the spikes. This knowledge remained hidden to incoming students.

I never had an opportunity to see Mr. Thompson in his office, but I knew of at least one kid who had. New to the school, he didn't have the benefit of our accumulated experience. Before we could properly indoctrinate him, he got into some trouble and got sent down to the principal's office. We never saw the kid again. I asked our teacher, Mrs. Foster, about him and she said the family had moved out of the county. But my friends and I knew the actual story. He didn't move out of the

county. Mr. Thompson knocked him clean out of the county with that paddle.

When I caught up with Jack at school on Monday morning, I shared the insight I had gained.

“Don’t worry, Arnie,” Jack said. “I’ve got it all figured out. It’ll be a breeze.”

For the first time in my life, I stood up to Jack, and I said, “Jack, if you don’t call Pastor Wolfe and tell him we choose to paint the fence, I’m going to punch you in the nose.”

After painting the fence, Jack and I just kind of drifted apart. Several years after I came back to St. John as its pastor, I heard he had been spending his time in a federal prison for counterfeiting. I’ve had a strong aversion to painting ever since.

Pastor Arnold Schmidt

*For a long time after Jess Harper made this story public by printing it in the “Man About Town” column of the newspaper, I did not relish*

*reading the Cedar Crossing Gazette, but it's a small town and I felt a certain obligation as a community leader to continue to do so—perhaps, too, there lurked within me a desire to find something that I could use for leverage in getting Jess Harper to serve as a sixth-grade Sunday School teacher. Nevertheless, I have resisted all the many attempts by my flock to get me to choose Hymn 342 as one of our worship hymns.*

## WANNA BUY A SQUIRREL?

According to the *Cedar Grossing Gazette*, Sheriff Lackmeyer of Oak County says that federal and state officials have not abandoned their search for a still up on Rockford Mountain. The officials narrowed down the search to that area because of evidence of numerous cattle near the base of the mountain running and frolicking around the pasture for no apparent reason. The most plausible explanation given by the sheriff for the unusual activity of the bovines centered on the belief that somewhere up on the mountain, the still owner, either accidentally or on purpose, spilled the contents of the still into the creek that fed the stream flowing down the mountain. Hampering the investigation has been the apparent lack of any noticeable activity over the last two months. There have been several other theories suggested by members of the community, especially those patronizing the Bottom of the Mountain Saloon and Grill, but law enforcement officials have declined to comment on them. When interviewed by Jess Harper, reporter

for the *Gazette*, the owner of the famed Saloon and Grill, Sonny Borden, mentioned that his sales have shown a remarkable spike of 80% in the last two months.

Basil and Gaylord Hairston, newer patrons of the Bottom of the Mountain Saloon and Grill, have had a run of bad luck lately. It seems that the entrepreneurs had to close the business that they operated from their home up on Rockford Mountain about two months ago. Apparently, some of their operating equipment caught fire, and they had to throw the equipment into the creek to douse the flames. The resulting damage to the assets and the loss of inventory that the equipment contained proved too much for the businessmen. Capitalists that they are, they have been struggling to come up with another line of products to market.

Last Saturday, while sitting on their front porch in eerie silence for two hours, Basil suddenly said, “Squirrels.”

“Whatta ya mean squirrels, Basil?” asked Gaylord.

“We need to shoot us some squirrels and see if we can’t sell ‘em.”

“Reckon there’s a market for squirrels right now?” asked Gaylord.

“I ain’t sure, but the way I figure it is, if we can’t sell ‘em, at least we could get ma to make us plenty of squirrel pie.”

“Sounds reasonable to me,” said Gaylord.

So, the businessmen got up real early on Sunday morning and set about gathering an inventory. When they had their burlap sack filled, they sat down on a couple of old tree stumps to do a little marketing strategy.

“Well, Basil, we done got us a good supply of squirrels,” said Gaylord. “Who do you think’s gonna wanna buy ‘em?”

“I been ruminating on that, Gaylord. I thought about putting an ad in the paper, but these here squirrels might be a little ripe by the time the paper gets out. We need us a place right now, this morning, where there’s a bunch of people in one

spot, so's we'd have a better chance of making a sale."

"Yeah, I see what you mean, Basil ... How bout that there church down the road? St. John, I think it's called."

"Gaylord, you're a pure marketing genius. That'd be perfect."

The two gentlemen stepped across the threshold of the church front door into a new world. In one of those pure, random, coincidental moments of time, just as they entered the church, Pastor Schmidt directed the congregation to stand up and welcome their neighbors in the pews. As Basil and Gaylord made their way down the center aisle, they just naturally assumed everyone had stood up for them. They shook people's hands all the way up to the front of the church. As they stood up at the altar next to Pastor Schmidt, their hearts were pounding with joy at the welcome they had received. The duo never expected that their marketing plan would have such a successful grand kickoff. The businessmen had wild thoughts about all the squirrel sales

they would amass. When those in the pews finally noticed Basil and Gaylord up front, the church became eerily silent.

“Thank you,” said Gaylord. “Thank you. Thank you very much. Basil and me feel overwhelmed by all this. Now Basil here has something to say ... Basil.”

Reaching down into the burlap sack, grabbing a squirrel, and holding it high, he inquired, “Anybody wanna buy a squirrel?”

Virginia Watkins in the first row immediately fainted at the sight of the squirrel. Of course, it wasn't all that unusual for her to faint, as she came from a long line of fainters. When Doris Lyons two rows back fainted, it was more out of respect for Virginia. Some suspected that Doris's fainting spell may have been influenced by the fact that she managed to faint into the arms of Buck Wilson, the most eligible bachelor in town.

Pastor Schmidt quickly pulled the boys into a huddle and said, “Guys, we're in the middle of a

church service here and we don't usually try to sell items from the altar."

"We're sorry, Reverend," said Gaylord. "But, you see, we're hurtin for some money right now and we got all these squirrels."

Sensing a hard sell, Pastor Schmidt then added, "The other thing is, guys, if we let you sell your goods inside the church, we could get in real trouble with the Internal Revenue Service."

"I gotcha, Reverend," said Basil. "We don't want no trouble from them revenueurs."

"Why don't you guys go outside, just off the church property, and wait for the service to end. When people leave, I'm sure you'll be able to sell some squirrels."

"Okay, we'll do 'er, Reverend," said Gaylord.

As they walked back down the center aisle to exit, Gaylord waved to the people in the pews and Basil held a squirrel high above his head.

Basil and Gaylord positioned themselves on the side of the road, right at the edge of the church

driveway. When the service ended, Pastor Schmidt positioned himself where he could shake the parishioners' hands and still see the squirrel vendors. The first car to leave the church parking lot stopped about fifty feet from the road and the driver, Virginia Watkins, looked both ways down the road. With rocks and dust flying up behind her car, she gunned the engine so she could get out on the road without having to stop at the end of the driveway.

The salesmen hollered at each car that left, "Wanna buy a squirrel? Only two dollars."

One man parked his pickup truck nearby, walked over to the two men, and purchased eight squirrels. He even gave them a four-dollar tip. Buford Douglas, the equipment mechanic and famous dispenser of valuable tips and information on a large variety of subjects, had been hankering for some squirrel pie himself. When Pastor Schmidt saw Buford walking over to the boys, he wasn't really surprised. With his eclectic taste in cuisine, Buford certainly fit the customer profile for the squirrel businessmen. What Pastor Schmidt saw next did surprise him, though. He later felt a little

ashamed for being surprised. With their sale complete, Buford went back to his truck, grabbed his Bible off the front seat, and gave it to Basil and Gaylord.

With the last of the congregation gone, Pastor Schmidt walked out to Basil and Gaylord. By the time he got out to the edge of the road, the price for squirrels had dropped to 25 cents each, but their only sale remained Buford Douglas.

“Well, Reverend,” said Gaylord. “We stand here, in front of you, a might disappointed in our sales revenue.”

“Yeah, guys,” said Pastor Schmidt. “Sometimes it’s hard to know what to do. Maybe everyone had an ample supply of squirrel at home.”

“I reckon we’re gonna have to do some re-thinkin on the squirrel business,” said Basil. “We still got twenty of these suckers in here.”

“I tell you what I’m going to do,” said Pastor Schmidt. “I’ll give you twenty dollars for those last twenty squirrels on one condition.”

“Well, now, Reverend,” said Gaylord. “That’s a hard proposition to turn down. You got a deal.”

“But you haven’t heard the condition yet,” said the shepherd.

“Oh, yeah,” said Gaylord. “What is it?”

“I want you to take these squirrels home and make yourself some squirrel pie.”

“All right, Reverend,” said Basil, as he shook Pastor Schmidt’s hand. “We’ll do ‘er.”

Ignoring the squirrel blood and fur on his right hand, Pastor Schmidt said, “I see you have a Bible there.”

“Yeah, Buford gave it to us,” replied Gaylord. “He’s a nice fella.”

“Yes, he is. If you ever have a question about what’s in that Bible, feel free to ask me anytime.”

“Will do, Reverend,” said Basil. “And we’ll also be sure and let you know about what we’re gonna try to sell next.”

## OF LIGHTHOUSES AND SEARCHLIGHTS

*Across the sea in the dark of night,  
Shines forth a ray of welcome light.  
Tending the flame is the keeper's chore,  
While the beam tells of life on the distant shore.*

*My spirit no longer weary and lost,  
Yet I lament that there was a cost,  
For the one before that had to pay  
For the light that now marks the way.*

*At sea there's danger with an errant deed  
For all those sailors who fail to take heed,  
Of all that the lighthouse has to tell,*

*About the eternal voyage into heaven or hell.*

So read the plaque on the lighthouse wall at the base of the winding stairs leading to the top of the structure. I found myself looking at that plaque while on vacation this summer. We took a trip to the east coast of the United States and enjoyed our first walk into the Atlantic Ocean. Managing a good mix of fun and historical exploration, we had specific plans to visit a lighthouse. After a one-hour tour up into the structure, we had dinner nearby and then returned that evening to a dimly lit path onto the rocks outside the lighthouse. We saw the beam shine out into the dark sky over the sea, where a distant set of lights marked a passing ship. Undoubtedly, the lighthouse beam didn't have quite the same meaning to modern ships with all their electronic navigation aids, but it probably still stirred some thought in the sailors aboard.

For those of you whose knowledge of lighthouses is as deficient as mine was, I offer a few

facts on the subject to make you more knowledgeable.

- They paint lighthouses with different colors and designs so that mariners who saw them during the day would have a bearing as to where they were along the coast. For example, a lighthouse with black and white swirling stripes would tell you that you were near Cape Hatteras.
- At night, lighthouses use a unique timing of their flash to help in identification. For example, the Cape Hatteras lighthouse flashes a white light every 7.5 seconds and so on.
- Early lighthouses burned whale oil, other animal oils, vegetable oil, and kerosene. Lenses captured the light and redirected and focused it to gain visibility from greater distances.

The tour guide filled our minds with many other facts about the particular lighthouse that we visited, and a little about the lighthouse keepers. He also told us a story about a near collision off the coast. A radio conversation ensued when two vessels saw each other's lights. The one naval vessel insisted that the other change course to avoid a collision, but the other one said he couldn't do that. The first vessel then identified itself and again demanded that the other change course. The other responded with "I'm a lighthouse. It's your call."

As we walked back up the path from the rocks that evening to our car, I looked back at the lighthouse and saw a single marker light high on the backside of the lighthouse. Of course, there were other lights in the parking lot, but that one up high reminded me of home. St. John's has a tall steeple with a single marker light at its peak.

I thought about the time when a young couple walked onto the church property late one night. I saw them walk up as I was sitting on the front porch of the parsonage. Their car had broken down out on the county road, and they were drawn to the church

because the steeple marker light stood out so prominently in the dark country sky—just like a lighthouse is how they put it. I kind of like that thought. While we helped them get their car back on the road, I also had some time to just talk to them during the wait. I found out they were from out of state, and they were on the way to visit the young man's grandparents. As it turned out, the grandparents only lived about two more miles up the road, but they couldn't get cell phone reception out here in the country. I knew that the Bailey's, the man's grandparents, were devout Methodists and so I inquired of the couple's spiritual habit. The couple had just gotten married and moved to a new town and said they were going to go to the local Methodist church. They told me when they left that if they ever had a hard time finding the grandparents' house on a return visit, they would always look for St. John's steeple to help them find their way. How cool, I thought to myself.

I used that story of the young couple in a sermon once. I talked about how most churches make very good spiritual lighthouses. We have the

physical structure, Jesus is the light, and the people are the lighthouse keepers. Scripture tells us where we should be in our journey, and it warns us where danger lurks.

We tried to get in another hour or so of driving before we stopped for the night. We soon came to a big bridge on the interstate, and we could see all kinds of emergency lights flashing on the edge of the lake that the bridge crossed. Police cars on shore were fanning their searchlights over the water. Overhead, two helicopters used big searchlights to cover the portions of the lake that the cars on shore couldn't reach. Since all the searching was being done at night, I surmised that there was human life at stake. We said a prayer for a successful rescue and for the safety of those searching. When we had gotten settled in at the motel, I checked the news on the television but heard nothing about the incident at the lake.

We arrived home late the following afternoon and felt glad that we had another two days of vacation to rest up from the rest of our vacation. That night I started thinking again about the searching at

the lake. I also had concurrent thoughts about my sermon analogy of lighthouses and churches. Then it came to me—I didn't take the analogy far enough. While churches make good lighthouses, their light is coming from a fixed point. The vast sea of humanity has so many dark and distant places that a fixed light cannot reach. And that requires rescue teams to go out into those dark and distant places and shine the light of searchlights.

Sadly, I fear too many churches are content with being lighthouses, which again, in and of itself, is good. But what if the emergency authorities had said, "We've got our police stations, fire stations, and hospitals. If you're lost, come to us." Obviously, it would drastically reduce the chances for rescue. Instead, they sent out teams with searchlights. Completing the analogy would require churches to form their own search and rescue squads.

I need to finish the analogy with another sermon. And then I need to urge the congregation to take action. Please pray for lighthouses and especially for search and rescue teams with their

searchlights. May your church endeavor to use both searchlights and the light in the lighthouse in its mission.

Pastor Arnold Schmidt

# ONE TRAIL TO THINKING ROCK

5:00 am, Tuesday, September 9<sup>th</sup>

Although the day held no special significance for me, I just had the feeling that I was supposed to be doing something not in my regular routine for the day. So, I opened my day planner and had a look. There it was—7:00 am, Clint at the Homestead. Then I remembered. He had a hankering to ride up to Horse Sense Hill and Thinking Rock, and he had invited me along. I checked for the proper attire immediately and got myself in high gear.

My mount for the morning ride went by the name of Freckles, so gentle a horse that I could probably have gotten by without even holding the reins. The air felt crisp on my face. It seems like fall has come a little early this year. Although Horse Sense Hill did not sit at a high elevation, it still stood veiled by a thin cloud as we made our way up the trail. By the time we reached Thinking Rock, the veil had mostly pulled back. Faced with

an always inspiring view, I could think of no better way to start the day.

Clint pulled a couple of old towels out of his left saddlebag and laid them out on the dew-covered flat rock. Then he went back to his horse and pulled out a paper from the right saddlebag. He handed me the paper.

“What have we here?” I asked. “A topic for discussion?”

“I pulled this out from a packet that Granny got from Medicare,” replied Clint.

Looking at the paper, I remarked, “It’s all Greek to me ... I’m sorry ... a little theological humor.” Of course, I had to suffer through Greek in pastoral training, but line 14 looked like Greek to me. “Let’s see ... It has been a while, but I believe it is saying something akin to, ‘If you have a question about this notice, you have a right to get help and information in your language at no cost.’.”

“Yeah, that’s what it says in English there on the top of the page,” said Clint.

“Thanks, Clint. I went and strained my brain for nothing.”

“There are twenty-four different languages for that same message on this paper. Does that seem a little ... a little ... I don’t know, off the wall, to you?”

“You mean the fact that all the people speaking all these languages live in the United States, are eligible for Medicare, and don’t speak English?”

“Well, yeah,” said Clint.

“There does seem to be a disconnect there,” I said. “Oh, I understand that the government tries to accommodate everybody and not show the slightest bit of discrimination. And, certainly, if someone has followed the rules and paid their dues, they should get what is coming to them, whether they speak English or not. The people of Cedar Crossing are a pretty homogenous group, so we rarely encounter much in the way of language issues in our daily lives. I came across some language barriers a few times when I was away at college, but it didn’t seem awkward. The immigrants I encountered

seemed to make a diligent effort to learn English and if they were not yet fluent, they always had someone with them to help with interpreting.”

“I don’t know, Pastor. I know that America is a melting pot of people, cultures, and languages, but for the government to have to do something like this paper, it just seems ... it seems divisive to me.”

“Um ... I do find it a little troublesome in a deeper sense and, in a way, you are right. I believe that this melting pot of ours is one of our strengths and we should celebrate the diverse array of people and cultures. But, if we are to remain the ‘United’ States of America, we must have some unifying elements. The ability to share a common language, I believe, is a critical unifying factor. I think you could probably say the same for the flag and even the national anthem. Without such ways to unite, we run the risk of the different people and cultures not melting in the pot. The combined, unique flavor of all the people is not there, for each culture has only its individual taste.”

“Do you think it’s wrong or prejudicial to think that way, Pastor?”

“In the right context, no. As with a lot of things, some people will take it to the extreme and use it to fuel their prejudices.”

Clint and I looked out across the valley and remained silent for a while. Overhead, a bald eagle circled and voiced a morning greeting. A raccoon slowly approached us, trying to gauge if any closer inspection would provide something to eat. When we offered him nothing, he scurried off. The morning sun eventually burned off the rest of the veil and distant farms became visible. We marveled at another day in the diversity of God’s Creation.

“Isn’t that the Culbertson’s farm down there along the creek, Clint?”

“No, that’s the Smith place,” he answered.

“I don’t get up here enough,” I remarked. “It kind of gives you a different perspective. I look at the valley, and I think of all the people in the flock of St. John and all the others who worship the Lord in other churches. I’m sitting here and I can’t help

but think about the parallel to what we were talking about with the many languages and the status of the church today.”

“How so, Pastor?”

“Take that paper and write denominations in place of languages and you’d get a similar picture. I think, at last count, there are some two-hundred different denominations in America alone. The equivalent unifying element to the English language would, for most, be the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Once you get beyond the path that Jesus blazed here on earth, all those denominations divide and divert to their own language, so to speak.”

“What do you believe God thinks about it all, Pastor?”

“Well, in some ways, I would imagine He loves the diversity of worship from the whole group. He has created a diverse world, so I think you could, by extension, say He considers all the diverse expressions of the various denominations as something joyful. But there are other aspects that

I don't believe He is happy with. When the divisions keep His people from uniting on some fundamental issues, He probably says something like, 'Oh, foolish man. How little you understand.' The Bible can be a little vague on some issues, but I believe it is crystal clear on others. I would submit that it is perfectly reasonable to disagree on the vague areas, but, for the love and respect of God, we should unite on the crystal-clear ones."

"Like which ones, Pastor?"

"Just to mention a few: the divinity of Christ, what He did in coming to earth, the life of a child in the womb, the marriage of a man and a woman. Part of the problem is that we can't even agree on what is crystal clear and what is vague, much less work together on what we do agree is crystal clear."

"Do you think that when we face God, He will ask us what denomination we belonged to?"

"No, I think He already knows that. Besides, it wouldn't be much of a courageous admission."

"What questions do you think God will ask us?" asked Clint.

“I don’t know for sure what all we will have to answer. I don’t think anybody knows for sure. One question I know He will have is if we believe Jesus paid the price for our sins. Beyond that, if anybody ever comes back with a list of the questions, it will sure make deciding on sermon topics much easier. It could send shock waves throughout the Christian community, though. We might find that a great deal of what we put so much emphasis on isn’t really that important after all.”

“Well, it looks like the dew is beginning to dry up, so I can get some baling done now. I reckon it’s about time to head back.”

“I suppose so, my friend.”

“You know, Pastor, I’ve had a lot of different people come up here with me over the years. This old rock has been a site for many lively discussions sometimes. When people sit here and start to say what they really think, it’s hard to find much agreement on anything. And that’s okay because I believe that’s why God put this old flat rock here. When the conversational dust settles, though,

there's one thing that everybody who comes up here has in common with everyone else and one thing that everybody can agree on."

"What's that, Clint?"

"Everybody's got to ride the same trail up and the same trail down."

"Yeah, you're right."

Freckles and I followed Clint and Jake down the trail in silence, except for an occasional whinny. If the horses were trying to add something to the conversation, I'm not sure what it was.

## THE POINDEXTER PLACE

“Here, Arnie, the phone is for you,” said Mary.

“Hello, this is Arnie.”

“Hi, Pastor. This is Regina Wallace.”

“How are you, Regina?”

“I’m good, thank you. I’m calling to see if you know anybody with a pickup truck who could help move a few things for my elderly neighbor.”

“Well, Regina ... all the farmers around here have pickups, but I know they’re extremely busy right now trying to get their crops in the ground.”

“I understand.”

“Let me ask around and if I find someone, I’ll call you.”

“Okay, thanks, Pastor.”

“What’s going on with Regina?” asked Mary.

“She wanted to know if I knew anybody with a pickup truck that could help move a few things for her elderly neighbor.”

“Do you?”

“Not off-hand ... at least not anybody who isn’t planting right now ... you know that’s the third call I’ve gotten in the last couple of weeks about a pickup truck. It makes me think that maybe we should look into getting one.”

“Do you think we can afford another vehicle, Arnie?”

“It would be very tight, for sure, but let me do some asking around.”

Pastor Schmidt went into town the next day and stopped at the hardware store. He thought he’d talk to Sy Tobias, the owner and self-proclaimed expert on the local population.

“Hey, Sy,” said Pastor Schmidt. “How are you?”

“Fair to middlin, Reverend,” replied Sy.

“Sy, do you know anybody who might have a good used pickup for sale?”

“A good used pickup, huh? Off the top of my head, no. Most guys hold on to their trucks until they’re worn out ... I tell you what, if you want to post what you want on the community board over there, maybe something will come up.”

“Okay, thanks, Sy. I’ll do that.”

“Excuse me, Pastor Schmidt,” said Lois Elder. “Did I hear you say you are looking for a used pickup truck?”

“Yes, Lois. Do you know someone who has one?”

“My nephew—my sister’s boy over in Crawford—he’s going into the army, and he has a pickup truck that he won’t be needing anymore.”

“Do you know how much he wants for it, Lois?”

“Actually, Pastor, he would give it away to someone who promised to take care of it. It’s his ‘pride and joy’.”

“Well, that would be very generous of him. I’d love to have it. If you can give me his phone number, I’ll give him a ring.”

“He already left this morning for boot camp. Let me give my sister a call right now to make sure she’ll be home tomorrow.”

A few minutes later, Lois came back into the hardware store with a smile on her face.

“If you’d be available tomorrow morning, I could pick you up at the church and we could go over to my sister’s house and get the truck.”

“One second, let me check my planner here,” said Pastor Schmidt. “Okay, that would work for me. Say around nine o’clock?”

“I’ll see you then, Pastor.”

Despite having white knuckles for half the drive over to Crawford, Pastor Schmidt got out of Lois’s car safe and sound. Lois walked up to the front door where her sister, Sophie, greeted her. They walked around to the barn behind the house where the pickup was being kept.

“Here are the keys, Pastor,” said Sophie.

“Are you sure this is what your son would want, Sophie?” asked Pastor Schmidt.

“I won’t be able to talk to him for about a week, but I’m sure he’ll be glad it went to you.”

“Well, I appreciate it very much, Sophie.”

On his way home, Pastor Schmidt stopped at the Motor Vehicle Bureau and took care of the title and registration. With that done, he headed home. He called his wife to let her know he would be there in about ten minutes. By the time he got to the end of the rock driveway leading to his house, Mary stood waiting at the front door.

“Well, what do you think, Mary?”

“I ... uh.”

“It runs great with plenty of power, and it’s been well taken care of.”

“I ... uh.”

Mary’s hesitation was understandable. A super jacked-up 4x4 with extra wide mud-grip tires

had become a new member of the family. Her husband's grin apparently showed the vehicle had reached into his soul and liberated some primeval instinct. The big longhorn steer hood ornament added a certain animal aura to the truck. The rear window displayed four deer antler decals with 'Country Style' lettering in the middle. It had a shin-buster ball hitch on the rear and a shiny toolbox just behind the cab. The front license plate said, 'Pride and Joy'.

"Wait till you hear this, Mary," said Arnie. When he pressed a button on the dash, the theme song from the Lone Ranger blared out from under the hood.

"How much ... how much did you pay for this, Arnie?" asked Mary.

"That's the best part of all. It didn't cost me anything. Lois Elder's nephew over in Crawford gave it to us, if we promised to take good care of it."

"Okay, then ... I guess we now have a pickup truck," said Mary.

“Have you done the grocery shopping yet?”

“No ... uh.”

“Great. We can take the pickup truck in and load up.”

“Well, okay. Just let me put on some different shoes.”

As they passed the barber shop on Main Street, Arnie pushed the button on the dash that released the Lone Ranger. The boys sitting on the bench in front of the barber shop waved and gazed in envy. At least that’s how Arnie saw it.

“Are you going to do that every time we come to town in the pickup truck?” asked Mary.

“No, I just did it today for fun ... I need to make a quick stop at the hardware store and let Sy know that I found a pickup.”

“Hey, Sy. I just wanted to let you know I got a pickup truck, so you don’t have to ask around anymore.”

“Great, Reverend. You know it must be some kind of divine coincidence that you came in here today.”

“How’s that, Sy?” asked Pastor Schmidt.

“You know old Jake Poindexter, don’t you?”

“Yeah. He’s got that place out there on Highway 19. Jake used to come to our church once in a while, but I haven’t seen him in a long time. I’ve been meaning to go see him.”

“Well, I’ve got forty bags of chicken feed that I need to get out to him. None of my drivers will deliver them out to him cause they say the Poindexter Place is haunted. I even threatened to fire them, but that didn’t seem to faze them at all. So, seeing as how you’ve got this pickup truck now and seeing as how with your spiritual connections the possibility of there being ghosts out there wouldn’t bother you ... well, I was wondering if I could get you to take these bags of chicken feed out there? Not only that, but it would give you an opportunity to visit old Jake ... you know ... like you said you’d been meaning to do.”

“Divine coincidence, huh? ... Okay, I guess it would give me a good opportunity to see Jake, but I can’t do it until tomorrow morning.”

“No problem, Reverend. They’ll be here waiting for you. And I’ll even see if I can’t rustle up a little something for the kitty at your church.”

“What? And you a Methodist? Putting something in a Lutheran kitty?”

“Well, Reverend, nobody else has to know, right?”

As he headed west on Highway 19, he saw the first of several warning signs for Dead Man’s Curve up ahead. Sadly, the name certainly fit, for over twenty-five people lost their lives at Dead Man’s Curve over the years because they were going too fast, and they missed the turn to go flying down into the valley below. There is a stout guardrail up there now, but it took a long time for the installation. What finally motivated the county to get the guardrail put up, he wasn’t sure. There was a macabre rumor going around at one time that when the head of the County Commission realized

most of those going over the curve were voting members of his party, he pushed the project through immediately. Although Pastor Schmidt hoped things had not come to that, in a moment of cynicism, he could see the possibility of some truth in the rumor.

About 500 yards before the curve on the right side of the road, there stood a huge billboard advertising Cedar Crossing Funeral Home. Seth Green, the owner of the funeral home, always had above average business sense.

Successfully making it around Dead Man's Curve, he figured he had about two miles to go to reach Jake's place. Just before an S-curve, he saw a car on the side of the road that looked like it was in trouble. It appeared to have its rear bumper caught on a rock and had gotten buried in the soft dirt trying to get out. Pastor Arnie stopped to see if he could help the elderly woman driver. As he walked back to the car, he noticed a sticker on the front bumper that read, 'Read the Bible. It will scare the hell out of you!'. He didn't know why, but he thought it somewhat amusing. Perhaps it

was just the contrast with the ubiquitous John 3:16 ones seen around town.

“Do you need some help, ma’am?” asked Pastor Schmidt.

“Oh, my Lord,” said the lady. “I’ve been praying someone would stop, but I never expected it to be a priest driving something like that.”

Handing her one of his cards, he said, “Actually, I’m the pastor at St. John’s Lutheran in Cedar Crossing.”

“Well, you’re surely the answer to my prayers.”

Walking to the back of the car, he looked underneath the rear of the car and saw the rock that the bumper had gotten snagged on. Being an older car, it had an old chrome metal bumper.

“We’re going to have to get you off that rock to pull you out of the hole. Fortunately, the bumper is just bolted on, so I can loosen it or even take it off if needed. Then I should be able to pull you out with my pickup.”

Pastor Schmidt went back to his truck, opened the toolbox, and took out a set of wrenches. After loosening the bumper enough to wiggle it free from the rock, he went back to his truck and took out a tow strap from the toolbox. He then backed his truck up to the front of the lady's car and hooked up the strap. Locking it into 4-wheel drive, his pickup effortlessly pulled the lady's car out of the hole.

"How can I ever thank you, Pastor?"

"It's my pleasure, uh ..."

"Helen."

"It's my pleasure, Helen."

Opening her purse, Helen pulled out a ten-dollar bill and said, "Here, Pastor. Put this in the offering plate on Sunday."

"That's not necessary, Helen."

"Please, I insist. Thanks again so much for your help."

“Okay, Helen. Pull your car up to that turn lane and I’ll get back under and retighten your bumper. Then you can be on your way.”

Back on the road, Pastor Schmidt soon came upon the driveway to Jake Poindexter’s house. He was glad he had a high-clearance vehicle, because the drive was bumpy and overgrown with vegetation. Clearly, Jake had very few visitors. Moving at a crawl, he finally reached the front of Jake’s house. He got out, walked up the path of broken steppingstones that led to the front door, and rang the big bell that hung by the door. Jake opened the door slowly and saw that it was Pastor Schmidt.

“Hi, Jake.”

“Hello, Pastor Schmidt ... It has been a long time. Come in. Come in.”

“Yes, it has, Jake. I have been remiss in getting out here to see you. I know you were coming to church for a while, and I sincerely apologize for not checking up on you.”

“It’s been tough trying to get around, what with not driving anymore.”

“Sy down at the hardware store asked if I could drop off some bags of chicken feed for you. Let’s get them unloaded and then we can talk some more. Where do you want them?”

“We can put them around back in the barn,” said Jake.

When they finished unloading the chicken feed, Pastor Schmidt said, “I’ve never been here before, Jake. How much property do you have?”

“I’ve got fifty acres of the valley all the way up to that ledge over there.”

Looking across the open space to where Jake pointed at the ledge, Pastor Schmidt asked, “I know it is easy to lose your sense of direction with all those S-curves on the highway, but is that ledge what I think it is?”

“Yes, Pastor. That’s Dead Man’s Curve ... I gotta tell ya, you’re a brave man for coming out here. It’s hard to get anything delivered any more, what with this place being haunted and all.”

“So, all those cars that came off the highway up there ended up on your property?”

“Yes, Pastor. There’s been blood spilled all over that end of the field.”

“Is that why you think this place is haunted, Jake?”

“It ain’t so much what I think, Pastor. It’s what everybody else thinks. I tried to sell this place once so I could move into town, but there wasn’t nary a bite. I admit it’s gotten run down of late. I’m just getting old and can’t do some things anymore.”

“I’m a bit of a skeptic on the matter of haunted houses, Jake. Have you seen any evidence that it is true?”

“Well, I ain’t never seen any ghosts, if that’s what you mean. Sometimes things just fall off the walls. All the lush pasture grass at that end of the field has disappeared. There won’t nothing grow there now but thistle. I’ve had county and state agricultural agents out, and nobody can explain it. And while I ain’t never seen anything, I’ve heard a lot. Sometimes when I’m lying in my bed at night,

I can hear moaning and groaning coming from down in the valley. I mean, nothing's ever happened to me. I guess they know I had nothing to do with it."

"They? Do you mean all the people who died out there?"

"I'd reckon. I don't know who else it would be."

Just as Jake finished saying that, Pastor Schmidt thought he heard the faint sound of a scream.

"Did you just hear that scream, Jake?"

"Yeah, I hear them screams all the time. Sometimes, though, the wind blowing through those trees at the edge of the valley can make strange sounds, so it can be hard to tell them apart."

"Very interesting," said Pastor Schmidt.

"What do you think, Pastor? Do you think the spirits of all them dead people are haunting this place?"

“Like I said, Jake, I’m a bit of a skeptic in that regard. There were certainly demons that Jesus called out at times, but I don’t know of anything recorded as done by the spirits of dead people. I know that some of the people who lost their lives up there were believers, so it doesn’t seem likely that if they are with God that they would be moaning and groaning anymore. Admittedly, though, there is a lot about the spiritual world that we just don’t know. In a bit of wild speculation, I guess I could see God allowing some spiritual activity to occur in order to get people to think about what’s really important and about how fragile life is.”

“Well, I reckon that I’ll be here till I pass on,” said Jake. “I just trust in the Lord to protect me till that day.”

“I know that if you don’t drive anymore, it would be impossible for you to get to church, but if I found somebody to give you a ride on Sunday, would you come?”

“I surely would, Pastor. I surely would.”

“I’ll give you a call and let you know, Jake.”

“Thanks, Pastor. I’d appreciate it ... Oh, and would you put these few dollars here in your pickup truck fund, if you have one?”

“I surely will, Jake. I surely will.”

On the way home, all Pastor Schmidt could think about was Jake and his place. As he pulled into the church parking lot, he concluded that he didn’t believe the Poindexter Place was really haunted. But the whole situation, including the blood from Dead Man’s Curve, was indeed curious.

When he got back into his office, he immediately called Mary and gave her the whole story on the Poindexter Place.

“Well, I should get to work on my sermon for this week, Mary, so I better go ... oh, one more thing, we’ve only had the pickup truck for two days now and it’s already generated three donations ... I just thought you’d like to know that.”

## DEATH OF AN OPPORTUNITY

Late one Wednesday afternoon, Pastor Schmidt received a phone call from Frank Collinsworth, the local grocer. Although Frank did not attend St. John's, he had worked with Pastor Schmidt on several community projects in the past. Expecting to hear about another charitable cause, Pastor Schmidt found himself a little unprepared for what Frank had to say.

“Hello, this is Pastor Schmidt. How can I help you?”

“Hi, Pastor. This is Frank Collinsworth.”

“Oh, hi, Frank.”

“I won't take up too much of your time, Pastor, but I need a favor from you.”

“What's up, Frank?”

“My sister, Lisa, lives over in Pinedale. I don't think you've ever met her. Anyway, her husband just passed away, and she wants a proper church funeral service for him.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Frank, but I can understand what she wants. Does she have a church she goes to over in Pinedale?”

“Well, you see, that’s the problem. We were raised Catholic, but she doesn’t belong to any church over there and has kind of strayed away from attending.”

“What about her husband?” asked Pastor Schmidt. “Was he a Catholic?”

“No, Pastor, he didn’t believe in anything.”

“I see. Have you been in touch with the local Catholic church? ... St. Paul’s, I think.”

“Yes, but they won’t do it because he wasn’t Catholic.”

“Hmm ... that can be a little problematic. What can I do for you, Frank?”

“Would you go over to Pinedale and talk with the priest at St. Paul’s and see if there is anything that he can do?”

“Well ... that can be a pretty delicate situation ... um, okay. I’ll go have a word with him. Give me

your sister's information so I can talk with her, too."

"Thanks, Pastor. I really appreciate it."

Pastor Schmidt had about an hour of driving time to think about how to approach the problem. He arranged to meet Father Flanagan at Martha's Café on Main Street in Pinedale. He vaguely remembered meeting Father Flanagan some years back at a fundraiser. As much as he could remember, he seemed like a friendly guy. Martha's Café soon appeared on the right-hand side of the street, and he pulled into the parking lot. He saw Father Flanagan standing by the front door.

"Father Flanagan, I presume," said Pastor Schmidt.

"And Pastor Schmidt, I presume," replied Father Flanagan.

"Didn't we meet a few years back at a fundraiser of some sort?" asked Pastor Schmidt.

"Yes ... I believe it was for that food bank over in Hopewell."

“Ah, yes. Now I remember ... shall we go inside?”

“Absolutely,” said Father Flanagan.

“Did we decide who was paying the bill?” asked Pastor Schmidt.

“Yes, you said you were,” answered Father Flanagan.

“I was afraid of that,” said Pastor Schmidt. “Little café. Can’t be too expensive.”

“I plan on ordering the most expensive meal on the menu,” said Father Flanagan. “It isn’t often that a Lutheran pastor will buy a meal for a Catholic priest.”

“I see ... Martin Luther was a Catholic, but I don’t suppose that has a bearing in our meeting today.”

“Au contraire, dear Pastor. Since you reminded me of it, I believe I’ll order a second meal for takeout.”

“I see,” said Pastor Schmidt.

Pastor Schmidt studied the menu, looking for the most expensive meal. He couldn't believe they served filet mignon at such a little café. When the waitress came to take their order, he took a deep breath when Father Flanagan started to place his order. The priest merely ordered a hamburger, though. Pastor Schmidt knew they were going to get along just fine.

“Lisa Wilson,” said Pastor Schmidt. “Do you remember talking with her about a funeral for her husband?”

“Yes, an awkward situation, indeed. I made some calls to the higher ups for some clarification on official church position. If it were up to me, I'd do it, but unfortunately, it's out of my hands.”

“Oh, I understand protocol, for sure,” said Pastor Schmidt.

“I did, however, suggest a couple of other churches she could try in our area.”

“Good. Good. Do you know if she had any luck with them?”

“I don’t think so, but I haven’t talked to her since this morning. I even gave her the name of a Lutheran church.”

“Well, I guess there’s still hope then, huh?” said Pastor Schmidt.

“No ... they were the first to turn her down.”

“Must have been Pastor Truesdale. He is a rules kind of guy.”

The two gentlemen continued talking about Christianity in general, and when they finished their meals, they left the café. Pastor Schmidt headed to Lisa Wilson’s house and called her to give her a heads up that he was coming. When he rang the doorbell, Lisa opened the door.

“Hi, Lisa. I’m Pastor Schmidt.”

“Hi, Pastor,” said Lisa.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, Pastor.”

“Have you had any luck with a church?” asked Pastor Schmidt.

“No ... once they learned my husband was an atheist, they pretty much declined.”

“Tell me a little about him, Lisa. Was he always an atheist?”

“When we first got married, he’d come to church with me sometimes, but I could tell his heart wasn’t in it. His whole family are atheists, so it’s easy to understand how he came to be that.”

“How long were you married?”

“Thirty years and while he didn’t embrace my religion, he never stopped me from raising our kids as Catholics.”

“How did he die?”

“Heart attack at work.”

“Did anybody hear him say anything in his last moments?”

“No, I don’t think so. At least, no one has come forward to say anything to me.”

“What are you thinking right now, Lisa?”

“I loved my husband, Pastor. I have no doubts I’ll be in heaven with Jesus when I die, but I’ve struggled with the thought that my husband won’t be there with me.”

“That’s very understandable, Lisa.”

“There’s a part of me that hopes his death, if nothing else, will make someone else think about it.”

“Very well put, Lisa ... Where is he being held?”

“Pinedale Funeral Home.”

“Okay, I know Jim Lasseter, the owner. I’ll give him a call to let him know we’re trying to work something out. I can’t promise anything right at this moment. I’ve got a few hurdles to clear, but I will call you early tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, Pastor. I appreciate you trying.”

“One more question. Do you have any idea how many people might come to his funeral? I only ask, because St. John’s isn’t a very big church, and I would need to know if we could handle it there.”

“Well ... he had a pretty big family, but mine is relatively small. With his friends and coworkers, I’d have to make a guess of maybe 150 to 200 at the most.”

“Okay, thanks, Lisa. Again, I will call you in the morning.”

All the way home, Pastor Schmidt kept reviewing all the pros and cons over in his mind. For him, it would be a journey into uncharted territory. He couldn’t recall the subject of holding a funeral for an atheist on church premises ever coming up in the seminary. He was sure it would wrinkle a few feathers, to put it mildly, higher up with the theological purists. He could think of a handful of his own flock that might organize a tar and feather party for him. Overriding all such thoughts, though, was what a remarkable opportunity it would be to talk about Christ to a largely unbelieving crowd. He decided to call his friend, Pastor Anderson of St. Peter’s in Jack Valley.

After laying out the background, he posed the question, “What would you do, Fred?”

“Well, on one hand,” said Pastor Anderson. “It would be theologically, a little delicate, but you have to ask a basic question. What would Jesus or even Paul have done?”

“Somehow, I can’t imagine Paul walking away from such an opportunity,” said Pastor Schmidt. “And according to Scripture, Jesus did not hesitate to mingle with the sinners.”

“No, I can’t imagine that either, but we have added a lot of new rules and regulations since that time. If it were up to me, I would have the funeral. To not address the question of death and what Jesus has done with such a group goes against why we became spiritual leaders. Obviously, the key is to conduct the funeral with a minimum of collateral theological damage and yet drive the point home to a room of non-believers.”

“Well, I’ve gone over that part a dozen times in my head. I’m glad you’re confirming the direction I want to go with it.”

“Listen, Arnie. I met a man once when I was helping a family over in Elsdorff that had suffered

a great loss from a tornado. This guy had a partner and together they probably had a billion dollars. They spent a good deal of time just helping people. I found it fascinating that such wealthy young men would have found a rather unique and unconventional way to do it. I knew I had to sit down with him and learn his story. The more I heard about their business, Peterson & Paulson, Inc., the more fascinated I became. During our conversation, he told me about a ‘rogue pastor’, as he liked to say. This pastor was always butting heads with the theological bureaucracy and always seemed under review for one infraction or another. But this pastor had some unusual leverage that deviated from the norm. Over the course of his official ministry, he has managed to help start over eight churches and to help over 1000 people follow Christ.”

“How does he do that, Fred?”

“That’s a long story to be told at another time, but suffice it to say, he made winning people for Christ his priority and he wasn’t afraid to buck the authorities sometimes to accomplish it. Not even the strictest denominational watchdogs could

gather the courage to mount any serious charges when faced with those kinds of numbers.”

“I’d like to meet that ‘rogue pastor’ someday,” said Pastor Schmidt.

“One of the other interesting things about this pastor was his background as an ex-military special forces soldier and then as an ex-CIA operative. He faced death on an almost daily basis and became something of an expert on the subject. If he faced the same situation as you, I’m quite sure he would say that to not reach out to such an audience would be the death of an opportunity.”

Later that week, Pastor Schmidt opened the doors to St. John’s for the funeral home to bring in Joe Wilson’s casket. He knew that the Holy Spirit could just as easily open the hearts of those in attendance at the funeral. Joe Wilson’s death had created an opportunity, and he could not let it die.

Some months later, Pastor Schmidt looked out into his congregation and saw Lisa Wilson. He talked with her after the service, and she told him she had been attending St. Paul’s regularly since

the funeral. Not only that, but she also said with eyes filled with life, that she even saw a couple of Joe's relatives coming to St. Paul's regularly.

When he got back home, Pastor Schmidt shuffled through some papers on his desk and found the note with the telephone number of Peterson & Paulson, Inc. that Pastor Fred had given him. He put it on his desk in the church office with a note to call them and get the address for their 'rogue pastor'.

## CHIT CHAT CAFÉ

Pastor Schmidt had to go into town to pick up a couple of things for the church office. Unfortunately for him, the office supply store sat next door to the Chit Chat Café. It wouldn't due to pass by a repository of potential sermon topics on such a fine morning. When he walked in, Randy Atwater loudly congratulated him on his recent pickup truck acquisition.

“Hey, Pastor,” said Billy Trumbel. “Heard a good one the other day ... a man knocked at the pearly gates and asked if he could come in.

“What's your name, my friend?” asked the angel.

“Arnie Schmidt,” said the man.

“No, I'm sorry, I don't have an Arnie Schmidt with a reservation. How is it you've come to be here?”

“Well, I'm a pastor and I made the mistake of suggesting we change the date of the Annual

Women's Rummage Sale in my announcements on Sunday."

"Today is Sunday, Pastor Schmidt."

"I know."

"Is that an umbrella wrapped around your head, Pastor?" asked the angel.

"Very funny, Billy," said Pastor Schmidt. "Very funny. You've obviously been drinking too much coffee."

One of the first things you notice when you enter the Chit Chat Café is a sign hanging from the ceiling. It is a quote from the Cowboy Cookbook by Ken Beck and Jim Clark.

*"Take a pound of coffee. Add water. Boil for half an hour. Throw in a horseshoe. If it sinks, add more coffee."*

That sign probably says more about the wisdom exuded in the Chit Chat Café than anything else. Maybe that's why it's there.

Pastor Schmidt sat down and waited for a waitress. He picked up a copy of the Cedar Crossing Gazette that was on the table. Sherry Costello, the waitress on duty, soon came over to his table.

“Good morning, Pastor Schmidt,” said Sherry. “What can I get for you, today?”

“I’ll take a cup of coffee and a cherry danish, Sherry.”

“I’ll be right back, Pastor.”

Sherry returned shortly with Pastor Schmidt’s order.

“Here you go, Pastor. Black like you like it.”

“Thank you, Sherry ... Say, how is your brother?”

“Well, it was touch and go for a while, but we think he’s going to make a full recovery.”

“If you ever need anything and Pastor Bennett’s out of town, you give me a call, okay.”

“Thank you, Pastor.”

Pastor Schmidt picked up his coffee and took a sip. Then he opened the paper and took a bite of his cherry danish.

Before he could start reading, though, Sam Young, sitting at the table next to him, said, “Did you read this in the police blotter, Pastor? A thief broke into the police chief’s house and stole his television. They apprehended the suspect, a Darryl Hanson, soon after. The police found that the suspect had left his phone on a charger in the chief’s house ... don’t you love it?”

Pastor Schmidt smiled and shook his head. He did make a habit of checking the police blotter regularly in case anyone he knew might need a visit. First, though, the front-page headline caught his eye.

### Oak County Still Case Not Yet Solved

Sheriff Lackmeyer of Oak County says that federal and state officials have not abandoned their search for a still up on Rockford Mountain. The officials narrowed down the search to that area because of evidence of numerous cattle near the base of the

mountain running and frolicking around the pasture for no apparent reason. The most plausible explanation given by the sheriff for the unusual activity of the bovines centered on the belief that somewhere up on the mountain, the still owner, either accidentally or on purpose, spilled the contents of the still into the creek that fed the stream flowing down the mountain. Hampering the investigation has been the apparent lack of any noticeable activity over the last two months. There have been several other theories suggested by members of the community, especially those patronizing the Bottom of the Mountain Saloon and Grill, but law enforcement officials have declined to comment on them. When interviewed by our Jess Harper, reporter for the *Gazette*, the owner of the famed Saloon and Grill, Sonny Borden, mentioned that his sales have shown a remarkable spike of 80% in the last two months.

Pastor Schmidt thought to himself, “That sounds an awful lot like something those two guys who came into church trying to sell squirrels would

do. No, it couldn't be." He took another sip of coffee and glanced up at the television over the counter. WPCC reporters were on the scene of a serious fire in Hedrick's Corner.

Reporter: We are coming to you live from Hedrick's Corner, where a raging fire has just destroyed a gentleman's home. I'm here with the poor owner right now. Mr. Chambers, this fire has totally destroyed your house. You've lost everything you ever had, including your pets. How do you feel?

Victim: Well, Bob, I feel pretty good, although my lumbago has been acting up lately and all that draft from the fire has stirred up the pollen. Pollen allergies can be brutal, you know. But it must be tough for you, too, having to come out here and broadcast remotely and all. I'll bet you'd rather be back at that nice comfy TV station.

You could hear a "cut" in the background, just before they switched to a commercial.

Pastor Schmidt went back to his paper. He came to the page on government news. As a

concerned citizen of Cedar Crossing, he felt bad that he hadn't been able to attend the last town council meeting. He was glad they had it covered in this week's paper. He read through the minutes until he came to one item he felt might interest the church:

"Councilman Dobbs, you have a proposal?" asked the mayor.

"Yes, Mayor. I feel it is my duty to make a motion that we repeal a law that is currently on our books."

"And what law is that, Councilman Dobbs?" asked the mayor.

"I propose that the council repeal law 13-46 passed in 1948."

"Forgive me, Councilman Dobbs," said the mayor. "But I don't have that law in front of me. What does the law say?"

"The law states that it is illegal to eat an ice cream cone within fifty feet of a church on Sunday."

“We have a motion on the floor to repeal law 13-46. Do I have a second? ... Okay, a second. All in favor of repealing 13-46, raise your hand. Okay, the motion passes unanimously. Law 13-46 is no longer valid.”

There wasn't anything else of importance in the minutes. Pastor Schmidt noted that they adjourned the meeting at 9:45 pm, and that all in attendance enjoyed some ice cream treats from Dobbs Ice Cream Parlor afterwards.

The tables are close enough in the Chit Chat Café that you can easily hear a conversation from a nearby table. Pastor Schmidt overheard Ronnie Dawson and Eddie Folsom talking about Rupert Johnson.

“Hey, have you seen Rupert lately?” asked Eddie.

“No, I haven't seen him in a long time,” answered Ronnie.

“Where do you think he's been, Ronnie?”

“I don’t know,” answered Ronnie. “I haven’t seen him since that day he left here to go buy his wife a birthday present.”

“What was he going to get her, anyway?” asked Eddie.

“He told me they were having a sale on deluxe broom, mop, and trash can sets at the hardware store.”

“Oh, well,” remarked Eddie. “He’ll probably show up one day ... if he’s still alive.”

Pastor Schmidt glanced up from his paper to see a welcome face standing at his table.

“Well, hi, Tom. Please have a seat.” Pastor Schmidt caught Sherry’s attention and pointed to his coffee cup and then to Father Tom. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Yeah, I’ve been busy. Real busy, but I got tired of my own coffee, so I thought I’d stop and get something with a little more body to it.”

“Having trouble with a topic for this week’s sermon?” asked Pastor Schmidt.

Sherry set down a fresh cup of coffee for Father Tom.

Taking a sip, Father Tom said, “Hmm, that’s good coffee.”

Pastor Schmidt smiled and said, “Well, you’ve come to the right place.”

Pastor Schmidt and Father Tom chit chatted for a while, comparing theological and congregational notes, so to speak.

“Ah, the quote of the day,” said Pastor Schmidt, reading from the paper. “It’s from Peter Marshall, ‘If a man is not willing to stand for something, then he’s likely to fall for anything.’”

“Pithy, even if it’s from a Presbyterian,” said Father Tom, while winking at Pastor Schmidt. “Did you ever read his book, *A Man Called Peter*?”

“Yes, I thought it was very good, although it’s been a long time,” answered Pastor Schmidt. “I think I’ll dig it out and read it again.”

“I wouldn’t mind rereading it again either,” said Father Tom.

“Do you still have your copy?” asked Pastor Schmidt.

“I’m not sure,” answered Father Tom.

“Well, if you don’t find it, let me know and you can borrow mine.”

“Thank you,” said Father Tom. “You know, I don’t have any idea why I’m thinking about this now, but somebody told me a rather humorous story a while back.”

“Okay, I’ll take your confession now,” said Pastor Schmidt.

A priest was called to the home of one of his elderly parishioners who had just been robbed. As they waited for the police to arrive, he did the best he could to console her, even reminding her that at times we must forgive those who have done us wrong. When the police officer got there, he began questioning the elderly woman.

“Do you know anyone who would want to do this to you, Mrs. Smith?” asked the policeman. “Do you have any enemies?”

“No, I don’t have any enemies,” answered Mrs. Smith.

“How old are you, Mrs. Smith?” asked the policeman.

Beaming, she said, “I’m ninety-nine years old.”

“That’s a long time. In all that time, you’ve never had anyone you might consider an enemy? That would be highly unusual.”

“I don’t have an enemy in the world.”

“That’s quite admirable, Mrs. Smith. How did you manage that remarkable achievement?”

“Oh, that’s easy, honey. I’ve simply outlived them all.”

“That’s a good one, Tom.”

“Have you got a sports section there, Arnie?”

“Yeah, sure. Here you go.”

“Thanks, Arnie. I like to read ‘Dan on the Outdoors’. Do you read that one?”

“Sometimes.”

“Here you go, Arnie. Dan reminds everyone that deer hunting season began last week and to be sure and practice gun safety ... this is kind of funny:

“There are rumors that Sheriff Tyler and his two deputies over in Bates County wanted to go deer hunting, but they had a problem. The two prisoners they had locked up still had a month to go, so they took the prisoners with them on the hunt. The sheriff’s wife volunteered to tend the camp while the men went out for deer, because she said it’s easier than trying to clean up after them when they get home. When the first day ended, the dejected hunters returned to camp with nary a deer. At least Evelyn, the sheriff’s wife, had a nice warm meal cooked up for them. They knew they had one more day to try again before they had to get back to law enforcement business. So, with full confidence in

their abilities, they headed out for another day in the woods. When the second day ended, they trudged back to camp, even more dejected than the first day, for they had no deer. As they walked into camp, they noticed a big pot over the fire. That pot contained deer meat. As it turns out, after they left in the morning, a deer wandered into camp and Evelyn shot it. Now neither the sheriff nor his deputies will confirm nor deny the report. The prisoners, with being released three weeks early from their sentence, are not saying a word. This reporter is on the fence about whether I should pursue the story any further or just let it go. My better judgment suggests letting it be.”

“Let it go,” said Arnie.

“Amen,” added Father Tom.

“Hey, Tom, did you see that new sign Harvey put over the window behind the register?”

“No.”

*It took God six days to make the world. I can make your eggs in five minutes or less.*

“I didn’t know that Harvey was so theologically minded,” said Father Tom.

“Yes, well ... speaking of time, I better get those office supplies. My secretary is probably wondering where I am.”

“Really, Arnie. You don’t think she knows where you are?”

“Come to think of it. She did ask me to bring her a cup of coffee. I think I’ll take one to go for myself, too. Do you want one, Tom?”

“I’m not quite ready to go yet.”

“Well, I’ll tell Sherry to have one for you when you go, and I’ll cover it.”

“Thank you, Arnie.”

“Next time, Tom.”

## DEPUTY CRAWFORD'S FILES

By all known crime measurements, Oak County has not yet risen to the level of a ‘haven’ for lawbreakers. The three sheriff’s deputies based at the Cedar Crossing substation work 8-hour shifts and only overlap in an emergency, with the last emergency occurring three years ago. Deputy Brian Crawford, a good friend even though he’s a Presbyterian, currently works the graveyard shift. Interestingly enough, that shift does require regular patrols of the Cedar Crossing graveyard. Except for an occasional midnight stroll by moonstruck teenagers, most live folks steer clear of the graveyard at night.

After making his rounds, Deputy Crawford returns to the station to “strategize” (his words) and have a cup of coffee. While at his desk, he often pores through crime data, crime stories, and unsolved cases. When he comes across something of interest, he creates a file on it for future reference. He feels that what he collects could show patterns

and prove useful in preventing or solving crime in Oak County.

Occasionally, I will run into Brian at the Chit Chat Café when his shift is over. Knowing that I am always on the lookout for sermon material, he will sometimes share selected stories with me from his files. While I don't consider everything he gives me sermon fodder, I do feel most of his files contain morsels of enlightenment in a broader sense. With that thought in mind, I am forwarding some selected material to you.

From Paris County:

Reverend Tucker from St. John's Episcopal Church had his home burglarized last week. Gone were all the usual electronic devices, as well as some gold memorabilia. When the local police arrived, they could find little evidence of who might have committed the crime. As they were about to leave, the detective saw a note written on a pad near the telephone. Just out of curiosity, he asked the reverend if that was his note. When the Reverend

Tucker said he didn't recognize it, the detective wondered aloud if it could be ...

The note read, "Meet at Stony's Junkyard tomorrow at 3 o'clock. Ask for Buddy. Call when there—287-555-2367."

Yes, the burglar had written himself a note and left it on the pad. The police arrested Jackson Cory at the junkyard shortly thereafter.

From Georgia:

The head teller at First American Bank in Harperville called the sheriff's office to report a young gentleman trying to make an unusual deposit. When the man approached the teller, he had a properly completed deposit slip in hand and a paper bag filled with money from weekend sales at the flea market. A problem arose, however, when the teller opened the bag to count the money and found a bag full of marijuana instead of money.

Yes, the man in question had mistakenly grabbed the wrong bag off his car seat. Police

found the bag with the money still on his car seat. Rufus Culhane remains in county jail until somebody comes forward to post his bond.

From Tyler City:

Jaspar Mitchell stepped up to the counter of the car rental agency to return the rental car from his weekend trip. When the attendant came back to the counter from his inspection of the car, he asked where Jaspar had driven, noting that the odometer only showed ten miles as the mileage. The discussion quickly became heated as the attendant questioned how all four tires on the car became bald after only ten miles.

Apparently, Jaspar had taken the car home, switched out the new tires from the rental car to his car and then put the bald tires from his car back onto the rental car. To him, it seemed like a good plan. Unfortunately, the man standing behind Jaspar in line at the rental counter was a state trooper. Jaspar ended up getting a free ride to the county jail.

### From Forest County:

A purse snatcher had been plaguing the county park recently. On Saturday afternoon, Doris Smith had her purse ripped off her arm by a speedy young suspect. The thief quickly outran the plain-clothes detective on watch in the park. While dodging a group of boy scouts on the path, the thief dropped his cell phone. One of the boy scouts picked up his phone and hollered at him that he dropped it. The thief stopped and felt his pocket for his phone and noted that he didn't have it. When he went back to retrieve the phone from the boy scout, the detective caught up to him and arrested him.

### From Paris County:

Reverend Tucker from St. John's Episcopal Church had his home burglarized again last week. Having not yet gotten his goods back from the police from the last burglary, it didn't seem like there would be anything valuable left to take. He did find his brand-new gray suit gone from the closet. When

the police arrived, they found an old ratty shirt and a pair of sweatpants in a heap on the floor. Inside the pocket of the sweatpants, they found a wallet with the driver's license of the suspect. The police contacted the owner of the wallet and told him he could come down to the station and pick it up.

Randolph Cory, the brother of Jackson Cory, dressed in a sharp looking gray suit, went to the police station to get his wallet back. He looked good for his mug shot with the gray suit.

I look at these guys, and I see fools—okay, such stupid fools that you have to laugh. I feel pity, sorrow, and disgust.

Lest I laugh too much, though, I fear that looking at them too closely would be like looking in a mirror with God on the other side watching me and all the dumb things, sin-wise, that I have done. But then, of course, we have grace. So, I am free to learn from my mistakes and, hopefully, minimize the number of times that God has to laugh at any foolish things I do. Sometimes you have to wonder

if guys like Randolph, Cory, Jaspar, and Rufus will ever grasp the meaning of grace. It is an eternal hope, I fear.

Perhaps you wonder if God really has a sense of humor. If in doubt, I invite you to come to the Chit Chat Café and sit down with Deputy Crawford. His files contain a mountain of evidence to support the thought.

## AN ELOQUENT PASSING

*“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die.”*

*I have no reason to disagree with the author of Ecclesiastes in that regard. I do have some objection to prematurely leaving this grand earth prior to my appointed time. Obviously, I do not know when that appointed time is. What mortal does? I can say, with some confidence, that as long as I am still breathing, the appointed time has not yet arrived. I can also say, with little consternation, that when I find the individual responsible for my premature passing, I shall do my best to be eloquently tactful in letting him know that he was mistaken. I am currently reviewing a list of suspects.*

*It is most comforting to know that there are so many outside my social circle who would come to the aid of my family should something unexpected occur. I’m probably not the first to experience some of the concern that follows, but I*

*certainly hope that I can spare others the agony by passing these concerns along. They came to my attention in a variety of ways: postcards, letters, e-mails, phone messages, texts, word of mouth, and so on. There were many more than what I list here, but it gives a good sampling. In each case, I felt it appropriate to further engage with a response.*

*Pastor Arnie Schmidt*

Dear Pastor Schmidtlapp,

It has come to our attention that you may be in need of our services. It is never too early to make final arrangements so those you love can deal with grief at your passing and not have to worry about a host of other final issues. We here at Donner Valley Cemetery and Funeral Home want you to know that we have several sites available that give a wide view of distant mountains while still retaining the peacefulness of the valley. Call one of our representatives today before it's too late. For your convenience, we've enclosed a discount coupon.

Jason Montague

President

P.S.—If you're not already dead, consider passing on the coupon to a friend who might be.

*Dear Mr. Montague,*

*I must refer you to that eminent humorist, Mark Twain, who once said, "The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."*

*Regretfully, I must decline your generous offer. Should the Lord call me home soon, I am pleased to tell you that I have already made arrangements for this sort of thing with Seth Green at Cedar Crossing Funeral Home.*

*It is my intent to continue living life in a manner that as Mark Twain also put it, "Let us endeavor to live that when we come to die even the undertaker will be sorry."*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

Dear Pastor Schmidtaker,

We offer our condolences on your passing. We believe that, at times like this, the least we can do is offer VIP treatment for your semi-annual septic tank cleaning. We will also give you priority status if you want the work done before your funeral.

Peace and good sanitation health,

Mike's Septic Tank Service

*Dear Mike's Septic Tank Service,*

*I would like to put our semi-annual septic tank cleaning on hold for now. If we try to do it before my funeral, it could cause an uproar in proper society in Cedar Crossing. If we do it after my funeral, it would probably just be a "wasted" expense, as my wife and children plan on moving to Las Vegas as soon as I am in the ground.*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

Dear family of Pastor Arnold Schwartz,

In times of need, it can be a comfort to know you've got someone ready to take care of the floral needs for your funeral service. We at Linda's Florist offer our condolences on your loved one's passing, and we stand ready 24 hours a day should you need to make last-minute arrangements. We also offer interest-free financing for 6 months.

Linda

Linda's Florist

*Dear Linda,*

*While we appreciate your concern, we are afraid that at the present time, we do not need any floral service. I will, however, give your card to my husband, Pastor Schwartz, in case he commits some*

*serious social faux pas and requires an expression of remorse or humility.*

*Mrs. Arnold Schmidt*

To the family of the Revrund,

In the event you now find yourself with an extra automobile you no longer need, Cedar Crossing Salvage is now buying used cars in any condition. We know that at times like this, it's not always at the top of the to-do list, but we just wanted to let you know we are here and can help turn an excess vehicle into cash to help pay for the funeral expenses.

Butch at Cedar Crossing Salvage

*Dear Butch,*

*Thank you very much for your kind offer. When I reach the pearly gates, I'll find out right away if*

*they take my model and year. If they don't, I'll have my wife call you.*

*Revrund Arnold Schmidt*

Dear Arnie,

I am so sorry to hear of your demise. I guess this means you won't be buying lunch on Thursday. Let me know if there's anything I can do to expedite your burial. I'm sure God is waiting for you. We can only hope He doesn't lean toward Catholicism.

So you don't have to worry, I have several potential suitors for your wife, after the prescribed mourning period, of course.

If you find out that we need to change anything we're doing, theology-wise, try to get word to me somehow.

Your friend,

Fred

*Dear Fred,*

*And to think all I am to you is a source for lunch. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I will be buying lunch on Thursday. I plan on choosing the cheapest greasy-spoon diner I can find.*

*As far as potential suitors for my wife, I have informed Mike's Septic Tank Service, who seem to have the same concerns with my family, that my wife and children will be moving to Las Vegas as soon as I am in the ground.*

*On a theological note, Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" I believe that, as Lutherans, we will have a garden view. Pastor Evans, of First Baptist here in town, believes that they have all the poolside rooms reserved. I hate to say it, but I think the Catholics will have rooms that overlook the parking lot. I haven't had the courage to tell Father Tom, but it is most likely he would disagree with me, anyway. Maybe my procrastination stems from my concern that I*

*don't deny him being enlightened with first-hand knowledge before me.*

*Your living friend,*

*Arnie*

Of course, I didn't really send any of those responses (except to Fred), but it was very therapeutic writing them. By the time you read this, I will have narrowed the suspect list down to three. I am already plotting out what leverage I might gain in exposing the fiend ... but then this life on earth is really too short, isn't it? I suppose I must forgive and live each day as if it really were my last. At least I'll know where to get flowers and that my septic tank will be clean. I'll know where I can get rid of my spare car (I'm sure my wife will opt to get rid of the pickup truck). And then, a little later down the line, I can decide if I want to trade my plot for a mountain view.

Pastor Arnold Schmidt

# MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

This past week we held two celebrations in the basement at St. John. Some might consider them at opposite ends of the emotional spectrum, but I feel the connection between the two resides at the same level. The first celebration became a milestone for me as I experienced somewhat of a rarity for the average pastor. The second had become all too commonplace, especially with an aging congregation.

Last Sunday, the ladies of St. John threw a big bash for Ruth Miller, who reached her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Some of Ruth's relatives came from hundreds of miles away to get in on the festivities. Still fairly alert, Ruth was the belle of the ball.

Yesterday, the following Saturday, we laid Ruth to rest. The ladies of St. John came through once again with a feast after the funeral and burial. During the meal, Ruth's daughter, Mary, came to me and asked if I would read something to those gathered at the tables. What follows is an excerpt

from a yellowing handwritten manuscript titled, “My Autobiography” by Ruth Miller.

In the month of October in the year 1924, I was born in my grandparents’ farmhouse several miles from Deshler, Ohio. I remember it had a porch painted an odd color green. Later, we moved into town but would occasionally visit my grandparents back on the farm.

After a few years in town, my father built a house on Main Street. It was a sturdy brick house with beautiful hardwood floors. Beside it, he built a house for his parents. My grandmother and my mother and father talked a lot of Low German at home, so I spoke it when I was very young. I started school there when I was six years old, but in the fall of that year, my father decided to move out west. We sold the homes, and dad and grandad built a house trailer. It was a large one pulled behind a truck and contained 4 bunks and a beautiful nook with benches and windows all around. At that time,

I realized little of what it meant to leave our pleasant home.

We had relatives in Colorado who lived on a ranch about 25 miles from Colorado Springs. We parked our house trailer there and lived in it that winter. Grandmother and grandfather stayed in the house with my aunt and uncle. It was a very severe winter, but I remember an exciting Christmas eve. My aunt and uncle with their six children, my grandmother and grandfather, another aunt and uncle who were staying there also, mother and dad, and my brother and I were all present. Uncle Bill played Santa Claus, who seemed real to me at the time.

My father bought some cattle, and we moved to a ranch with an old brick house, two big ponds with wild geese, and a creek running down past the milk house into the ponds. The one-room schoolhouse was about one-half mile down the lane from our place. I often walked down that lonely lane, but sometimes some people who drove an old Model T Ford would give me a ride. I remember I would often be afraid to walk past a certain field because

there was a bull in it. Once in a while, when there was nice snow on the ground, one of the boys who worked for my dad would come after me on horseback and have a sled hitched to it so I could ride home on the sled. That was great “fun”.

When I was about eight years old, we moved into the beautiful little city of Colorado Springs at the foot of Pikes Peak. My grandparents had a chicken ranch there on the outskirts of town. We stayed with them while my father began a Hay and Straw business. The home on the chicken ranch was a good-sized one-room cabin. I liked the school there, but my brother hated it, so once or twice we played ‘hooky’ and stayed up on top of a hill extending up to a huge golf course, until school was out. I took an extraordinary interest in Sunday School while living there and attended every Sunday.

In 1935, my dad decided to move back to Ohio. The trip was very eventful because on our way from Denver to Cheyenne, Wyoming, we ran into flooding rains. Cattle along the roads were being beaten by pounding hail. Soon the water was

several inches deep. As darkness fell, we kept on driving. It was difficult driving, and the night was inky black. The water was swirling on both sides and sometimes over the road. About halfway through, highway officials stopped us advising us to wait till morning to continue because the storm had washed out many roads, but dad kept on and we had to drive over the hills and around curves by staying within lights placed on washed out spots. We were thankful the next morning to be through it safely. The only damage was that hail had broken the glass of one of our trucks. I was glad it was not the one I was riding in.

It seemed strange being back in Ohio, where the land was flat. I tried to remember something about what it had been like when I had been here before, but it all seemed new and strange to me. The first place we went was to my mother's folks, where we stayed all summer until we got a house in town. The farm seemed so different from the ranches back west.

*This entry was dated December 3, 1942. Ruth later went on to graduate from Concordia College in Seward, Nebraska. She taught school in Indiana, married a police officer, and had four children. They eventually ended up here in Cedar Crossing.*

*It's always interesting to get a glimpse into another era from someone who has experienced it. The family relationships fascinated me. Grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles—their lives were interwoven into an interesting family fabric. It is something I do not see in the present generation. Oh, there are still some vestiges of it in the smaller farm communities like Cedar Crossing, but elsewhere it does not seem to exist. While the current era has many pluses like medicine, transportation, communication, and computer technology, it is missing that certain family fabric that I think people today could benefit from.*

*Ruth taught Sunday School here at St. John for many years and was a devoted servant of the Lord. I wish I had seen this autobiography earlier so I could have teased her about playing 'hooky'.*

*Continue to reap the wisdom of your elders!*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

## BUSBEE'S RECYCLING FAIR

Driving to the county administration offices to drop off some paperwork, I passed by the county fairgrounds, where I noticed dozens of huge tents sprawled across the exhibition area. The large sign out at the edge of the road said, "Welcome, Busbee's Recycling Fair". I decided to stop by the event on my way back to Cedar Crossing. Not that I had a tremendous interest in the subject, but I just remembered that one of my parishioners might be there.

Emmett Moore was the current owner/operator of Moore's Environmental Emporium and a member of St. John's. Emmett's father and grandfather previously operated the family business under the name Moore's Junkyard, but Emmett felt the new name and remodeled retail area offered a more attractive ambiance to the new ecologically minded generation. The old-timers around Cedar Crossing still call it the junkyard, but that doesn't seem to bother Emmett because he figures he already has their business anyway. Emmett had a

huge vinyl sign hung in front of the Emporium that said, “See you at the fair. Proud to be a sponsor.”.

I pulled into the parking lot and followed the attendant’s orange-flagged directions. Once you were out of sight of the attendant, it was an “every man for himself” type of system. Dodging two large potholes in the rock and grass drive, I grabbed the first empty spot that looked like it had ample space between the two existing vehicles. I opened the door and narrowly missed stepping into a puddle. The first goal of my visit was to get to the back of my car and put on the spare pair of old shoes that I carried around—a nugget of knowledge not taught in the seminary that I learned early in my career as a rural spiritual shepherd.

As I strolled from tent to tent, I found it to be a lot more interesting than I thought it would be. It seemed like there was just about anything the mind could imagine being recycled, from manure spreaders to hundreds of objects made from shredded tires. I did, in fact, purchase a welcome mat made from strips of shredded tractor tires. I’m sure my wife will consider it a fine addition to our home

in the event we need to welcome anyone coming in our “backdoor”.

I stopped at Moore’s Environmental Emporium booth and talked with Emmett for a while. He seemed quite satisfied with his presence at the fair, as well as his sponsorship of the event. Feeling a certain obligation not to leave his display area without purchasing something, I took my time looking at his goods for just the right item. Then I saw it. Tucked away in a far corner was a carved wooden eagle lamp. For those of you not familiar with that particular object, it had been in circulation in the community of St. John for years via countless numbers of The Ladies of St. John Annual Rummage Sales for Foreign Missions. I almost felt like I had found an old, long-lost friend. I didn’t mind it being recycled within the family of St. John, but now ... it sat in a lonely corner for sale to the public. What if an atheist ended up buying it? No, God must have led me to it and purchase it, I must. I’m sure, or at least I’m almost sure, that my wife will get a chuckle or two when she sees it again.

The two objects in my arms were a little too cumbersome to carry around and do additional shopping, so I took them out to the car. I don't know why I did it, but I sort of tucked the lamp up under the mat in case I ran into any other of my flock on the way to the car. It is important to not have valuable items like these in view even with the doors locked, so I put them in the trunk. My hands were now free to make the exploration of other offerings within the tents more enjoyable.

Toward the far corner of the lot, I came upon Sally's Garden Creations. Miss Sally Crumpet, an art major at an upstate university and a garden enthusiast, expressed her passion for both interests by converting yard sale merchandise into ingenious garden art. A frugal person by upbringing, she typically hit a yard sale right about the time the sellers were ready to close and just dump what they had left over. Sally got her raw materials at a price that even a cash-strapped college student could afford while reducing the strain on local landfills as a plus. Even though I have always felt the appreciation of art to be far too subjective for me, I left

Sally's place with a plant stand made of old plumbing parts and with a mind satisfied that I had helped an enterprising young student pursue her career.

I became so enthralled with the creative talents of the participating vendors that I lost all track of time. I only looked at my watch when I heard a voice on a loudspeaker say that the fair would be closing in twenty minutes. Since I was right near the exit, I figured I still had time to take a leisurely browse through Zachofsky's Knowledge Boutique. Zach's Place, as so named by the man who greeted me with a "Welcome to Zach's Place" when I came through the door, was a recycler of used books and other mentally stimulating goods. I left Zach's endeavor with a used copy of *Roget's Thesaurus of the Bible*. I became intimately familiar with *Roget's International Thesaurus* in college, but I was unaware that one had been done on the Bible. Such recycled knowledge—when you think about it, almost all knowledge comes from someone else's discovery or labor—would surely come in handy in my profession.

Fortunately, I had no critical schedule for the afternoon, so I arrived home with no crisis from my losing track of time. My wife rolled her eyes at the items I brought home, but she made no disparaging remarks—always a positive sign regarding purchases I make. That evening, as I flipped through the pages of the thesaurus, I came across a folded-up piece of paper that the previous owner had most probably tucked away for safekeeping. There was no way of knowing who wrote the words on the paper or even if they were true, but, in the spirit of recycling, I pass those words on to you for your edification or just pleasure. I thought it quite humorous myself.

A woman wrote:

Opening the freezer door, I stood in a foggy mental daze. The entire bottom two shelves were empty, and I knew I had just filled them with meat yesterday. At least I thought I had. Yes, I know I did because I remember running into Emma Dodson at the grocery store while I was putting the meat into

my cart. Emma complained about her rheumatism all the time, and it surprised me that she never said a word about it yesterday. That alone made the encounter memorable.

I picked up the phone and called my husband, Jeff. “Hi, honey. I was just wondering if you did anything with all the meat that was on the bottom two shelves in the freezer.”

“No, Sandy,” he replied. “Why would I have done anything with it? You know I don’t cook.”

“I know,” I said. “But before I investigate it any further, I just thought I’d ask, in case you had something going on that I didn’t remember.”

“No, it wasn’t me,” answered my husband.

“Okay, thanks. Have a good afternoon.”

My little gray cells told me to look for the receipt from the grocery store as further evidence. I found it stuffed inside the checkbook with some coupons that I forgot to use. It vindicated my memory, for the receipt showed that I had purchased a sizeable amount of meat. The question

remained, though, why it no longer lived in the freezer.

As I sat at the dining room table pondering the mystery, my young daughter approached me. “Mommy, have you seen my little red wagon?”

“No, sweetie,” I answered. “I’ll help you look for it later. Right now, I’m trying to figure out what happened to the meat that was in the freezer.” In desperation, I asked, “You haven’t seen the meat, have you, Christie?”

“No, Mommy.”

I made a mental checklist. Husband didn’t take it. Daughter hasn’t seen it. I didn’t use it. I haven’t asked my five-year-old son about it, but what would he do with all that meat? Wait a minute. A missing wagon and missing meat! Could there be a connection? Could the wagon have been used to carry away the meat? What kind of thief would use a little child’s wagon to steal meat?

As my mind continued weighing all kinds of sinister plots, I heard a loud commotion outside the front door. It sounded like a bunch of dogs barking

and growling. Walking toward the front door, I stopped and looked out the living room window. I saw the back end of a red wagon with a dozen dogs around it, all competing for a portion of what the wagon contained. The front porch column blocked my view of the front of the wagon. I went to the front door and peered out the peephole, but I couldn't see anyone. Cracking the door slightly with the security chain in place, I had an unobstructed view of the front porch scene. I removed the security chain, took a step outside, scooped up my son, and closed the door.

“Did you see all the dogs that followed me home, Mommy? Can we keep them?”

Of course, I had a brief chat with my son. It's hard, though, to administer any discipline of substance when you're trying to contain a smile. I did make him help me pick up the meat wrappers strewn across the neighborhood.

*I recycled this little story I found in the book several months later as an illustration in a sermon*

*on “What it Takes to Follow Christ”—the little boy certainly knew what it took to get the dogs to follow him. A further twist came when Pastor Fred and I attended a seminar that featured a noted “Shepherd” and his thoughts on giving the parish more of the ‘meat’ of Scripture so they can become better followers—more on that seminar in another story.*

## MORE LATE-NIGHT TV

*Late summer/early fall can be a busy time of year around Cedar Crossing, what with harvesting and all. I needn't remind you, though, that harvesting is not always limited to the crops of the field. While the setting sun may slow some activities outdoors, the harvesting of ideas continues throughout the fullness of the day.*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

Not having ventured into the often-underappreciated world of late-night television in several months, I felt it was the right time to fulfill my obligation to my flock to monitor the influences on their lives. I didn't want to go so far as to say that it was the Holy Spirit calling me to do it on that evening, but I've always tried to remain open-minded about such things. Yet being too open-minded has its own dangers. Although not a fan of

the English novelist, Samuel Butler, I do remember one comment from an English literature class in college that he made on open-mindedness, “An open mind is all very well in its way, but it ought not be so open that there is no keeping anything in or out of it. It should be capable of shutting its doors sometimes, or it may be found a little drafty.” Whether that has any meaning or relevance to someone sitting in front of a television at 1:00 o’clock in the morning, I couldn’t say.

I felt encouraged when I learned that our satellite subscription service now included an additional fifty channels. As I scrolled down the list of programming, I took note of a show coming up at 1:30 am on the Theology Channel that held some possibility. Dr. Merle Schmidt (no relation), eminent scholar and professor of theology, would be giving the second segment of his lecture series to seminarians on communicating with the masses. It would probably take me a good thirty minutes just to give adequate consideration to 550 channels, so that might work out. A slight negative came when I learned I would have to pay an extra \$9.99 for viewing that channel, but it remained under

consideration. Apparently, my failure to work out regularly with the remote control somehow slowed my reflexes, because I only reached channel 342 by the time the 1:30 am deadline rolled in. I had to decide quickly, so I walked into my den, opened a tin on my desk that contained ‘mad’ money, and returned to my easy chair in front of the television. Dr. Merle Schmidt would be shining a light upon my intellect tonight.

Dr. Schmidt’s lecture certainly reinforced his stature as a learned and eminent scholar. I had to use the backs of six junk mail envelopes just to list words I needed to look up later to refresh my memory of the meaning. Fortunately, my intellect has always had a natural bent to be a shepherd rather than an academic. I fear that if I started communicating with the masses of St. John in Cedar Crossing with the same terms that Dr. Schmidt did to the seminarians, someone might come up to me after the service and say, “Been watching the Theology Channel again?” But I suppose we never know whether that first call might come from a church with a university setting or not. The hour dictated that my stimulation for the night was over.

The schedule for the following day was rather light, and no emergencies came up, so I felt I had the endurance for another date with the television in the quiet hours. Since I had only made it to channel 342 the night before, I worked backwards surfing from 550 down for a little variety. When I hit the grouping of financial channels, I saw a listing that looked vaguely familiar. Channel 402 was a channel that specialized in currency exchange rates, stories, and news, but the description shown on the guide appeared to be of a theological nature. Undoubtedly, this was a glitch in the listing, but I clicked on the channel for the full-length description. It said that Dr. Merle Schmidt, eminent scholar and professor of theology, would be giving the second segment of his lecture series to seminar-ians on communicating with the masses. With only fifteen minutes until the scheduled showing, and since I felt there was a principal at stake here forcing me to see if it was the same show or not, I went to the kitchen to assemble some adequate nourishment. Of course, all this activity must be done quietly so not to disturb my wife and children. They don't always appreciate it when I have to work late.

When the time neared for the program, I clicked on channel 402 and waited. A screen soon came up saying it would cost \$1.99 to view the program with Dr. Merle Schmidt. Flush with ‘mad’ money, I decided to take a risk. Prior to the program starting, a commercial of sorts came up saying that this program cost \$9.99 on many other channels, but on the Currency Exchange Channel they could run it through all their exchange rates and eventually arrive back at the low cost of only \$1.99. In the bottom left of the screen a box showed these words, “We take ten-dollar words and exchange them for two-dollar ones.” Sounded like a good free market concept to me. When the program finally started, it showed Dr. Schmidt beginning his lecture just as in the \$9.99 version. Shortly into the program, a split screen came up. On one half of the screen was Dr. Schmidt, and on the other half was a man standing in front of an old-fashioned blackboard. Dr. Schmidt continued his lecture as before and after he finished making an important theological point with his elegant and erudite language, his half of the screen froze. The man in front of the blackboard then took his stub of chalk and wrote, “Jesus is the

Son of God”. This process continued throughout the length of the program, with the chalkboard serving as the platform for expressing the scholarly ten-dollar words after the exchange rate calculations that reduced those words to two-dollar ones.

When the program concluded, I scoffed at those who say there is nothing good on television. They just don’t know where or when to look. Out of time and low on ‘mad’ money, I eventually went to bed.

## SAM'S GENERAL STORE

Every morning (well almost), Jasper Higgins and Teddy Marsh sit outside Sam's General Store and hone their skills with the game of checkers. Sadly, after ten years of such a diligent pursuit, their skills seemed to have reached the highest threshold of checkers insight that the game would allow. They thought about moving up to chess, but checkers had a natural fit with the ambiance and the occasional interruption of a tall tale. Besides, checkers required no clothing above jeans or overalls. With chess, they thought that they might have to wear a suit and a tie. During that ten-year period, the two gentlemen, plus assorted tourists when the gentlemen weren't there, managed to wear out sixteen checkerboards. As part of the town's regular monthly street maintenance, workers cleaning the drain along the curb found an average of six checker pieces per month in the drain. Sam's wife, Martha, often complained about the costs associated with the previously mentioned activity eating heavily into their store overhead budget, but Sam

felt it was all part of public relations. By the tenth year, the table and checkerboard had become an officially declared town fixture, thus advancing to the status of tradition. Numerous candidates from the town's retired elite stood in waiting, should Jasper or Teddy pass on.

Cedar Crossing boasted of many other traditions besides Sam's General Store and the revered checkerboard, but they shall be subjects of future accounts.

Stepping inside Sam's General Store evoked a sense of yesteryear, for those old enough to remember the concept of yesteryear. One might think that the prices in such an establishment would be a little higher than the modern superstore in, say, Profitville, with its sleek efficiency and bulk purchasing power, but they were not. Sam and Martha just wanted enough to meet their modest home needs with contingency funds for spoiling their grandchildren. Oh, sure, some items fell victim to the bane of inflation. Chicken feed proportionally rose with the cost of tractors, so Max's egg wholesale cost continued to creep up. The town needed

more tax money for things such as street and drain maintenance. Overall, though, most products lining the shelves reflected the step into yesteryear.

Pastor Schmidt felt so enamored with Sam's General Store that he considered it the first stop on his tours of the area for visiting dignitaries and church higher-ups. Just last week, the President of the district to which St. John belonged, savored one of Martha's homemade brownies with a cup of fresh-brewed coffee while standing over a pickle barrel. Pastor Schmidt covered the cost of 39 cents from his discretionary fund.

Though Sam and Martha were members of First Baptist Church, Pastor Schmidt didn't hold that against them. Of course, the feeling was mutual. The ecumenical spirit had wide boundaries in Cedar Crossing. He sometimes wished that denominational dogma didn't put up so many roadblocks to working as a team with fellow Christians. There was one occasion, though, that he emphatically stated to a well-educated theologian in the higher echelon of the church, that the brownie he was consuming was a Baptist brownie. The indiscretion

occurred after the synod had issued some dictatorial decree that he thought to be beyond their authority. He later admitted to Father Tom, over coffee at the Chit Chat Café, that he did it in spite.

Occupying a back room of the store, an old-fashioned barber's chair frequently held a patron who felt the need to discuss matters that could only be discussed while getting a haircut. Mel Overfield sold his barbershop down the street and retired. As part of the deal, Sam and Martha gave him permission to set up the little room in their store. He would come in every Wednesday and solve world problems with his client in the chair. The rest of the week, the room functioned as a photo spot. Pastor Schmidt faced a dilemma regarding haircuts. Bobby Fowler, the current owner of the only official barbershop in town, was a member of St. John, but Mel had been cutting Pastor Schmidt's hair since he was a little kid. So, he had to come up with some sort of compromise. If there were no deep religious issues inflicting the town, he went to Bobby's barbershop. If serious theological or moral issues arose, he would, by sheer coincidence,

be shopping in Sam's store on Wednesday and, if Mel's chair were unoccupied at the time, then he felt it to be his duty to have a hair consultation with Mel. Of course, over the years, Mel's opinions had become quite predictable—at least enough for Pastor Schmidt to lead him on a little.

On this particular day, Pastor Schmidt's wife asked him to pick up some hamburger buns when he made his trip into town. It was a simple enough request, he thought. After making his purchase of some office supplies at the Five and Dime (yes, Cedar Crossing still has a Five and Dime), he headed over to Sam's. He opened the door to the general store and heard a familiar voice coming from the rear of the store. Then he remembered it was Wednesday. Feeling the back of his neck, he decided he could use a trim, so he made his way to the "room". One in the chair and one waiting. He looked at his watch and decided he had enough time to wait.

Then Silas Warner, who was the next one waiting, said, "You can go next, Pastor. I'm just here for the conversation."

“Thanks, Silas.”

Pastor Schmidt listened to the flavor of the conversation that Mel and Jim Barry were having, so he had some idea what Mel was hot on today. In vigorous discussion, Mel always resorted to quoting someone else, but he always tried to make it sound like it was something he came up with. Mel and Jim seemed to be engaged in the analysis of politics, so Pastor Schmidt figured he may as well continue with that subject.

When Pastor Schmidt got into the chair, he said, “So, Mel, what do you think about this upcoming special congressional election?”

“Well, I tell ya, Pastor, politics has become so expensive that it takes a lot of money even to be defeated.”

“Uh, huh, and if you do get elected, it’s still expensive for the rest of us,” said Pastor Schmidt.

“Lord, the money we do spend on government, and it’s not a bit better than the government that we got for one-third the money 20 years ago.”

In his mind, Pastor Schmidt tried to recall the last two quotes that Mel borrowed. Then he quietly said to himself, “I’m thinking Will Rogers, but let’s go for another one to be sure.”

“Well, Mel, maybe if we get the right people in there, they will finally balance the budget.”

“I don’t know,” said Mel. “I think it was old Alexander Hamilton that started the U.S. Treasury with nothing, and that was the closest our country has ever been to being even.”

“Definitely Will Rogers,” said Pastor Schmidt to himself.

“I don’t think that will ever happen, Pastor. And you know why?”

“Why is that, Mel?”

“Congress is so strange. A man gets up to speak and says nothing, nobody listens and then everybody disagrees.”

When Mel finished with his haircut, Pastor Schmidt got up out of the chair and pulled out his

wallet. Apparently, there was still time for one more.

“You know, Pastor,” said Mel. “I look at this ten-dollar bill and how much I’ve got to pay in taxes on it and it reminds me that the only difference between death and taxes is that death doesn’t get worse every time Congress meets.”

His time with Mel and Will Rogers had come to an end. He looked at his watch again and decided he had a little more time to spend on the bench outside Sam’s General Store. Jasper and Teddy had already left, so he was all alone on the bench. Sometimes, he just liked to watch people. If it’s somebody he doesn’t know, he wonders where they are in life. Do they know God? He tries to imagine if he were sitting on a bench in New York City and he was looking at huge crowds of people. Undoubtedly, there would be many who either don’t know God or choose to reject Him. It almost seemed a little intimidating.

His friend, Pastor Anderson, had started doing some statistical work for the district and what

he found was disturbing. So many churches were just declining. Their members were getting older, and the young were leaving and never returning. Many of the churches had an average weekly attendance of less than one hundred. The one hundred and fifty in the pews of St. John, a small country parish, every week almost seemed surreal in comparison. As he continued contemplating those numbers, he noticed a man crossing the street and heading towards him.

“Is this seat taken?” asked a gray-haired man in a tieless suit.

“No, my friend,” answered Pastor Schmidt. “Have a seat.”

“Are you from around here?” asked the man.

“Yes, I’m the pastor at St. John Lutheran Church, out on Route 37. How about you?”

“I used to live here fifty years ago, but then I moved to Chicago.”

“What do you do for a living and what brings you back to Cedar Crossing?”

“I’m retired now, but I worked for the railroad for twenty years. Then I started my own trucking company. I’ve just come back to take care of the paperwork on my brother’s estate.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What was your brother’s name?”

“Robert McComb.”

“McComb ... McComb? I didn’t know him, but ... was his place out on County Road 12?”

“Yes.”

“Okay ... I’m sorry, my name is Arnie Schmidt and yours?”

“Randy McComb.”

“Do you remember much about Cedar Crossing, Randy?”

“Oh, it hasn’t changed all that much from what I remember.”

“Have you ever considered moving back?”

“I’ve thought about it, on occasion, but it was a different life, and fate has led me elsewhere ...

I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be impolite, but I've got a little work I've got to get done."

"By all means, my friend."

Mr. McComb opened his briefcase and pulled out a writing pad and a portable calculator. Pastor Schmidt continued watching people on the street as Mr. McComb appeared to be doing some serious number crunching. About fifteen minutes later, he pulled out a checkbook and wrote a check to someone, but Pastor Schmidt couldn't see the name. Then the man wrote something on a piece of paper, folded it up, and put it inside an envelope. He inserted the check into the envelope, as well. He addressed the envelope and tucked it under his left leg while he put away his writing pad and calculator. Closing his briefcase, Mr. McComb stood up.

"Well, Pastor, it was good to meet you, but I must be going now."

"Come back any time, Randy. Again, I'm sorry to hear about your brother."

“I have an envelope here that I’d like to give to you for the church. I simply ask that you not open it until I’m gone.”

“Okay, Randy. I will do as you wish.”

“Thank you, Pastor.”

“Have a safe trip home, Randy.”

The man nodded and turned around. He walked about a block and then got into a car and left. Pastor Schmidt opened the envelope and began reading the paper that was inside it.

“Pastor, it was again a pleasure meeting you. Fifty years ago, my family belonged to St. John. I was an altar boy when I was thirteen years old. One Sunday, as I was carrying the offering plates back to the office after the service, a twenty-dollar bill fell off the plate onto the ground. Instead of putting the money back into the offering plate, I put it into my pocket.

I know it was wrong, and I asked God to forgive me many years ago. Somehow, I just felt that my forgiveness was not complete until I paid it

back. This check is for that twenty dollars plus interest plus inflation plus the loss of its use in the mission. Please put it to good use.”

Pastor Schmidt looked at the check for five thousand dollars and smiled. Then he looked at another man on the sidewalk across the street. He wondered where he was in his relationship to God and what his life story entailed. It might be hard to top the story of Randy McComb today. At the very least, Pastor Schmidt didn’t think he would ever look at a man outside Sam’s General Store in a complacent way again. He got up from the bench and headed home.

“Have you got the hamburger buns, Arnie?” asked Mary, his wife.

“No, I ... uh...”

“Wait a minute. It’s Wednesday, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I believe it is, dear,” said Arnie.

“It looks like you got a haircut.”

“Yes, I did.”

“You spent so much time talking to Mel about some world problem that you forgot the hamburger buns, didn’t you?”

“Uh, well ... you see ... I met this man who had a spiritual problem and I ... uh ...”

Mary just looked at him.

“I ... uh ... I did bring back a check that the man gave me for five thousand dollars for the church.”

“Five thousand dollars? Wow, that man must have had a big spiritual problem. All right, forgiveness requires that I make the burgers without buns.”

“I suppose so, Mary.”

Mary let out an exaggerated sigh, smiled, and said, “Forgiveness can be tough sometimes.”

Pastor Schmidt looked out the window and said, “Yes, it can ... and sometimes it is the toughest to forgive yourself.”

## CROSSTIES AT CEDAR CROSSING

In its early days, Cedar Crossing was a hub for three different railroads. Volume-wise, it certainly didn't compare to the big cities, but strategically it proved to be essential. Over time, as railroad traffic diminished, one of the railroad lines discontinued service through Cedar Crossing and the other two lines merged. The merged railroad lines still find it profitable to run through Cedar Crossing because of the rich natural resources and farm products of the area.

An offshoot business that developed in Cedar Crossing from all the railroads came in the nature of used crossties that the railroads replaced with regular track maintenance. For a while, two businesses operated in the county, but one eventually closed when old Adam Jones passed away. The remaining business is owned by Robert Haleron and his wife, Virginia. While Virginia is a regularly attending member of St. John, her husband is a C&E (Christmas and Easter).

It is late November, and I am making my annual subtle attempt to get Robert to expand his attendance beyond that of a C&E. The neat storage yard of Robert's Railroad Ties has rows and rows of crossties in orderly stacks. I find Robert up by his shop sharpening chainsaw cutting tips.

"Hi, Robert," I said. "How are you doing today?"

"I'm doing good, Pastor," answered Robert.

"I assume you know why I'm here," I said.

"Of course, it's late November," replied Robert. "I do need to let you know that I've accumulated a whole new list of excuses."

"Well, that's a little disconcerting," I said. "I came with counter-responses to all those that I knew. You know next week is the start of Advent. Do you remember what Advent means?"

"Coming, I believe."

"Since we're on the subject of coming, it would be an ideal time to start coming to church for a few weeks before Christmas."

“To do that, I would have to violate the official ethical standard of C&E’s all over the world,” said Robert.

“They have an official ethical standard?” I asked, incredulously.

The verbal sparring continued for about half an hour until Pastor Schmidt broke the cycle by taking a walk around Robert’s outside display area. For now, the match ended in a draw, though Pastor Schmidt liked to think optimistically that he was making some inroads. Either way, he did always come away with a litany of excuses to plan answers to.

Pastor Schmidt knew that Robert believed in God, so that didn’t bother him as much as it did with some other people. Robert lived his life and had a relationship with his friends, family, and business customers that he was sure God would approve of.

As Pastor Schmidt strolled around Robert’s display area, he noticed that most of the functional and decorative pieces made from railroad crossties

had a common theme. They had some connection to God and His creative hand.

“Robert, you have become quite the master artisan,” I said. “You do beautiful work. Are you selling much?”

“I used to move quite a bit, but I’m not selling anymore. The creosote issue has become a large concern, not only for me working with the ties every day, but for the people that are taking these products home. I have always been very careful about the creosote layer that I cut away, but recent studies find it penetrates the inner wood in trace amounts, too. I understand and accept that. Considering all the current information, I don’t want anything that I might sell to affect anyone’s life adversely. So, I’m waiting to hear from the regional EPA office as to how we should proceed in getting rid of all these ties and products.”

“What would you do?”

“Oh, we’ve been conservative with our money and have a pretty good nest egg saved up.”

“But I still can’t see you just sitting around the house,” I said.

“I might for a couple of weeks or so, but you’re probably right. Ginny and I have talked about a few things when the time comes.”

“If there’s anything I can ever do for you, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“You never know. When that day arrives, I might even end up coming to church more often.”

“Wait a minute. Is that another curveball you’re throwing me?”

“Could be,” said Robert.

“If it is, then I must consider praying that they ban the sale of all railroad ties immediately.”

Something caught Pastor Schmidt’s eye as he looked around. He walked back to the far corner of the display area and stopped. There he saw a 6-foot-long and 4-foot-wide model of the scene of the crucifixion on Calvary. The crosses were, of course, made from railroad crossties and intricately

carved pieces added to the authenticity of the scene.

“Robert, this is beautiful.”

“Thank you, Pastor,” said Robert. “Do you see the irony in it, now?”

“Um ... well ... the scene at Calvary was all about death.”

“Yeah, and this model contains material that we now know to be toxic.”

“So, this model contains poison and on Calvary, Jesus took on everything that poisons the human spirit,” I said. “Very interesting. I’m just glad you didn’t make a model of the resurrection scene with railroad crossties. The theological implications would have been a little more challenging.”

“Amen to that, Pastor.”

Pastor Schmidt left Robert, confident that he would do what was right and get it all worked out. Still, he had questions in his mind, and they didn’t leave when he pulled out of Robert’s driveway.

They were questions that he posed before, but today they just seem amplified.

“Why do people such as Robert not come to church regularly?” he asked himself. “What is there about the Sunday worship service that turns them off? In Robert’s case, it does not appear to be a lack of faith. Is there some kind of Twilight Zone that C&E spirits live in—something that all those sitting in the pews and all of us standing in the pulpits on Sunday just can’t see? Oh, sure, I’ve heard all the common excuses, many jokingly coming from Robert. There’s got to be something more.”

Looking in the rearview mirror, he saw the cloud of dust behind his car as he drove away. It had been so dry in the area lately that the cloud seemed almost impenetrable to the eye. It seemed to parallel the cloud in his mind.

“I think I’ll pick Fred’s brain a little when I get home,” he continued to himself. “Maybe I’ll also throw Robert a little curveball of my own. I think I’ll visit him just before Lent instead of late November.”

## MEMORIES

Sitting at the long wooden table, working on my second (or maybe third) piece of pie, I watch the potluck crowd begin to disperse. Ladies find their dishes to take them home. I only have to look at their facial expressions to tell which dish is completely empty and which dish is hardly touched. If there are husbands nearby, I can look at their facial expressions to know if they're going to be eating warmups tomorrow.

Tonight, for some reason, as I watch them say their goodbyes, I wish they didn't yet have to go. My mind wants to cling to the presence of the people who are such a big part of my life.

There's little Adam Walker, ten years in this world now. I remember the time I was in the park, and I saw Adam, then about five, and his dad. A typical autumn day followed an early morning rain, complete with mud puddles all around. His dad waved, and I waved back. I was just close enough that I could hear them talking.

Lowering his paper, Bert Walker said, “Adam, stay near and whatever you do, keep away from the mud puddles.”

“Okay, Daddy,” answered Adam.

Bert raised his paper and continued reading (the Cedar Crossing Gazette can be riveting sometimes). Adam walked about with typical young boy curiosity.

“Hi, Mr. Squirrel ... Hi, Miss Butterfly ... Boy, you sure are working hard today, Mr. Ant ... You sure are bright today, Mr. Sun.”

With his hands in his pockets and trying to whistle, he continued to stroll around. Then he began to talk to himself, “It sure is a pretty day and I really like visiting with my friends.”

Seeing something interesting a short distance away, he walked over to get a closer look. When he reached it, he looked down. With a mischievous grin, he looked around to make sure his father wasn’t looking. He took off his jacket and carefully laid it aside. Then he joyfully began playing in the mud puddle.

“Are you behaving, Adam?” asked his father.

With a furrowed brow and worried look, Adam answered, “Yes, Daddy. I’m okay.” Then he looked at his muddy hands and got a panicked expression on his face. He wiped them on his shirt so they would be clean, but then he realized that his shirt was now dirty.

Although I couldn’t hear exactly what he said, I guessed it was something like, “Boy, oh, boy. What am I going to do now?”. Then he decided he had better put his jacket back on to cover his shirt.

“Come on, Adam,” said his father. “It’s time to go.”

“Okay, Daddy,” said Adam.

I remember crafting a sermon from that scene. Only I changed the ending to complete the message. When Adam realized that his shirt was now dirty, he frantically looked around for some way out of his predicament. His eye caught something hanging on a wooden post a short distance away. There he saw a clean shirt draped over the

crosspiece of the post. He took off his dirty shirt and exchanged it for the clean one on the post. As he walked away, he turned and stared back at the dirty shirt hanging on the post.

“And did you stay clean, Adam?” asked his father.

“Yes, I’m clean,” answered Adam.

“So you are, son,” said his father.

Helping her mother with the dishes, Jenny Armbruster had returned to the spiritually transforming ambiance of the potluck. She just graduated from college and couldn’t help but come back for one last meal before heading overseas for a job assignment. She never said that exactly, but I inferred it. How else would you explain it?

I remember watching her grow up, always the little lady. I often wondered about those who left the parish to continue their education away from home or took a job in another state. As an extension

of that concern, I fixed up a little packet of things that I hoped would help her continue her walk with the Lord while at college. I called Pastor Bortz of the campus church and gave him a heads up.

We exchanged several letters over the years, so I got to see the progression of maturity and wisdom. Though she often talked of the hostility that some showed towards Christianity, she never felt they tested her faith beyond what it could handle.

Now, she's all grown up and attending what may be her last potluck for some time. It's a melancholy thought.

Buster Washington and his wife are walking out the door. Trailing behind are their two strapping young sons. Yes, I can see Coach Martin recruiting them for the football team next year. Buster and Abby were the first couple that I married who were both members of St. John, so that was kind of a treat. Hardworking farm folks, they have been faithful in attendance and generous with their

offerings when the Lord has blessed them with a bountiful harvest. Despite that image, Buster has a somewhat wry sense of humor and is not above a practical joke now and then. I have to be on my guard when I visit their farm, because he seems to enjoy playing those practical jokes on me. But, of course, Abby is always there to apologize with a peace offering of some tasty dessert. Abby is well known for her pecan pie at potlucks.

Sitting down at the other end of the table, Bert Metcalfe always issues me a challenge to see who can eat the most pie. He's eighty-four years old, wiry of frame, and philosophical of mind with perhaps a modicum of stubbornness. I always let him win, but I don't let him know that I'm letting him win. He always relishes the victory and probably doesn't let me know that he knows that I let him win.

The last time I saw Bert at the Chit Chat Café, he indicated a need for some lively conversation. While I usually agree with Bert on principle, I will sometimes take a contrary view just to let him exercise his mind. That particular day he lamented

about the current generation and their apparent moral decline. While I tried to remind him that past generations weren't always so righteous either, he countered my point with facts. As Mark Twain once said, "A single fact will often spoil an interesting argument." In general, we of the current generation and the future generations could do well by listening to those who have traveled before us.

So, here I sit talking as if there will be no more potlucks, as if the memories of past potlucks have to hold me for the rest of my life. It is but a momentary lapse in fundamental faith and theology. As long as there is life, the potluck will survive. Perhaps the foods will change, though maybe not so much in this little farm community. Do not fear, my friends, more potluck dishes will grace the tables of St. John as time continues its march to eternity.

# GENDER GAPS (1)

## All Souls Radio

Bob: Good morning, all you people out there in the good old USA. We are coming to you live from our studio here in beautiful Jack Valley. At the mike for this edition of “Gender Gaps”, the personal help show for struggling couples, is yours truly, Bob Wilson. My charming co-host is, of course, Msssssss. Linda Morgan.

Linda: Thank you, Bob. I’m stunned that you consider me charming.

Bob: Well, what can I say? I’m just a magnanimous guy.

Linda: Been reading the dictionary again, Bob?

Bob: Yes, Linda, frankly, I have. I find it both enlightening and intellectually stimulating ... Anyway, here at All Souls Radio, we do whatever we can to help you with your personal problems. Sometimes we give the theological background for our advice and sometimes we just call ‘em like we see ‘em.

Linda: That’s right, Bob, and we do our best to cover things from all angles. It’s a known fact that in the human brain the left side and the right side handle problems differently. Since the left side is predominantly male oriented, Bob will always give you the view from the left. That means I will always be ... right.

Bob: Okay, Linda, before we get rolling here, I’d like to thank our sponsors for today’s show, St. John Lutheran Church in Cedar Crossing and St. Peter Lutheran Church in Profitville. Formalities done, let’s get right to our first caller, Don from Minneapolis. What can we do for you, Don?

Don: Yeah, Bob. My wife and I argue constantly. She says I spend too much time on my computer. Then she ends up calling me stupid. Bob, I have a doctorate in Chemical Engineering. I set up my own computer system and am proficient at designing programs for it. I don't think I'm stupid. How is it I have all this knowledge and ability and yet I can't seem to understand my wife?

Bob: Don, first off, you need to tell your wife you love her, even when she calls you stupid. Now, let me ask you something. I know you said you set up your own computer system, but when you came home with your computer components, was there a basic instruction manual in the box?

Don: Yes.

Bob: Okay, let me ask you another question, Don. When you got married, did they give you an instruction manual on women?

Don: Uh, no, Bob.

Bob: There you go, buddy.

Don: Uh, thanks, Bob. I think.

Linda: Our next caller is Molly, from the Big Apple. This is Linda, go ahead, Molly.

Molly: Hello, Linda?

Linda: Yes, Molly, you're on the air. How can we help you?

Molly: Linda, every time my husband and I have a discussion he's always wrong. My question is, "If my husband was all alone in the middle of the desert and if there was nobody who could hear him when he says something, is he still wrong?"

Bob: Whoa, Linda. That's right up your alley.

Linda: Well, Molly, honey, you and I both know what the answer is, but to be fair, we have to put it in terms that a male can understand. Here's what you do, Molly. Give him an example involving football. Let's say the season is almost over and since you're from New York, we'll use the Giants as the example. Their record is, oh, let's be generous, 1 win and 13 losses. The owner moves the entire team out to the desert to play their last few games. Ask your husband what the possibility would be of the Giants winning the Super Bowl.

Molly: But that's impossible, Linda. They could never win the Super Bowl. Even I know that. It's the same team with the same players, and there are only two games to play. Playing in the desert will not make any difference. It's just mathematically impossible.

Linda: Exactly. When your husband says that, point out the similarities to his own situation and he will convict himself.

Bob: You have no mercy, do you, Linda?

Molly: Thanks, Linda. I don't care what Bob says about you, you're the winner of the Super Bowl to me.

Linda: Let me know how it goes, Molly.

Bob: Okay, our next caller is Amy, from Des Moines, Iow-way. This is Bob, Amy. You're on the air.

Amy: Yes, Linda?

Linda: Go ahead, Amy.

Amy: I don't know what's wrong with me. Every time I get involved with a man; I have all kinds of problems.

Linda: Actually, Amy, that is a very common situation. I can almost guarantee you it is not you. It's almost always the man.

Bob: Wait a minute, Linda. Can you cite anything to back that up?

Linda: Don't pay any attention to him, Amy. It is a known fact that most women's problems begin with men. It's obvious that Bob, like so many of his kind, is blind to the basic example given to us in the English language. So, for him, I will give you four examples of problems that start with men—Menopause, Mental Illness, Menstrual Cramps, and Mental Breakdown.

Bob: You know, Linda, I've been on the air with you for over five years and that leaves me speechless.

Amy: Thanks so much, Linda. You're a treasure.

Linda: You're welcome, Amy.

Bob: Jim is from Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. This is Bob, Jim. I'm going to have a hard time following that last gem of advice from the "Treasure", but I'll give it a try. What's up, brother?

Jim: Yeah, Bob, do you have any tips for a man who can't ever seem to say the right thing to women? Every time I open my mouth, it's like I'm taking my life in my own hands.

Bob: Give me an example, buddy.

Jim: Last night when we were getting ready to go out to dinner, I asked my wife a simple question. I said, "Is that what you're wearing?" She got all bent out of shape.

Bob: Okay, Jim. There are two things you need to do. First, go back and read the Book of Proverbs. It is a virtual fountain of knowledge about human relationships. Second, you need to build yourself a stock of alternative approaches. I don't even remember where I heard these, but they certainly contain words of practical importance. In the case that you cited, a safer remark would have been,

“Gee, you look good in brown” or whatever color she was wearing. The safest thing to say would have been, “Wow, look at you!” And the ultimate in safety would have been, “Here, have some chocolate.”

Linda: You know, Bob, I’ve also been on the air with you for over five years and that is the most pathetic thing you’ve ever said.

Bob: Jim, as a follow up to your comment about her getting all bent out of shape, it’s downright dangerous to say, “What are you so worked up about?” A little safer thing to say would be, “Could we be overreacting?”, but the safest would be, “Here’s fifty dollars.” And then, of course, the ultimate would again be, “Here, have some chocolate.”

Jim: Thanks, Bob. I think I’ve got the idea. I’ll buy some chocolate tomorrow.

Bob: Yeah, Jim, I'm not sure how, but chocolate seems to affect their hormones. And don't forget about Proverbs. Somewhere in Proverbs 10, Solomon says, "Wise men lay up knowledge."

Linda: That's beyond pathetic, Bob. Why didn't you give him the rest of that verse in Proverbs?

Bob: What's that, Linda?

Linda: But the babbling of a fool brings ruin near.

Bob: Well, I see by the old clock on the wall, that our time is about up for the program today. It's amazing how time flies when you're having fun. Do you have any last comments, Linda?

Linda: You're pathetic, Bob.

Bob: There you have it, ladies and gentlemen. Thanks for tuning in to the program. If you have any positive feedback, send it to me here at the station. If you have a problem with anything from today's program, send it to Linda here at the station. So, until next time, it's pathetic Bob Wilson and Msssss. Linda Morgan hoping all your gender gaps are little ones.

# MY GRANDPA AND GRANDMA

By David Young

Over the summer, we visited my grandpa and grandma, who are real tired. I guess you get that way when you have to move all the way down there to Florida, because everybody in the houses living around them was real tired, too. When I grow up, I'm going to try not to work too hard, because I don't want my hair to turn gray or fall out when I have to move to Florida.

The first night that we were there, Grandpa and Grandma took us down to their wrecked center for a party. It's where they're allowed to have fun. I'm not sure why they called it their wrecked center, because nothing looked wrecked to me. Maybe they just forgot that they had already fixed it. They must forget a lot around there, because everybody at the party wore a name tag so they could remember who they were. We got to play bingo while we were there because it was Friday night. Every Friday night they play bingo and whoever wins gets

to go out and eat early birds on Saturday night. I guess because they lost all their money, the losers have to bring their lucky pots with them to the wrecked center on Saturday night. If everybody brings their lucky pots, then they can share their food, so everybody has something to eat.

On Saturday, Grandpa and Grandma took us to where all the grownups play. There was lots of grass, some neat sand pits, and some real cool ponds where you could sail some big boats if they would have let you. Dad said Grandpa and Grandma like to go to the park every weekend with their friends. I don't understand why if you're already real tired why you would want to go there and try to mow all that grass with a little club.

There must be a whole lot of other people in Florida who don't have a home, because they have to have a policeman stand guard and make sure nobody gets in who doesn't have a house there. If you're really good and the policeman likes you, then you don't have to ask permission to get out. He just gives you this little box where you push a button, and the gate opens by itself. The policemen

who work there have to work really hard, so sometimes they fall asleep in their little house.

When you get real tired, it must hurt your ears. Mom and Dad had to tell Janie and me to play quietly because they didn't want kids running around and hollering much around there.

Sunday morning, we got up and went to church with Grandpa and Grandma. It's a different kind of church where they let you wear anything you want. We got to sit all the way up front because only people who were hard of hearing were allowed to sit in the back. Dad said it was really because Grandma wanted everyone to see her cute grandkids.

On Monday, we sat out on the porch and watched a whole bunch of men come in and mow the grass and cut the bushes. I guess everybody who lives there was too tired from cutting the grass at the park on Saturday to mow their own grass.

On Tuesday, we got to ride bicycles around the neighborhood. We had to stop every once in a while, so Grandma could do some more bragging

to her friends about her cute grandkids. When your hair turns gray, you must forget how to ride a bike, because Grandpa and Grandma had to ride tricycles.

Some of Grandpa and Grandma's friends must feel better after resting up for a while, because they go back up north to live in another house they have up there. They usually come back a few months later when they get real tired again. Although, I heard Grandma say that Mrs. Johnson only comes back when her kids get real tired of her. I guess you can get real tired just from being around someone else who's real tired.

We finally left Grandpa and Grandma and headed for home. On the way, Mom and Dad started talking about when they were going to get real tired and all the things they wanted to still do. All I know is when I get older and maybe start to get real tired, I don't want to live in an old house. I want it to be a new house, and I want it to be somewhere that I can holler a lot if I want to.

David Young

Oh, yeah. Mom says I have to tell you that my sister helped me write this.

# CLERGY CEUs

Dear Reverend Schmidt:

This letter is the official notice of a new program being implemented by the synod. As of January 1, they will require all clergy to take Continuing Education Units to maintain their active status on the official synodical list. The requirements vary according to the number of years of service and are given below. Contact your district office for applications or for any questions about the listed curriculum.

## CEU Requirements per annum

Clergy with less than 5 years of service—25 credits

Clergy with between 5 and 20 years of service—20 credits

Clergy with between 21 and 35 years of service—10 credits

Clergy with over 35 years of service—0 credits \*

\*While no CEUs are needed, they will require you to talk your congregation into giving you a sabbatical so you can do extensive study as to the future direction of your service life. It requires a motorcycle to complete the sabbatical.

## Curriculum

As new courses become available, you will be notified by mail.

### SH101—Shepherding 101 (5 credits)

Understanding sheep

Whose sheep are they anyway?

Find loopholes in the definition of “pastor”

### CP101—Elementary Carpentry (2 credits)

How to nail shut doors

How to build an ark

CP202—Intermediate Carpentry (2 credits)

Construction nuances in stables, museums,  
and maternity wards

How to save money in pew maintenance by  
rotating pews from front to back

LT101—Lighting Fundamentals (3 credits)

Theoretical differences between lighthouses  
and flashlights

How to change a light bulb without a com-  
mittee

How to light a fire (spiritual concepts in-  
cluded)

EE204—Employer/Employee Relationships (3  
credits)

Who's the boss?

Do they work for you?

Do you work for them?

Do you both work for God?

Are those in the pew being paid enough?

CM101—Introduction to Coffee Making (1 credit)

FM101—Floor Mopping for Extra Income (1 credit)

MS307—Subliminal Money Sermons (1 credit)

OC404—Advanced Outreach (5 credits)

How to trick your parishioners into making outreach calls

How to trick your parishioners into greeting a visitor

## EW201—Emergency Worship (3 credits)

Can you still hear God if the power is off?

Can God still hear you if the power is off?

How to form a search party

## FF302—The Frugal Father (2 credits)

(Course currently on loan; limited time)

Hymnals make good paperweights

Baskets hold more than gold offering plates

You don't have to spend \$2,000.00 to polish  
a basket

## BB201—Scripture Refresher (5 credits)

Using a Bible in Bible class

How to make the words of old dead men  
come alive

## SC201—The Transfiguration (3 credits)

From shepherd to CEO

CG302—Changes (1 credit)

Defining change

How to slip change in without it being noticed

Protocol for making change

How to manage someone shouting “Praise the Lord”

PL202—Advanced Anatomy of a Potluck (1 credit)

Spiritual significance of chicken casserole

Spiritual significance of apple pie

How to make sure there are no leftovers of your wife’s dish at potlucks

LA203—Ladies of the Church (1 credit)

Maximizing the effectiveness of women in the church — so they know their place

Keeping a safe distance between you and the women's groups in the church

Lines not to cross in working with the Altar Guild

## PF202—Profiling (2 credits)

Why you shouldn't consider a motorcycle gang member as Sunday School Superintendent

Why you shouldn't consider a go-go dancer as a speaker at the Men's Weekend

Savvy size-ups without a lie detector test

Forty-three new excuses that have gone viral

Using blackmail as leverage in seeking volunteers

## PARISHIONER CEUs

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ and Fellow Members of St. Peter:

In light of a recent synodical requirement that members of the clergy get Continuing Education Units to maintain active status, the Church Council has implemented a similar plan for the members here at St. Peter. The requirements vary according to the number of years you have held membership. Contact the church office for applications or for questions about the credit requirements and curriculum. The effective date of this new membership requirement is January 1.

Pastor Fred Anderson

CEU Requirements per annum

Parishioners with less than 5 years of membership—25 credits

Parishioners with between 5 and 20 years of membership—20 credits

Parishioners with between 21 and 35 years of membership—10 credits

Parishioners with over 35 years of membership—0 credits \*

\*While they require no CEUs, they will ask you to publicly recite the Athanasian Creed in at least one service without the use of a teleprompter.

## Curriculum

As new courses become available, you will be notified by mail.

SH102—Sheep 102 (5 credits)

Discovering what kind of sheep you are

Who is your shepherd?

Can you be a shepherd?

Finding loopholes in the definitions of “sheep” and “shepherd”

### MR101—Elementary Map Reading (2 credits)

How to find the back door

Knowing where the exits are during money sermons

How to find where the front pews are located

### MR202—Intermediate Map Reading (2 credits)

How to find Bermuda when the church starts nominating new officers

Calculating mileage when asked to volunteer

Finding a Bible Class location on a map

(WARNING—Both map reading courses employ reverse psychology techniques at times.)

LT102—Lighting Fundamentals for Non-Professionals (3 credits)

Finding the lighthouse while blind

How to use a flashlight

Keeping the wood dry for when a fire needs to be lit

FM102—Working Out While Mopping the Church Floor (1 credit)

MS308—Keeping the Mind Open to Subliminal Sermon Messages (1 credit)

OC405—Advanced Outreach (5 credits)

Avoid the embarrassment of being tricked into anything by volunteering

How to shake hands (Review of Basic Outreach Course)

Learning the word “welcome” in seven different languages

Create a welcome script for yourself with only forty words

Recognizing a visitor without clerical assistance

### SR201—Spiritual Refresher (5 credits)

What is a Bible?

How to recognize a hymnal

Legally using a Bible at home

Prayer is not limited to your closet

### SC202—The Transfiguration (3 credits)

From the rest of the week to Sunday

Using a transfiguration planning guide

### SP101—Sanitary Practices (3 credits)

What to do after shaking hands with an atheist

Should you have your picture taken with an atheist?

What to do if you accidentally eat a potluck dish made by someone of a different denomination

Don't throw out the truth with the bathwater of the mind

### CG302—Changes (1 credit)

Defining change

Recognizing change so it doesn't slip by you

Protocol for making changes

### PL203—Intermediate Anatomy of a Potluck (1 credit)

Is a potluck casserole dish without onions a thing of the Devil?

Understanding the spiritual significance to a second helping of apple pie if you see your pastor taking one

Why you must make sure that there are no leftovers from the dish brought by the pastor's wife

### ST301—Statistics (2 credits)

How to increase your attendance rate by 50% by coming on Pentecost

Tithing is not the Hebrew version of laying odds

Giving an extra hour per week to the work of the Lord does not statistically increase your chance of going blind

Your attendance rate at Bible Class should be better than your batting average in the softball league

Telling one of your children that you are going to return them to God does not

statistically increase your chance of getting a better room in heaven

### EX101—Excuses (2 credits)

Keeping track of which excuses you've used

Building a stockpile of dynamite excuses

Subscribing to an excuse updating service

(WARNING—EX101 also uses several reverse psychology techniques)

### STR101—Inner Strategies (2 credits)

How to recognize rationalization in your thoughts

Understanding the subtle difference between “want” and “need” with your children only

Developing a reasonable guilt complex

Effective and not-so-effective procrastination

## THE DEAD CASE FILES

*Profitville, as a city, often has very different community issues than the small farming town of Cedar Crossing. St. John's sister church in Profitville, St. Peter's, has a large, well-equipped fellowship hall. As part of its outreach to the people of Jack Valley/Profitville, the church often offers its facilities as a venue for certain civic events. The following meeting proved to be very much in the community's interest. Thanks to my friend, Pastor Fred Anderson, for providing the account.*

The crowd of community leaders gathered in the fellowship hall at St. Peter's numbered about two hundred. The mix of people ranged from governmental officials to clergy to business executives, with central figures from a dozen other groups. They awaited the FBI agent who had called for the meeting. Some of those in attendance grew a little restless as the 9:00 AM meeting already

lagged twenty minutes behind. Finally, a well-dressed young man walked to the podium.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I apologize for the delay, but our flight hit a few snags out of Atlanta. I’d like to thank you for coming to this meeting today. My name is Timothy McCabe, and I’m a special agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The gentleman standing over at the board is Agent John Phillips. We work in the Dead Case Files Division, which investigates unsolved cases where all leads have gone cold. We also work on cases that have been solved, suspects convicted and sentenced, and where something arises later that casts doubt on the verdict as they rendered it. We are here today at the request of your Chief Barnes. Chief, did you have anything you want to say at this point?”

“Yes, thank you, Agent McCabe. I, too, would like to thank everyone for coming out today. We, at the local level, will do everything we can to assist Agents McCabe and Phillips in the matter they will bring to you.”

“Thank you, Chief Barnes. To get straight to the point, there have been several unsolved crimes in your fair town that appear to fit the M.O. of someone involved in a case several years ago. Agent Phillips and I have studied that case closely and we believe the man who they convicted was, in fact, innocent. We think the guilty party in that case is still out there today. We believe he is the ring-leader of a large gang of criminals that blend very well in the general population. Because these are dead case files, we are releasing considerably more information to the public than we normally would ... yes, Agent Phillips.”

“Tim, I just wanted to add that we don’t think he is headquartered here in Jack Valley. We definitely believe that his organization is worldwide, and it’s our job to find new leads from local cases that may have slipped under the radar of federal agencies.”

“Thank you, John. We don’t want to cause undue alarm, but those of you gathered here today are the eyes and ears of your community. It is our experience that, even in the most mysterious of

cases, there are usually witnesses. Those witnesses, who may have heard or seen something seemingly inconsequential, may not be coming forward out of fear or any of a dozen other reasons. And it is even possible that those witnesses may not be aware that they witnessed anything. So, in the hope that someone out there did see or hear something, we are going to give you what we have on the crimes in your town and how they relate to a reasonable profile of the criminals involved on larger scale. Agent Phillips will take over for that part of things ... John.”

“Thanks, Tim. We’re looking at six crimes in your community that have a common denominator with similar crimes in other locations across our nation. Chief Barnes called us in when he ran out of leads. We were able to show what we think is a link between these local cases and the other crimes because we had a larger picture to examine. We believe that those committing the crimes deliberately left these clues behind. Here is what we have on a case-by-case basis:

Case 1—At 0600, the local dispatcher received a call saying someone had painted thirty-

two lightning bolts on the side of the city's water tower. She actually received three calls on the matter, but the other callers said there were thirty-four and thirty-five lightning bolts, respectively. This was on January 1st. Pumps and valves at various locations within the city's water system were vandalized.

Case 2—At 0700, an officer reported eleven squares with dollar signs painted on the road at the corner of 27th Street and 28th Avenue. At 0800, the dispatcher received another call describing the same scene. This was on March 30th. Eleven citizens lost everything they had in connection with a large scamming operation.

Case 3—At 1900, a man walking his dog used his cell phone to call the police and report that there were fourteen stars on metal placards hanging from a traffic light on 16th Street. A few minutes later, the same man called to say there were fifteen stars on metal placards hanging from a traffic light on 23rd Street. This was on April 24th. They found a famous movie star hanged to death in a local hotel that day.

Case 4—At 1800, a motorist called to say someone had put twenty dead pigs across the road between 22nd and 21st Streets. Dispatch received by the time an officer arrived on the scene, a total of seventeen calls on the same incident. This was on May 13th. The Food and Drug Administration and The Department of Agriculture could not find the source of an experimental drug that was illegally injected into meat products. The drug caused the people who ate the meat to develop an addiction of sorts that produced exceedingly strong cravings for more of the meat.

Case 5—At 2500, patrol car number 29 went on break for dinner at Maggie's Café. When the officer got back to his car, he found ten beer bottles carefully laid out on the car's hood in the shape of the number nine. In the center of the loop forming the number, he found twenty-six OxyContin pills. This was on July 12th. Agents from the State Drug Enforcement Agency arrested nine people in connection with a bootlegging and smuggling ring that ran illegal alcohol and drugs from overseas. They

later discovered all nine had been innocent victims of identity theft.

Case 6—Thirty-six calls were received within a few minutes of 0500 at the county sheriff's office. Thirty-three of those calls came from a phone on the outskirts of Profitville. When officers investigated the site, they found four severely beaten prostitutes tied to two telephone poles and left for dead. This was on August 31st.

"Thanks, John," said Agent McCabe. "I'm sure most of you have some familiarity with these crimes because of the media coverage, but if you could help spread the word to the community to offer anything that might be relevant, it might help us reopen the cases that are currently at a dead end."

"Now that you've seen what appears to be a pattern and a link with these six local cases, does anyone have any thoughts?" asked Agent Phillips.

Initial response to Agent Phillips's question brought murmuring among the crowd, but no one voiced anything constructive towards opening a

path around the dead end. Then a lone man approached the board where Agent Phillips stood.

“May I?” asked the man, as he held out his hand for the chalk that Agent Phillips held.

The man drew a large square on the board. Then he added internal horizontal and vertical lines, so he ended up with thirty-six smaller squares within the large square. Periodically looking back at the list of clues that Agent Phillips had written on the board, the man began filling in the smaller squares with numbers. Then he stood back to look at what he had done.

“I’m sorry, uh,” said Agent McCabe.

“Fred Anderson,” said the man.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Anderson. What is this?”

“Magic square,” said Reverend Frederick Anderson of St. Peter’s.

“What is the relevance of this magic square?”

“I was a bit of a mathematician before I entered the seminary. One of the fun things we did with numbers was the magic square. I won’t go into

all the technical details of how they work, but I will explain this one on the board.

Most magic squares use a formula that produces a pattern. The pattern in this case is such that if you plug in the numbers from the clues given, you will get a square that produces an equal sum whether you add the numbers across, down, or diagonally. So, adding across row 1, we get 111.

The same on row 2 and rows 3 through 6. Then add the numbers down and you always get 111. The sum diagonally either way is 111. If you add all horizontal lines together, you get 666. The answer is the same if you add all vertical lines or if you add all the numbers in all the squares. You always get 666. Labeling the horizontal lines Cases 1 through 6, Agent Phillips wrote on the board.”

Case 1	6	32	3	34	35	1
	111					

Case 2	7	11	27	28	8	30
	111					

Case 3	19	14	16	15	23	24
	111					

Case 4	18	20	22	21	17	13
111						

Case 5	25	29	10	9	26	12
111						

Case 6	36	5	33	4	2	31
111						

111	111	111	111	111	111	666
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“Are you saying that the number 666, which as I understand is a reference to the Devil, applies to this case?” asked Agent McCabe.

“You are correct in that modern culture usually assigns its meaning to the Devil or Satan. In the Book of Revelation, they thought the number 666 to represent the number of the beast—a man or the Anti-Christ or the Devil, depending on your interpretation. Scholars differ in their opinions on whether it was a reference to Nero or some other apocalyptic being. In all probability, though, it is a signature reference to Satan.”

“Are you saying the one who left us these clues, the one we are after is Satan? Because if you

are, we are going to have a hard time taking that to the judicial system.”

“While I leave the adjudication of Satan to a higher level of justice, it has a possible relevance here. It tells me that the ringleader behind these crimes against man and ultimately against God is an erudite persona, given the depth of his mathematical knowledge, and that he or she is most likely under some influence from Satan, whether that be a satanic cult or something like a student of satanic lore. If you consider that Satan is the father of all lies and the breeder of all sin, then you merely have to look at the clues in each case to understand the link. In Case 1, we have the lightning bolt which could be a symbol for power. In Case 2, we have the dollar signs which represent money. In Case 3, we have fame. In Case 4, we have the pigs, which could be a reference to gluttony. In Case 5, we have alcohol and drugs. In Case 6, we have sex. If you examine all the motivations for crime across our land, I would venture to say most would fall into one of those six areas.”

“Very interesting, Pastor Anderson,” remarked Agent McCabe. “John, will you get a picture of the board? We will certainly take that back with us, and if it fits, then it adds significantly to the profile. May we contact you again if we have any further questions?”

“Certainly,” said Pastor Anderson. “You know where I’ll be, particularly on Sundays from 8:00 AM to 12:30PM.”

“Does anyone else have an observation they’d like to share?” asked Agent McCabe. “No ... okay, that about wraps it up for today. Thank you again for coming. Thanks, Chief Barnes, for your cooperation. Thanks to St. Peter’s for the use of your facilities today. And, especially thanks to you, Pastor Anderson, for your insight.”

Five weeks later, Pastor Anderson opened the doors to the fellowship hall for the first meeting of a new member’s class. Thirty-six people entered the hall; a number that stretched the imagination of the good reverend. He had only expected the usual crowd of about ten, so he made apologies and

fervently found more chairs and ran off more copies of the class material. Later that evening, as he read the short information sheet that each new prospect had filled out, he noticed a pattern in the answers. Fourteen families composed the thirty-six people present. Those fourteen families all had representatives at the meeting with the FBI agents five weeks prior. The answer to the question on the form asking, "How did you come to learn about St. Peter's" was the same from all fourteen families, "From the town hall meeting five weeks ago". And the number thirty-six added incentive to jump start his mathematical mind. Thirty-six people; thirty-six squares in the magic square; the odds of thirty-six new prospects all coming from the same source; that the town hall meeting wasn't exactly five weeks ago, but thirty-six days. At two o'clock in the morning, he succumbed to a final thought of irony. If Satan's intent was to always drive a wedge between God and man, it had backfired in Jack Valley/Profitville, for the wedge turned out to be a bridge instead.

When Pastor Anderson woke up at 7:00 AM, he rehashed his thoughts of the night before. Over Cheerios and a bowl of peaches, he wondered if his contribution to the community's crime solving effort offered any possibility as a new tool in the evangelism arena. Perhaps only time would tell.

## THE MISSING MAN

*He always loved his gold necklace and large gold belt buckle. Such were the thoughts of his mother as she tried to deal with her son's disappearance. While that might seem like a strange way to remember a lost offspring, it did reflect a prominent feature of her son. He savored the wealth that a successful family enterprise had thrust upon him. He never hesitated to parade that wealth in front of the public any chance he could. Could there have been some enemy within his mind that made him cling so to those two particular trappings of wealth?*

*His mother long since passed away, Horace Van Buehler no longer occupied the memory of any living relative in Jack Valley. I have pieced together this account from old newspapers, family diaries, and an interview with Marvin Katchmayer, the former sheriff who lived at St. Mercy Home for the Aged when Pastor Anderson spoke with him. A chance discovery by the reverend and his young*

*people's class brought the young man's story back into the light.*

*Jess Harper, Cedar Crossing Gazette*

Every spring Pastor Anderson took his young people's class on a hiking trip to the hills around Jack Valley. He found it a great opportunity to instill some concepts within the young people while free from the distractions of everyday life in the city. And the kids responded by opening up and growing one day closer to maturity.

Pastor Fred led his pupils down every path with the rod and staff of a true shepherd. A gift from a fellow pastor who had visited Israel many times, the rod and staff added a certain authenticity to the scriptural parables and metaphors. The path they took on that day ran both narrow and wide at varying spots. Every so often he would stop and point out something that might help bring a Biblical story to life. When they reached the end of the path, they stood on a slight overhang of rock that gave a

partial view of Jack Valley off in the distance. As he talked to his little flock about when the devil took Jesus up on a mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, Fred felt a slight vibration in his feet. He quickly moved the group back off the overhang. Within minutes, the rock overhang collapsed down the side of the hill.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Pastor Anderson led the students back down the path toward their campsite. As they wound around the snaked trail, Fred glanced over to the area of the overhang every so often where he could see it from different angles. At one point, he stopped the group and fixed his eyes on what appeared to be a cleft in the rock underneath where the overhung had been. The narrow gap in the side of the rock had been shielded from view before by the overhang. He thought sure he had seen a momentary sparkle coming out of the cleft. They continued down the path until Fred once again thought he saw a shimmer of light coming from the gap in the rock, but as he stared at it, he couldn't make out anything.

“Why do you keep stopping and staring back at the rock, Pastor?” asked Jimmie Cahill.

“I thought I saw a sparkle of light coming from that gap in the rock,” answered Pastor Anderson. “Listen, kids. Do me a favor and watch that cleft in the rock as we go down the path. If anybody sees a sparkle of light, let me know.”

After they had gone about fifty feet farther, Melissa Fairbanks said, “I saw it, Pastor.”

“Me, too,” said Doug Gottfried.

Pastor Anderson walked back to where Melissa and Doug stood and looked at the gap. At first, he couldn’t see it. Then he momentarily could. He tried to figure out what would make the sparkle be intermittent like that. Then he noticed the movement in the leaves of the tree near them. When the wind blew, it changed the shadow of the tree ever so slightly. At a certain point in the movement, the sun hit the gap in the rock.

“What do you think it is?” asked Melissa.

“I don’t know, guys,” replied Pastor Anderson. “It’s a little too dangerous to get any closer, but we’ll find out what it is, one way or another.”

The group finally reached their campsite below, packed up, and headed for home. The next day being Sunday, Pastor Anderson didn’t have time to pursue any answers to the mysterious sparkle in the rock. On Monday, he called his friend, Roger Olafson, who was an experienced rock climber and cave explorer. He arranged to meet Roger and his climbing partner, Mary Thoms, at church on Tuesday and lead them out to the trail where he and the kids had been on Saturday.

When they reached a spot just above where the overhang had been, Mary secured and monitored the safety harness and Roger went over the edge. When he reached the gap in the rock, he shined his flashlight into the gap.

“Okay, I’m coming back up,” hollered Roger. When he got back up to the flat spot where Mary and Fred stood, he said, “You’re not going to believe this, guys, but there’s a human skeleton

wedged into that gap. The sparkle of light that you saw is from the sun hitting a large gold buckle. There is a slight darkening of the reflective surface of the gold, probably from the acid in the rock, but enough clear area to pick up the light. It's hard to imagine how this person got trapped there, but I would say they've been there for a long time."

"I'll call the sheriff and let him know what we've found," said Pastor Anderson.

"There's got to be access to the back of that gap," said Roger. "I'll bet there's a cave behind him. Care to do a little exploring, Mary?"

"Sure."

"I'll wait down below for the sheriff," said Pastor Anderson. "You guys be careful."

"We will, Fred," said Roger. "I've got all my equipment in the trunk."

By the time the deputy sheriff arrived, Roger and Mary had found the cave entrance, mastered the internal maze, and marked the path to the

backside of the gap. Then they led the deputy and Fred back to the skeleton.

“Don’t touch anything, folks,” said the deputy. “I’ll get the lab boys up here so we can get ‘em out of there. My guess is that it’s been there a good fifty years or more.”

Pastor Anderson studied the scene intently while they were waiting for the county crime lab to get there. He noted the two very striking pieces of gold jewelry that the person wore. The gold necklace appeared to be caught on a sharp piece of rock and the gold buckle likewise appeared to be jammed into a rock, but curiously, in opposite directions. The leather bag that laid about two inches below his right hand also looked like it was wedged tightly in the gap, but it still held its contents securely, showing it had been of sturdy construction. All of that rested only about two feet from the outer edge of the opening. He or she appeared to be so close to freedom.

With the lab crew done with what they had to do, there only remained the task of removing the

skeleton. The bones came out easily from the backside, but they had to use a chisel on the rock that clutched the jewelry, as well as on the rock on one side of the leather bag. When they got the bag free, they opened it up to find it about half full of gold coins and half full of deteriorating paper currency.

Pastor Anderson remained fascinated with the find and continued to follow up on the case, unofficially, of course. The official public statement comprised the belief that the remains were of Horace Van Buehler. Investigators saw no evidence of foul play. Law enforcement concluded the man had simply got caught in the gap and died there. Fred wanted to know more and set about on an investigative trek of his own. He researched every newspaper article of the time period still available in the library. He tracked down two distant cousins who had retired and moved to Florida. One of those cousins remembered something about a box of old books found in the attic of the now demolished family home. That trail led to the diary of Horace's mother. His final piece of evidence came when he talked to the aging sheriff at the time of the missing

man. The family enterprise collapsed soon after the man went missing. The contents of the leather bag that Horace carried held a goodly portion of the company's assets they had saved for the business partnership with another firm.

Carefully laying out everything he had gathered on the floor of his den; Fred first considered the picture of the missing man wedged into the rock. Then, weighing everything else in front of him, he developed a theory. It could not, of course, be absolutely conclusive, but it brought satisfaction to his inquisitive and mathematical mind.

Pastor Anderson's theory had Horace Van Buehler traveling to a business meeting to complete the partnership that the family enterprise needed to survive. He had a traffic accident in a severe storm and his car, never found, lay at the bottom of some inaccessible ravine, now completely covered with vegetation. He escaped the car before it went over the cliff and entered the cave to get away from the storm. Slightly disoriented, he got lost in the cave and couldn't find his way out. He happened upon the gap in the rock and thought he

had found the path to freedom and life. Thinking he could squeeze through the gap, he attempted to do so. His expensive gold necklace got caught on the jagged piece of rock, so he started to back out when his large gold buckle got wedged into the rock also but in the opposite direction. The coroner said his left arm appeared to be broken and was probably of little use to him. His right arm became wedged as he tried to hold on to the leather bag with all the money in it, so that too became unusable. And that was how it ended. He simply got wedged and couldn't move.

His theory remained entirely within his mind, for no one remained in this earthly domain who cared if finalization came or not. Some years later he jotted down his theory and so provided us with this unofficial written account of the fate of Horace Van Buehler.

As extensions to his theories on such matters, though, Pastor Anderson always tried to look deeper into the meaning of why things happened the way they did and whether there were any spiritual implications involved. The extension on this

case began with the fact that he had his young people's class on a hiking and camping retreat. As part of that experience, he tried to reinforce and bring to current life a picture of certain Biblical lessons as they would present themselves on the trail. His shepherd's rod and staff, as well as the sights, sounds, and touch of nature itself helped to authenticate those principles. Vindication of the Lord's words, "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few." and "it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." seemed obvious in the physical sense. Perhaps too obvious for his critical mind. Yet, there it stood. The stones cried out with the evidence. Would the rich young man have been able to get through the narrow gap in the rock and continue living if he had left his riches behind him? Perhaps ... is there a corresponding question regarding his spirit? Perhaps ... would the answer be the same? Perhaps ... it all seemed to fit, yet the answers would all be speculation at this point.

The evidence of “The Missing Man” had just come to the light. The evidence of the Lord’s words has been in the light for two thousand years. Any metaphorical connection cannot help the dead. It can still help the living.

## ALL COOKIE CHANNEL

Pastor Schmidt and Pastor Anderson had a free afternoon from the pastoral conference, so they took a walk outside the City Conference Center. As they made their way out the front door, they cast their eyes upon the secular jungle of the city. The area around the conference center bore the mark of a plethora of eateries and tee shirt shops for tourists. As they waited for the light to change so they could cross the street, Pastor Schmidt noticed an attractive woman in front of a TV studio that fronted the main sidewalk. She appeared to be inviting people on the street to come into the studio.

“What do you think, Fred?” asked Pastor Schmidt. “Do you want to check it out?”

“Sure, why not,” replied his fellow clergyman.

As they approached the woman, they heard her telling someone else, “Come on in. The show will start in about thirty minutes.”

Giving Pastor Anderson and Pastor Schmidt handouts, she asked, “Are you two gentlemen interested in cookies? If you are, the All Cookie Channel will be shooting a program in about thirty minutes and you’re welcome to join the audience.”

The woman moved on to other people on the sidewalk. As far as the two clergymen were concerned, the word “cookie” triggered a positive response. As they entered the studio, an usher directed them to two vacant seats about halfway down a row towards the back of the audience area.

“It looks like they’re going to have a full house, Fred,” said Pastor Schmidt. “Have you ever seen this show on TV?”

“No, I can’t say that I have.”

“I’ve seen it a few times on late night TV,” said Pastor Schmidt. “It is kind of interesting.”

“And dangerous,” added Pastor Anderson.

“How so, Fred?”

“Well, over 84% of Americans can’t resist a cookie. If baked goods can easily sway that large a chunk of the population, can you imagine what a marketing quicksand that would be?”

“84% ... where did you ... I’m sorry, I forgot you’re the mathematician and pay attention to numbers.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Pastor Anderson. “False cookie prophets could lead many astray.”

“I don’t remember the last time I looked out from the pulpit to see a full house,” remarked Pastor Schmidt.

“There was a Christmas a few years back where we had to set up a few folding chairs in the back. The next year we set them up in advance expecting another sizeable crowd and there wasn’t any need as there was still plenty of room in the pews.”

“It’s funny that we’re here lamenting empty pews in church while sitting in a fully packed

studio for the All Cookie Channel. And ‘empty pews’ is the whole theme of this year’s pastoral conference across the street, Fred. Do you suppose we could use that lack of cookie resistance to ... uh ...?”

“What are you saying, Arnie?”

“Do you think we could somehow take something away from the All Cookie Channel and use it across the street as an outreach tactic?”

“You mean like putting an attractive woman outside on Sunday morning and having her invite people in for free cookies?” asked Pastor Anderson.

“Hmm ... I hadn’t thought about that angle exactly,” said Pastor Schmidt.

“I know that wouldn’t work for St. John because you’re out in the country. St. Peter has a sidewalk on Main Street, but I don’t know, Arnie. It could be fraught with difficulties.”

“Like what, Fred?”

“Let’s suppose that it is immensely successful at first in drawing people into the church. Suppose that attendance is such that there is standing room only. Then the church council will want to establish a capital campaign to build a bigger sanctuary. Suppose we build that bigger sanctuary, take out a large mortgage, and then all those new people begin to see that it is not all about sugar-coated cookies in the church. The shallow-ground cookie lovers may fade away and then we are stuck with a huge new building that is only half full on any given Sunday.”

“You mean like most of the churches are already?” asked Pastor Schmidt. “Isn’t that a little pessimistic, Fred?”

“Exactly.”

“Then we should stick to whatever the district suggests, Fred?”

“Well, I didn’t say that either. Traditional evangelism can work in certain areas, but overall, it hasn’t been what I would call hugely successful in filling the churches.”

“What are you thinking then, Fred?”

“Well, I think you first have to go back to our mission statements. They don’t say anything about filling the pews at our respective churches. They give the mission as telling the world about Christ. Obviously, if the pews are full, then you’ve done a good job of telling the local community about Christ. That is a more measurable response.”

“Well, we sponsor that mission in Kenya.”

“Yes, of course. And that’s good,” said Pastor Anderson. “But I was thinking more about ... you know that cottonwood tree outside your office window. Have you ever watched the seed from that tree?”

“Sure, it’s light and feathery,” said Pastor Schmidt. “When the wind blows, it gets carried away.”

“To who knows where. Somewhere out there a new cottonwood tree may be growing from your tree’s seed.”

“Hmm ... like spreading the Gospel but not knowing whether it is growing beyond what you can see.”

“I certainly don’t think that approach should be a major part of a local congregation’s outreach strategy, Arnie. But including it as part of the overall plan can sometimes bring surprises.”

“Kind of like those radio programs that we jointly sponsor. While I haven’t seen an overwhelming response to them, I’ve gotten enough, particularly one lady from Picksville, that I believe them to still be worthy of our support, especially considering the low budget requirements.”

“Right, Arnie. I feel the same way.”

“What if ... what if we sponsored a show on the All Cookie Channel?”

“Well, it’s certainly something we could check out, particularly the cost,” said Pastor Anderson.

“I’m thinking something seasonal, like at Christmas. A nativity scene made of cookies with

no dialogue, just a familiar hymn in the background and then at the end a screen saying brought to you by our churches.”

“I like it, Arnie,” said Pastor Anderson. “Yeah, I like it—kind of subtle, but effective.”

“Perhaps we should keep this to ourselves until we have everything checked out,” said Pastor Schmidt.

“I would never say anything at the conference, Arnie. They already have enough on us to consider us somewhat on the fringe.”

“Do you think so, Fred?”

“I’ve heard some comments.”

“Well, no matter that. We can certainly enjoy our free cookies today.”

“Absolutely, my friend.”

“And if they are good enough, we eat them all ourselves and don’t tell anybody at the conference.”

“I’m with you, brother, though I don’t think the All Cookie Channel would consider it in the spirit of cookie outreach.”

## GENDER GAPS (2)

### All Souls Radio

*St. John Lutheran and St. Peter Lutheran jointly sponsor several shows on All Saints Radio. Gender Gaps seems to appeal to a large audience, and the parishes feel it's worth continued support. Here is the script from last week's show.*

Bob: Good morning, all you people out there in the good old USA. We are coming to you live from our studio here in beautiful Jack Valley. You are in for a treat. Our station manager says that since we have been so overwhelmed with calls, he's giving us an hour show today. At the mike for this edition of *Gender Gaps*, the personal help show for struggling individuals or couples, is yours truly, Bob Wilson. My charming co-host is, of course, Msssssss. Linda Morgan.

Linda: Thank you, Bob. There you go with the charming bit again.

Bob: Linda, I have always considered you charming, in a charming sort of way.

Linda: From you, Bob, I'll take that as a compliment.

Bob: Here at All Souls Radio, we do whatever we can to help you with your personal problems. Sometimes we give what we call the God perspective in our advice, and sometimes my partner just weaves brutal feminist machinations to confuse you.

Linda: That's right, Bob, and we do our best to cover things from all angles. It's a known fact that in the human brain, the left side and the right side handle problems differently. Since the left side is predominantly male oriented, Bob will always give you the view from the left. Of course, that means I will always be ... right.

Bob: Sometimes I just don't understand how that line wears so well, Linda.

Linda: The truth sets us free, dear Bob.

Bob: Okay, our first caller is Debbie from Bates Falls. How can we help you, Debbie?

Debbie: I have a question for Linda.

Linda: Go right ahead, Debbie.

Debbie: My husband and I are expecting our first child next month and I ...

Linda: Congratulations, Debbie. Do you know what it's going to be?

Bob: Human, we hope.

Linda: Don't pay attention to him, Debbie. I'm sorry, go ahead.

Debbie: We've taken classes and read several books on raising children. My husband and I seem to disagree on how to address the difference in behavior of little girls and little boys. He doesn't think there's any difference in behavior of little boys and little girls. We don't know what we're going to have. I was wondering if you had an opinion.

Linda: The best example I can give you is what my sister experienced. Their first child was a little girl, and their second child two years later was a little

boy. She often told me if they had had the little boy first, they may not have had any other children, but that's just an aside.

Bob: A desperate attempt at rationalization.

Linda: On their daughter's third birthday, they gave her a little red toy wagon. The little girl promptly took the wagon into her room and neatly filled it with her dolls and stuffed friends. She soon brought it back out and showed it off to them. On their son's third birthday, they also gave him a little red toy wagon, because they knew how much their daughter had loved and taken care of her toy. When he got the wagon, he promptly took it into his room. After a long period of time, they began wondering what their son was doing in his room. When they went inside to look, they found that the little boy had turned the wagon over and was trying to take the wheels off.

Debbie: Thank you, Linda. I'll tell my husband what you said.

Linda: You don't have anything to say, Bob?

Bob: No, it brings out too many emotional scars from the little red wagon that I had as a child.

Linda: Our next caller is Don from Applegate. How can we help you, Don?

Don: My question is for Bob. Bob, I forgot my wife's birthday last week, and she hasn't spoken to me since. What can I say to her that will help rectify the situation?

Bob: First, let me ask you a question. Have you enjoyed the silence?

Don: Well, sort of, but I've lost five pounds.

Bob: She's got the upper hand, Don. You've got to apologize, take her out to dinner, buy her flowers, buy her a diamond, etc. In other words, you've got to go for the 'works'. No pussyfooting around. In your apology, be sure to say, "How do you expect me to remember your birthday when you never look any older?". Above all, learn from it, buddy. Strategize for next year. Here's a little trick that I've learned, besides the obvious one of writing it down someplace that you look at on a daily basis. Buy a spare gift. Have it wrapped, but don't put a

card on it. Hide it somewhere in your closet and make up a bunch of cards—one for birthday, one for anniversary, one for Valentine’s Day, etc. Then if you find yourself in a bind again, just go to the closet, find a card for the occasion, attach it to the gift, and give it to her. Of course, it’s got to be a universal type of gift, and it’s got to be something romantically personal. Don’t do chocolate like I did one year—by the time I used the gift, they were like concrete. By the way, I don’t think that strategy violates any Biblical commandments.

Don: That’s a great idea, Bob. I’ll do it.

Bob: You don’t have anything to say, Linda?

Linda: Actually, Bob, I didn’t think you were that creative. I’m impressed.

Bob: One more thing, Don. Once you’ve got your plan established, just forget about such a minor mistake. There’s no use in both you and your wife remembering the same thing.

Don: I appreciate the advice.

Bob: We've got Harley from Bellview on the line. Let her rip, Harley.

Harley: My wife had to have some surgery, which went well by the way, but I ran into a little difficulty when the doctor came into the hospital room the next day. He checked her out, said the incision looked good, and asked if we had any questions. My wife didn't seem to have any, so I inquired as to when he thought she might be able to do housework again. Bob, I didn't know cups of ice could be such dangerous projectiles. What did I do wrong?

Bob: Harley, Harley, Harley. You never ask a question like that first off. You save that for much later, preferably when your pastor is there visiting. Things are less likely to fly at that time. And you try to frame it to where it sounds like you only have her welfare in mind. You say something like you're thinking about arranging for a maid to come in so your wife can properly recuperate and then maybe sneak in about how long you think you should engage that service to see if the doctor will make a comment.

Harley: Oh, okay, Bob.

Bob: Before we get to our next guest, we have to pay a few bills. Our sponsors for this show are St. John Lutheran Church in Cedar Crossing and St. Peter Lutheran here in Jack Valley. Both Pastor Arnie Schmidt of St. John and Pastor Fred Anderson of St. Peter are friends of this show and if you have a question that we didn't cover today, feel free to seek their guidance. Ask for Janice and she'll give you their phone numbers. Okay ... let's see, line 4 is Meredith from here in Jack Valley. Go ahead, Meredith.

Meredith: My husband doesn't like to cook. How can I get him interested in helping with that chore?

Linda: How you sell it is the key, Meredith. Most men don't like to cook; however, they will cook if they think it involves danger. Sometimes you can broach the subject by kind of playing dumb. When you're pulling meat out of the refrigerator, ask him a question like, 'Honey, is it true that the early brave man hunted for his meat, and carved it with a big, long knife and used a roaring big fire to cook

it?’ You get the idea, just kind of play it up. They usually fall for it.

Meredith: Thanks, Linda. I’ll try it.

Linda: Sherry from Bakerston is on line 3. You’re on the air, Sherry.

Sherry: Linda, I’m having some problems with my teenage son. Right now, he wants to get his ears pierced. He says his girlfriend thinks it looks cool. Sometimes I don’t understand him. What should I do?

Linda: Well, Sherry, I don’t have a teenager, but I will say that I’ve had a lot of experience being around immature males. It can be a delicate balance to keep the communication lines open and yet not damage their sensitive psyches. Assuming that he’s well-grounded in areas like drugs, sex, etc., then you could probably cut him a little slack on the pierced ears. I don’t know that the Bible says anything about the issue. Sometimes the big picture takes precedence, but that’s something that only you and your husband can see. Besides, pierced ears are a good preparation for marriage.

Bob: Wait a minute. How are pierced ears a good preparation for marriage?

Linda: The young man will have experienced pain and will have had to buy jewelry afterwards.

Sherry: Thanks, Linda. I know Bob would probably have never given such a balanced answer.

Bob: This is Bob ‘unbalanced’ Wilson, we’ve got Judd on line 2. Go ahead, Judd.

Judd: Bob, how do I know I’m in love?

Bob: Judd, is your wallet lighter?

Judd: Yeah.

Bob: That’s just the first sign that I know. But what is love? It reminds me of a conversation that Fozzie Bear and Kermit the Frog had on the subject. Fozzie asks Kermit, “What about love?” Kermit says, “What about love?” Fozzie says, “I don’t know. I was hoping you knew.” Kermit says, “I date a pig, remember?” Fozzie says, “Oh, yeah. Never mind.” It’s possible that it’s all a conspiracy organized by the florists of the world to get us to buy more flowers. And that’s about all I know about love. Linda,

did you have anything you want to add from the right side of the brain?

Linda: How could I possibly reach the poor man after that? Judd, have your girlfriend call in and ask for me.

Bob: I thought of one more thing that Josh Billings said about love, “Marrying for love may be a bit risky, but it is so honest that God can’t help but smile on it.”

Linda: Why can’t you say that right off, instead of ‘Is your wallet lighter?’

Bob: I eventually got to it.

Judd: Will do. Thanks, Linda and ... uh, thank you, Kermit ... I mean, Bob.

Bob: I think we have time for one more call. Kathy from Overton is on line 1. Go ahead, Kathy.

Kathy: Linda, where is a good place to meet a man?

Linda: The ideal place is in church. Any unmarried male beyond the teenage years who’s still going to church usually has his priorities straighter than most.

Bob: My wife would agree with that, Kathy. Ladies and gentlemen, thanks for listening today. May your dreams stay big, and your worries stay small.

Linda: And may God hold you in the palm of his hand.

## PUZZLED

Looking out his office window, Pastor Fred Anderson saw the postal worker carrying a thin square package up to the front door of the church. A few minutes later, Doris Haupt, the church secretary, knocked on his office door.

“Come in,” said Pastor Anderson.

“Here’s a package addressed to you personally, Pastor,” said Doris.

“Thanks, Doris. I could see him bringing it up and I wondered what it could be ... By the way, I should be here all afternoon in case anyone needs anything.”

“Okay, Pastor.”

Checking out the return address, he did a double take. The return label read: John Smith, 555 Main Street, Anytown, USA. How odd, he thought. Could it be some kind of joke? Then he noticed another label at the bottom of the box that read: To be opened by addressee only. Unauthorized opening

punishable by statutory law. He shook his head, having seen those kinds of labels before. They almost always offered some deal that couldn't be beaten, and only he had a personal reservation for a seat at the table. He thought about opening it later when he went through all the junk mail, but it was so lame that he couldn't help but open it immediately.

Taking out his trusty pocketknife, he cut the seal at the top of the box. He pulled out something about two-foot square, wrapped in tissue paper. When he removed the tissue paper, he saw a large object shaped like a puzzle piece. One side had a straight edge while the other three sides had the typical puzzle cuts and projections. Pastor Anderson felt the texture of the piece and found it fascinating. The piece had another straight vertical line down the middle, dividing it in half. The left side, which had the straight edge, had a grainy granite-like feel and had 'St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Profitville' written on it. The right side had a woody-like texture and had no writing on it.

Emptying the box completely, Pastor Anderson also found a note that said: “Bring this puzzle piece to First Baptist Church in Profitville at 10:00 AM on Saturday June 12<sup>th</sup>.

Pastor Anderson always liked a good puzzle, and this appeared to fit that billing. Since it was one piece of an obviously larger picture, he deduced that others in the area might have received a piece as well. He called his friend, Pastor Schmidt in Cedar Crossing.

“St. John’s Lutheran Church, this is Marjorie. How can I help you?”

“Hi, Marjorie. This is Pastor Anderson. Would Pastor Schmidt be in?”

“No, I’m sorry. He won’t be back until about 3 o’clock. Could I take a message for you?”

“Sure. Just tell him I called and for him to call me back as soon as he can.”

“Okay, Pastor.”

“By the way, let me ask you a question. Did Pastor Schmidt receive a package in the mail today?”

“Yes, he did, but he wasn’t here, so I’ve got it on my desk awaiting his return.”

“Is it thin and about two-foot square?”

“Yes, and what’s kind of funny is the return address. It says: John Smith, 555 Main Street, Anytown, USA.”

“Okay, Marjorie, tell him to call me after he’s opened it.”

“I sure will.”

Pastor Anderson decided to call Bud Morgan, the pastor at First Baptist Church. Since the note said to bring the puzzle piece there, maybe he knew what was going on.

“First Baptist Church, Bud Morgan speaking.”

“Bud, this is Fred Anderson at St. Peter’s Lutheran. How are you today?”

“Good. Let me guess. You got a package that had a puzzle piece in it with instructions to bring your piece here on Saturday, June 12<sup>th</sup>.”

“Ah ... I guess that means you’ve talked to a few others already.”

“I’ll tell you what I told them. I don’t have a clue why someone would say to bring them here. None of it has originated from First Baptist. And, yes, I got a piece, too. Mine is the same size as everybody else’s. It has a straight edge on the bottom and a horizontal line down the middle dividing it in half. The top half is brown, and the bottom half is kind of a mottled gray with ‘First Baptist Church, Profitville’ printed on it.”

“Are you going to be there and have the church open on Saturday?”

“I think I have to.”

“Well, I guess I will see you on Saturday, Bud.”

“I’ll have coffee and donuts, if nothing else.”

“I like a man who has his priorities straight.”

About twenty minutes later, Pastor Schmidt returned his call.

“Hi, Arnie. Did you open your package?”

“Yes, I did. What’s this all about?”

“I don’t have any idea, Arnie. I called Bud Morgan at First Baptist, and he said he doesn’t know anything about it either.”

“A little mystery, then.”

“Yes, and it would be my guess that every church in the county got one.”

“Are you going to take your piece down?”

“Of course. You know I couldn’t resist a mystery like this. I just hope it’s not some marketing scheme to sell us something.”

“That would be a disappointment.”

“Am I going to see you there?”

“Absolutely, Fred.”

“Well, I’ll see you then. By the way, Bud Morgan said he would have coffee and donuts.”

“Well, every good Lutheran must take advantage of that, especially when a Baptist is buying.”

When Pastor Anderson arrived at First Baptist on Saturday, there were already about twenty cars there. Everyone seemed to be standing outside waiting for some direction when Bud Morgan came out of the church and said he had the Sunday School room cleared of chairs so we would have an open floor. Everyone then filed into the Sunday School room where they found a table set with trays of donuts and five pots of coffee. When the clock read ten-thirty, some murmuring began to occur.

“Gentlemen, I don’t know what to tell you,” announced Bud. “Whoever sent these puzzle pieces apparently is not here and not knowing who it is we don’t know who to call.”

“Why don’t we lay out the pieces on the floor,” suggested Pastor Anderson.

“Yeah, we may as well,” said Father John Treadwell from St. Ann’s Catholic in Maryville.

The guys who had corner pieces put theirs down first to give the others some type of bearing. After about twenty others had gotten their pieces placed, it became fairly obvious that the brown, wood textured part of the puzzles formed a wooden cross. The gray pieces with the church names on them looked like a border of rocks around the cross. There were two no-shows, but they could readily see the picture anyway.

“What does it mean?” asked Bud Morgan. “Not what does the cross mean, obviously, but why was it given to us like this?”

No one voiced an immediate opinion, limiting their conversation to just those around them. Finally, one spoke up.

“Gentlemen, I’ve been studying this closely,” said Pastor Fred Anderson. “Those of you that know me know of my affinity for puzzles, especially mathematical ones. I don’t see any strong mathematical overtones to this, except maybe one. There are thirty-four leaders here representing most of the churches in our county. Each one of us

received one puzzle piece and yet, it took thirty-four of us to come together to get the complete picture. Individually, we would never have seen it.”

“So, you’re saying it is sending us a message that we can’t fully understand what Christ wants us to do unless we do it together?” asked Father Treadwell.

“No, I don’t necessarily mean that,” said Pastor Anderson. “Everybody here understands what Christ wants us to do. Most of the people we see in the pews every Sunday understand that. I think it speaks more to all the people in the world out there who outwardly show no signs of understanding it or maybe suffer from some degree of myopia. Notice how the church names on the rocky texture side of the puzzle piece are kind of hard to read when you stand at a distance, but then look at how powerfully the cross stands out.”

“And the massive rock border that forms when we put the pieces together denotes a solid foundation,” said Rev. John Glaser from St. Mary’s Episcopal.

“Right,” said Pastor Anderson.

“So, we should all unite and become Lutherans then, Fred?” asked Father Treadwell with a sly grin.

“Right,” answered Pastor Anderson. “No, of course not. We’ve got 400 or 500 years of denomination dogma that would never allow that. Besides, look at the puzzle. Each individual piece is still an individual piece with the individual church name on it. If the puzzle meant that all the pieces were to become one church, it would have all the same name on them ... St. Peter’s Lutheran Church ... Each puzzle piece can continue to teach and minister within their own group in their own way as they see fit to interpret the less overt areas of scripture. The unbelieving world around them will have a hard time seeing the message of the cross because it is only a small section of a woody textured edge on the puzzle piece. Put all the pieces together and, again, the shape of the cross is huge and quite visible, except to those who are completely blind.”

“A daunting task, considering all of our differences,” said Bud Morgan.

“Yeah, how could we do it?” posed Rev. Glaser. “Does anybody see the answer to that question in the puzzle?”

“I’m not sure I can see an answer to that in either the individual puzzle piece or the completed puzzle,” replied Father Treadwell. “What about you, Pastor Schmidt? You haven’t said much.”

“I was looking out my office window the other day, watching the power company install some new electrical lines along the highway. It was getting near noon, so they took their lunch break. Since they parked some of their trucks on the church property, I had to walk by them to take some mail out to the box. We exchanged pleasantries, and I became fascinated by all the tools and materials they had on the back of their trucks. They had one reel with very thick cable that had maybe a couple of dozen smaller diameter wires twisted together to form a solid conductor. The wires, though individual, carried the power as one. Now some of

you may wonder what this has to do with our puzzle, but I mention it because it is of the same concept as the puzzle. Just as the pieces of the puzzle are separate yet put together give a powerful image. The smaller individual wires were still fairly good size, and to twist them together would have probably taken some powerful machines. There is only one power I know of capable of twisting all the different denominations together ... the Holy Spirit.”

“I certainly agree that the Holy Spirit has the power to bring us together, but I’m still having a little trouble seeing anything in the puzzle to tell us how,” said Rev. Glaser.

“I don’t think it tells us the practical,” said Pastor Anderson. “I think if we can agree that the Holy Spirit has the power to pull it off, then we go home to our individual churches with the full confidence that we can do it. Keep an open mind and just start noting anything that you experience or that is going around in your neighborhood and then ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten you as to how, working together, we could solve it. Some examples could include supporting a pro-life center in

the county, or a larger food bank, or education for the home schooled, or financially supporting a member of the community in need of an operation or anything like that ... or maybe nothing like that. Every puzzle piece will have its own environment or situations that come up and, if more strength is needed, that church can bring it to the puzzle table. But I think the puzzle is also telling us that whatever we do, we make sure we do it so that the world can see the picture we bring with us.”

It got kind of quiet in the room, except for the low murmur of the gears of thought.

“Do you think it was the Holy Spirit that sent us the puzzle pieces?” asked Pastor Eric Thomas of Grace Bible Chapel.

“I don’t know,” answered Pastor Anderson. “I’m pretty sure it wasn’t John Smith, 555 Main Street, Anytown, USA. It could remain one of those mysterious ways in which He works. It may remain a puzzle forever.”

When no one else seemed to have anything else to add, Bud Morgan spoke up.

“Well, gentlemen, I suggest we go back to our homes and let this all soak in. Then maybe, if we have been so moved, we get together later and lay out some type of organization.”

There was unanimous voice consent to his suggestion.

“I also think we should each take our puzzle piece back with us as a reminder of what we found here today and what it could represent for the future,” added Bud. “And for the practical aspect of doing that, it gives us back our Sunday School room floor. It looks like there are plenty of donuts left over if any wish to take some home.”

Pastor Anderson was not the least bit puzzled to understand that the first person back to the donut table was his friend, Pastor Arnold Schmidt.

## GIANT RELIGIOUS SALE

Pastor Fred recently visited the big city. Of course, to us in Cedar Crossing, Profitville, where Fred lives, is a big city. Big city to him would be substantially bigger. It would be big enough to have an Ed's Discount Auto Parts and Religious Store. Fred sent me a text to let me know about a giant religious sale going on at Ed's. Please note that all our texting is in full English. We haven't forced ourselves to learn all the shortcuts yet.

Fred: I'm in West Clark City attending a conference. I've still got a couple of hours before it starts, so I thought I'd do a little looking around. I ran across an interesting store, and I wanted to let you know about it in case you wanted to come up and have a look. Ed's Discount Auto Parts and Religious Store is having a giant religious sale in case you need anything. I'm about to go in, and I'll let you know if there are any good deals. Right up front they have a display with books and DVDs. Ah, here's a book that looks interesting—*Tweeting and Texting for Church Dummies*. Perhaps we

should get one and share it. What do you think? It's 50% off.

Arnie: Sounds interesting, but I say you should buy it and I'll just pick it up from when you text or tweet.

Fred: Okay, but I may have to charge you a learner's fee. Now this looks like ... uh ... an in-depth study. The sign says "Obadiah" is out this year. *Professor Gerhard Mallik's Commentary on Obadiah* is only \$5.99. It's some 500 pages long.

Arnie: Obadiah? ... I've never read anything 500 pages long unless I absolutely had to.

Fred: There is a radio going at the next table. It has a sign saying, "Too Hot to Handle Anymore". "Name Your Price". What's playing is an infomercial for a product called RIAB: Religion in a Bottle. You ever heard of it?

Arnie: Yes, I saw that infomercial on late night TV one time. The theological implications reach into a somewhat questionable area. I'd pass on it.

Fred: There is a young man at the next table who appears to be offering some kind of coupon book. I'll get right back to you ... yeah, it is a coupon book called "Sins for a Dollar". According to the young man, if you commit one of the sins in the coupon book, you tear out that coupon and put it in the collection plate at church and that sin will be forgiven. It's only \$6.99 and dealerships are available. It could come in handy if we don't make our budgets at the end of the year.

Arnie: You are pulling my leg, aren't you, Fred?

Fred: Not about the coupon book—that is true. About us using it ... yes, I'm just having a little fun with you. Now this looks interesting. I think this is

something you could use, Arnie, with being a little more rural than me. It's a multi-purpose tool. It's got 2 knives, scissors, pliers, file, 3 screwdrivers, and more—all in one compact foldable tool that's easily carried in your pocket. But what makes this particularly appealing is that it also has a fold-out cross for emergency situations.

Arnie: Hmm ... that does sound intriguing. How much is it?

Fred: Normally, it's \$19.95, but with the sale today, it's only \$9.95.

Arnie: Pick one of those up for me, will you, Fred?

Fred: You bet. I think I'll go ahead and get one for myself, too. Hmm ... here's an electronic visitor detector. I wonder how that works. Okay ... you have to implant chips in your members that deactivate the detector. Then when a visitor passes by

without a chip, an alarm sounds ... You probably know when you have a visitor anyway, so never mind ... Bull Moose Cream—great for chapped hands and for polishing gold offering plates and communion ware. What do you think?

Arnie: No, I don't think so. It could affect my dairy farmers.

Fred: Last year's Easter eggs are 90% off. Could be a real bargain if we could figure out how to change the date on them.

Arnie: I think our time could be better spent.

Fred: Yeah, you're probably right ... Okay, how about *24 Knockout Sermons on God's Plan for Pet Discipline*? They are practically giving this away. Apparently, it only has 23 sermons because the author's dog ate one of the sermons and nobody at the

publishing house bothered to count the number of sermons.

Arnie: Pet discipline? ... Not really an issue in Cedar Crossing.

Fred: They have a free Usher and Greeter Recruiting Service available. "We bring them to you, dead or alive": Bruno's Enterprises.

Arnie: Sounds like a nightmare I once had.

Fred: Okay, then here's *143 of the Most Common Excuses Given by Church Members and How to Answer Them*. Written by Rev. Jack Liars and published in ... it appears to be a little dated ... in 1942.

Arnie: With today's fast paced world and technology, there are probably a whole lot more than that now. Pass.

Fred: Whoa ... here's something we've been talking about for a long time, a Denominational Survival Kit. Okay, let's see what all they have in this thing:

Officially certified anti-atheist hand sanitizer

A leather notebook with all kinds of pockets for religious material from your denominational headquarters

A gold embroidered copy of the best-selling book *Why I'm Right and You're Not*

A flashlight with your customized church imprint on it to help those who are not right find the light

A copy of *Buford's Comments on Clerical Protocol*

An extensive collection of Sainthood medals and coins

A DVD called "Perfecting the Use of Circumlocution in Your Arguments"

An abridged dictionary of obscure theological words

And much, much more

All made in the USA

Arnie: I bought one of those at last year's district convention. *Buford's Comments on Clerical Protocol* is about the only thing I've used.

Fred: They've got a lot of cool stuff here, Arnie. Unfortunately, I've got to get to the conference now, so I'll sign off. After this, that conference is probably going to be pretty boring. Are you going to come up?

Arnie: As much as I'd love to, I've got to mow the grass at the church this week. Delbert is out of town. Don't forget to get me that tool.

Fred: Will do, Arnie.

## SPECIAL DELIVERY

*Thanks to my friend and colleague, Pastor Fred Anderson for sharing this recent experience he had. The Cedar Crossing Chamber of Commerce has no Annual Costume Ball, so I don't think there is anything similar we need to worry about in our small town.*

*Pastor Arnie*

*The Lord works in mysterious ways—a familiar saying often used for explaining the unexplainable. I'm afraid I must call upon it in trying to explain this story. I have spent the greater part of my adult life in the study of God, and there are times when I know no more about God than the little child down the street.*

*Pastor Fred Anderson*

The Annual Profitville Chamber of Commerce Costume Ball returns this coming Saturday night. In the event you are wondering why this would interest me, let me explain. Though the Church's mission comprises winning and keeping people for Christ, there is much in the administration of that goal that is business oriented. From office equipment and supplies to publicity to property maintenance to accounting, it behooves us as leaders to make the business aspect as efficient as possible. We owe it to those who sacrifice every week with their gifts, to make sure we spend every dollar wisely.

It is with those thoughts in mind that the Church Council invested in a membership in the Chamber. When I'm not able to make a meeting, I have several retired business executives in the congregation that I can call on to take my place. Our

presence in the Chamber has proven to be beneficial for both us and the other Chamber members. Not only have we built a good rapport with the business community, but we often harvest new knowledge on efficient business practices. We've built up an extensive contact list of businesses and people that we can call on when something arises in the church that needs outside experience. Since we are the only church on the member list, we have many opportunities to offer spiritual guidance within the Chamber halls. It has been a win-win relationship.

Getting back to the Annual Costume Ball, I've struggled with homemade costumes over the last few years. This year, I decided to rent one from the costume shop in town. My wife is content with making her own again, but I want something different. Of course, I had to establish parameters—no devil suits or zombies or such. It needed to be something with some dignity, and if spiritually themed, all the better.

On Tuesday, I called upon fellow Chamber member, Trace Bell, the owner of Snuggly's

Costume Shop. After an hour or so of searching the racks of costumes, I noticed a ray of light shining on one in the corner.

“Now, that’s a great costume, Pastor,” said Trace. “It’s a little more complicated, but I don’t think you’d find a better theme.”

“I would have to agree with you there, Trace.”

An hour later, I walked out of Snuggly’s Costume Shop with an elaborate but refined costume. When I walked through the front door of my house carrying a package as big as me, my wife gave me a curious look.

“What in the world did you get, Fred?” asked Becky, my wife.

“It’s my costume for the ball.”

“I figured that. What is it?”

“In due time, my dear. In due time. I want the effect to be more ... dramatic, so I’m not going to show you until Saturday.”

“O ... kay.”

In another part of town, a young boy got ready for school, but only after he asked his mom when they were going to get a dog. The little boy's name was Jimmy, and he was as cute as a button, but he inherited his father's penchant for persistence.

When he was all ready for school, he asked the question again, "Mom, are we going to get a dog today?"

"No, we can't today, Jimmy."

Unfortunately for his mom, Jimmy asked that same question every morning for a month. Then, when he got home from school, he would ask, "Mom, is Dad going to bring home a dog today?"

At bedtime, he didn't ask the same question, exactly. It rather took the form of, "Mom, can we get a dog tomorrow?"

Exasperated by her son's persistence, she finally said, "Okay, Jimmy, I'll make a deal with you. If God brings us a dog, then we can keep it."

Jimmy got a big grin on his face and ran up to his room. His mom wondered if the deal would end the wearisome questions. Jimmy did not ask her the question at all the next day.

When nighttime came, his mom said, "Come on, Jimmy. It's bedtime. Let's go say your prayers."

"Okay, Mommy."

Kneeling beside his bed, Jimmy began, "Bless Mommy and Daddy and Suzy and Gina. Bless Aunt Sophie and Uncle Bill and bless Calvin. Amen."

"Jimmy, who's Calvin?"

"That's the name of the dog that God is going to bring me."

"Oh."

For the next three weeks, Jimmy included Calvin in his prayers, morning and night. His mom wondered if she had done the right thing with her

deal. At his age, his sisters, Suzy and Gina, would have moved on to something else quickly. Not Jimmy. She hoped she hadn't set him up for resentment of God when Calvin never arrived.

Saturday afternoon, Pastor Fred unwrapped his costume and showed his wife.

"An angel. Seems dignified and within your parameters."

"Yes, but this is no ordinary angel. The wings move in and out with a little electric motor. It has a halo made from a bright, circular fluorescent light. Another switch turns on a little pump that emits a foggy mist. And there are four other things it does."

"Wow! Sounds complicated."

"A little bit, but it's worth it. I feel it is in concord with my professional status in the Chamber."

"Uh, huh."

“There is one minor problem, but it’s not insurmountable.”

“What’s that, Fred?”

“It takes about an hour to put it on and get everything hooked up.”

“Okay. Let me get my costume on, and then I’ll come out and help you.”

“You are a fine woman.”

“Not magnanimous?”

“That too.”

An hour and a half later, Angel (aka—Pastor) Anderson and his wife were ready to head to the ball. As they walked out the front door, Pastor Anderson stopped.

With a sheepish grin, he said, “Uh, I’m afraid with these wings folded in front like they are, I won’t be able to drive.”

Becky held out her hand and Fred gave her the keys.

With the passenger seat pushed back as far as it would go, Fred managed to get his seat belt on underneath the wings.

“This would obviously not be the preferred means of transportation for angels,” he commented.

“Really?” said Becky.

“According to my watch, we should arrive at the ball with plenty of time to spare.”

“Do you think angels wear watches, Fred?”

“Uh, that’s a good question. Perhaps I will leave it in the car.”

“Slow down, Becky. It looks like a little puppy is getting close to the road up there. He looks lost. Pull over on the right.”

Pastor Anderson got out of the car and walked over to the puppy who immediately put his paws up on the pastor. Fred started to bend down to pick up the puppy, but he found he couldn’t bend over with his wings folded in front of him. He

pushed the button to open the wings, and the puppy backed up with an uncertain look on his face.

With wings fully extended, Pastor Anderson picked up the puppy and said, “It’s okay little fella, I’m not going to hurt you. Let’s see what we have here. No ID tag and no collar.”

By then, Becky had joined him on the road-side with the puppy.

“What do we have, Fred?”

“I don’t know. No ID or collar. Maybe we should check with some of the neighbors to see if anyone’s missing this little guy.”

“Okay. I’ll take the left side and you can do the right.”

About fifteen minutes later, they regrouped at the car.

“Any luck?” asked Fred.

“Nobody’s missing a puppy.”

“Well, there’s one more house at the end of the cul-de-sac. I’ll try there.”

“Okay. I’ll stay by the car and watch to see if anybody comes along looking for a puppy.”

Fred walked up the front sidewalk to the house, carrying the little puppy in his arms. Coincidentally or not, Jimmy looked out the front window when Fred approached the front door.

“Mommy! Mommy! He’s here!”

“Who’s here, Jimmy?”

“The angel that God sent with my puppy.”

“What?”

Just then the front doorbell rang.

For a moment, Jimmy’s words didn’t sink in and then it hit her. If whoever’s at the door has a puppy, she’s doomed. She made a deal. She couldn’t go back on her word. But she did say if God brought a dog, didn’t she? She walked over to the front door and looked out the peephole. All she saw was a blinding light. Perhaps it should be noted that when Pastor Anderson was trying to maneuver his way to the front door with his fully extended

wings, he accidentally hit the switch that turned on his bright, fluorescent halo.

Jimmy's mom knew she had to open the door with Jimmy standing next to her saying, "Boy. Oh boy. Oh boy." She slowly opened the door. Perhaps it should also be noted that when Fred moved the puppy to his left arm so he could push the doorbell, his right arm accidentally bumped the switch that operated the mist pump of his costume.

Jimmy, of course, was oblivious to the light and the mist. He exclaimed, "Calvin!" and then took the puppy from Fred. Running upstairs with the puppy, he joyfully said, "I knew God would bring you to me, Calvin."

With the puppy now headed up the stairs, Jimmy's mom stood at the front door shielding her eyes from the light. Through the mist, she thought she made out the form of a huge angel standing in front of her.

"Uh ... thank ... thank ... you ... uh ... for ... uh ... for delivering ... uh ... Calvin."

“You are quite welcome,” replied Fred. As he fiddled with the switches on his costume, he started to apologize for the light and mist, but Jimmy’s mom had already closed the door.

“Oh, well,” said Fred to himself. “Mission accomplished.”

When he got back to the car, Becky noticed he no longer had the puppy.

“Find his home?”

“Yes, there is one happy little boy in there. It was a little odd, though. His mother seemed at a loss for words, almost like she was in awe.”

As Becky looked at Fred from head to toe, she continued watching him fold in his wings. She then said, “Yes, I can imagine she would be.”

“Well, let’s get to the ball.” Taking off his watch and checking the time, he continued, “I guess it never hurts to be fashionably late once in a while.”

“How could they think any less of an angel for it, dear.”

## E PLURIBUS UNUM

*Pastor Fred has talked with me numerous times on this extraordinary, yet difficult experience from members of his flock and the community of Jack Valley. I have no additional words of wisdom that could improve on what is here given.*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

The Pacific Intermountain Express ran once a week, leaving Denver on Sunday morning and returning on Saturday night. For this seven-day journey, two powerful locomotives, working in tandem at times, pulled three sleepers, two dining cars, and three vista cars. The PIE always ran at full capacity. The passengers on board had no destinations; they had no tickets for stops along the way; they did have a safe return as a goal. Depending on the

season, the train did occasionally make stops at certain points of interest, but it was all part of one passage.

The riders of the Pacific Intermountain Express rode the common ground of their cars as sightseers. Once in a while, a large group would book the whole train and thus provide an additional element of singularity to the journey.

This particular day, the PIE carried a random list of passengers from a random list of locations that were all booked on a first-come, first-booked basis. Joe Randall and his wife Clara occupied the front seat in Vista Car #1. They had dreamed of such a vacation for several years. Since Joe's parents wanted the kids to visit them on the farm for the summer, and since the cookie jar held funds aplenty, they decided to go for it. After about an hour of travel, a steward came to their seat and told them breakfast was ready and they could go back to the dining car. They just had to look for the table that had their name and the town where they were from on a reservation card. Getting up from their seats, they walked back down the aisle towards the

dining car. About two-thirds of the way back, Clara stopped suddenly.

“Maggie!” she exclaimed. “What are you guys doing here? Wait, that was kind of a dumb question, wasn’t it? Joe, come back. It’s Maggie and Bill.”

“This is so funny,” said Maggie.

“Hi, guys,” said Joe. “I told you it wouldn’t work, Bill.”

“I know, Joe, but we gave it a good try.”

“What are you guys talking about?” asked Clara. “Did you know about this?”

“No,” answered Joe. “We’re just messing with you. It is a small world, though, isn’t it?”

“Well, look, we’ve created a traffic jam, here,” said Clara. “We’re holding up the line. So, I’m sure we’ll have a chance to talk later.”

“See ya, guys,” said Bill.

“Can you believe that, Joe?” remarked Clara, as they continued to the dining car.

“Here we are, Hon,” said Joe, pointing to the reservation card on the table.

A few minutes later, Bill and Maggie Davis walked past their friends. “We must be farther down,” Maggie said.

“Bon appétit,” said Joe.

“I still have a hard time believing that,” said Clara. “I mean, what are the chances of two families from the same church taking the same train ride a thousand miles away and not knowing beforehand?”

“Okay, then,” said Joe. “Here’s another one for you. Take a glance at the reservation card across the aisle.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Frank Sythe,” read Clara. “Am I supposed to know them?”

“Keep reading.”

“Jack Valley ... Joe, this is uncanny ... I wonder if this is them coming now?”

An elderly couple slid into the booth across from Joe and Clara.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Joe. Holding up their reservation card, Joe continued, “I was wondering if you might have accidentally gotten our booth.”

The gentleman picked up the card on their table and reread it, “No, I’m sorry. Ours has our name on it. What does yours say?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Randall, Jack Valley.”

“Jack Valley?” said Mr. Sythe. “You’re kidding?”

“No, that’s what it says,” said Joe. “We’re from Jack Valley, aren’t we, dear?”

“Don’t pay any attention to him,” said Clara. “This is so strange. We just saw two friends of ours from our church in Jack Valley and neither of us knew the other was on this train.”

“What church is that?” asked Jackie Sythe.

“St. Peter Lutheran.”

“We’re members at First Baptist,” said Jackie.

“Sure, that’s on Route 21, right?” said Joe.

“Yes,” answered Frank. “And do you want to know what’s even stranger? We just saw a couple from our church and neither of us knew the other was on this train either.”

Looking up and around, Joe said, “It’s ... the Twilight Zone.”

“Well, we don’t want to hold up our waiter here,” said Clara. “We’ll have to introduce our friends to your friends later.”

“Count on it,” said Frank.

The waiter handed them menus and took their drink order. He returned a short time later and asked them if they were ready to order yet.

“You go ahead, dear,” said Joe. “With the strange aura around, my inner psyche has not yet returned to the physical world.”

“Oh, shut up, and order.”

After a delicious meal and another brief conversation with the Sythe’s, Joe and Clara returned to their seats in the vista car.

Over the course of the next two days, Joe and Clara introduced Bill and Maggie to Frank and Jackie. Reciprocally, Frank and Jackie introduced David and Betty Clark to everyone else. By the third day, the eight became friends.

On the fourth day, the Pacific Intermountain Express stopped at an old gold mine town that had become a tourist attraction. While they were walking around the town, Joe thought he saw someone that he knew.

“Clara, doesn’t that guy over there in the red shirt look familiar?”

“Yes, he sorta does. I don’t recognize the woman he’s with, though.”

“I know him from somewhere. You don’t suppose he’s from ...?”

“Normally, I would say not a chance. But now, I don’t know.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out. Let’s get a little closer.”

Joe and Clara moved up next to the couple and Joe reached into the bucket of gems next to the bucket the man was looking at.

“They sure make them look real,” said Joe.

“Yes, they do,” said the man. Looking up and smiling, “Yes ... yes, they do.”

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” asked Joe.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” the man said.

“You wouldn’t happen to be from Jack Valley, would you?”

“Profitville, actually.”

“I’m thinking ... a store?”

“Shoe repair,” stated the man.

“Sure ... sure. Over the bridge on Main Street.”

“You got it.”

“Do we have an eerie story for you,” said Joe.

Joe and Clara introduced themselves and then found their other friends, old and new. They then introduced them to Richard and Tanya Terrabino. By the time the train blew its whistle to reboard, Richard and Tanya had revealed that they went to church at St. Ann's Catholic and had lived next to Maggie's parents for five years.

The afternoon trip through the mountains provided some gorgeous panoramic views. At different points in the trip, each of the new friends made a comment about the awesome creative hand of God. When the train traversed a tunnel in the mountain, the sky opened up to a fiery orange background streaked with brilliant hues of purple and gold.

Clara turned to Joe and said, "I love you, Joe. With this kind of beauty, can you imagine what heaven's going to be like?"

"I know. It's mind boggling."

At 6:00 pm, the steward began seating people for dinner. Just as he reached Joe and Clara's seat, the train lurched momentarily and then there was a

loud ear-piercing screech of metal on metal. Although it would only span a few seconds, the time that it took for the car to tip over and roll down the side of the mountain seemed like a slow-motion dream to Joe. Vista Car # 1 came to rest on a ledge about two hundred feet from where it had been on the tracks.

Strangely, Joe did not feel hurt. His right arm had a couple of minor abrasions, but that appeared to be it. He immediately climbed over a mangled seat and started looking for Clara. He found her under another seat and quickly realized his beloved bride was dead. A jagged piece of metal had pierced her throat. The moaning of several other people resonated in his ears in the otherwise deathly silence of the railcar, but he could not leave Clara. Finally, he couldn't stand it anymore. He couldn't do anything for his wife; she was with God; he had to see if he could help anybody else. Jammed metal and twisted seats made it very difficult to maneuver. He saw Maggie's head and crawled back to her. Bill was obviously dead. Maggie couldn't move, but she opened her eyes.

“Joe, is that you?” she whispered.

“Yes, Maggie.”

“Bill? Where’s Bill?”

“I am so sorry, Maggie. Bill didn’t make it. He didn’t make it ... hang in there, Maggie.” But it was too late. Maggie passed away in his arms.

A few feet away, he found Frank, but he couldn’t see Jackie anywhere. “Frank, can you hear me? Frank?”

“Yes, Joe, I hear you.”

“Can you move, Frank?”

“No, Joe. The weight ... it’s just too much.”

“I’ll see if I can get this off of you.”

“Joe, don’t. Tell Jackie I love her.”

“Yes, Frank, I will, but ... Frank? Frank?”

Joe felt the car move a little. He crawled over to where a window had been, knocked out the remaining glass, and leaned out. He could see the ledge giving way, so he maneuvered the rest of his

body out the hole, and in a desperate leap, went for the branch of a tree that hung low. His feet went out from under him, but his hands continued to feel the rough bark of the tree. He watched between his legs as the railcar tumbled down the mountain. About thirty feet to his right, he could still see the dining car upside down on another ledge. He worked his way up the tree branch, jumped on a rock, and crawled over to the dining car. Ten feet to his left he saw a man on his back who seemed to be twitching. When he got up to him, he recognized him as Richard Terrabino.

“Richard, it’s Joe. Look at me, Richard.” When the man opened his eyes, Joe said, “Where are you hurting, Richard? Can you move?”

Richard tried to prop himself up on his elbows but quickly collapsed. “I can’t feel my legs, Joe ... Joe, would you find Tanya?”

“I’ll try, Richard. I’ll try.” Joe looked up the mountain at the two teetering cars left on the tracks. “Richard, I’ve got to try to move you. If those two cars above come down, we won’t stand a chance.”

Richard grabbed Joe's wrist with a strong right hand and pulled him closer. In shortened breath, he said, "I'll see you on the other side." Joe felt Richard's grip release and he knew he was gone.

Joe dodged a large rock that tumbled down from above. When he heard a creaking and then a groaning, he crawled to his left as quickly as he could. With a thunderous roar, Vista Cars 2 and 3 came crashing down, caught the back end of the dining car on the ledge, and carried it with them down the mountainside. Alone, he saw no other life. He knew he had to try to get back up to the tracks; rescuers would probably find him much quicker up there. An hour later, a rescue chopper lowered its medic and sling down to the lone man clinging to a twisted rail.

All the passengers on the Pacific Intermountain Express but one died on that mountainside that autumn afternoon. The churches of St. Ann's Catholic, First Baptist, and St. Peter Lutheran in Jack Valley overflowed with the living for the funerals.

Pastor Anderson had many long conversations with Joe Randall for months following. Questions of “Why?” abounded; answers were not always definitive; they couldn’t be without knowing everything that God knows. Perhaps the last conversation they had cast the clearest light on a shadowy question that still haunts Joe Randall today.

“Pastor, why do we wait until the end?” asked Joe.

“What do you mean, Joe?”

“Why do we wait until the end to resolve our differences with all the people who are supposed to be our brothers and sisters in Christ?”

“I assume you’re referring to the fact that the dying words of the people on that mountainside were not about doctrinal differences?”

“Yes.”

“The brutal truth is, I don’t know. The human condition is both simple and complex. Ultimately, I’m sure it goes back to the Garden of Eden, but The Tower of Babel was certainly a point in time

that communication problems broadened. John tells us that the Lord himself prayed that all may be one. For a time in history, the structure of the Church was sort of united, but certain abuses brought about the Reformation. And while the reformers addressed the abuses and corrected some, the resulting split ended up creating widespread differences. Time only multiplied those differences.”

“So, we each have to have a church on the corner with walls that separate us from our brothers and sisters?” asked Joe.

“The physical building walls and the spiritual interpretation walls. Of course, we can’t be so naïve as to ignore the fact that there are some brothers and sisters who have taken a path on some issues that I believe is just wrong in the broad context of what God has revealed to us through the scriptures. They will have to try to justify that path to the Lord someday. While we can’t judge them, we don’t have to go down the same path that they have chosen. I don’t know how God will judge them. I know we must always keep the doors of the heart

unlocked for them, and I know we must keep our eyes and minds open on any path we take on our journey as a church and as an individual. I know that Father Riley at St. Ann's, Pastor Douglas at First Baptist, and I have talked more since that day than we ever had before. We're even going to collaborate on a couple of projects. Death is the great equalizer in the human journey. It is the point at which all the different denominations, all the different doctrines, all the people of God become one, meeting at one point, Joe."

"Ever since I lost Clara ... sometimes when I hear people arguing and holding grudges about stupid petty stuff ... I just want to grab them and shake them and say stop. It's just not worth it; wake up; live every day as if it were the last."

"Well, Joe, I know what you mean. Sometimes I want to do the same thing, but then I get caught up in all the everyday chores and concerns myself. I've done a lot of grief counseling in my career, and I've found that—and I know this may sound strange—the most fortunate people are those who know they are dying, and they have a little

time to think about their relationship with God and resolve their differences with others. The toughest situations are those like what you experienced—where death is instantaneous. Because all those things that, as you say, we wait until the end to do, never get done. Certainly, it is less of a concern with Clara and the others on board that train with active faith lives. For believers, this tragedy was ... as Charles Dickens put it in *The Tale of Two Cities*, ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ... it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair ...’”

“And for those who reject God, Pastor, it is but the season of Darkness.”

“Yes, my friend. Without hope or light, how could it be anything else?”

## HOME RUN DILEMMA

*This story originated with Tom Peterson of Peterson and Paulson, Inc. Tom and his partner, Rick Paulson, are a couple of young millionaires who love to help people in unique ways. I've worked with them on numerous charitable projects, and Tom came to introduce me to the young man in this story.*

*Pastor Fred Anderson*

“Hey, Tom, since it’s a girls’ night out for shopping, how would you like to catch a ball game?”

“Well, Rick, I’d really rather go shopping with the girls, but if you insist, I guess we could go down to the ballpark ... You do insist, don’t you?”

“Yes, I insist, as a matter of male independence.”

“Who’s playing tonight, Rick?”

“The Wildcats are coming to town, and they’ve got that new kid that’s causing quite a sensation.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“Have you heard anything about him, Tom?”

“No, not really.”

“His name is Dexter Hawkins. He’s from a little farm town out in Nebraska. This will only be his third game of the year and he’s already hit six home runs.”

“Whoa. Six home runs in his first two games? That’s amazing.”

“Yeah, it could be exciting, but there’s already talk of moving him up to AA in a couple of days.”

“Man, the parking lot is almost full,” said Rick. “I’ve never seen it like this before. It’s got to

be the kid bringing them in. We may end up in the bleachers.”

“That’s okay, Rick.”

The first two batters from the visiting Wildcats were quick outs on only three pitches. Then came Hawkins batting third. The hometown pitcher felt confident with the first two easy outs. His first pitch to Hawkins cleared the left field wall by twenty feet. The crowd went wild, even though it was the opposing team. When Dexter came up for his second bat, the home team had a new pitcher on the mound. The first pitch to Hawkins landed in the water behind the center field wall.

“Man, this is great,” said Rick. “What a rush.”

“Yeah, it’s something alright,” added Tom.

His next two at bats, Dexter was intentionally walked, despite the boos of the hometown crowd. The Wildcats came out on top in the end by a score of 6 to 5.

As they walked back to the car in the parking lot, Rick looked at Tom and said, "I know that look. You've got to find out more about this guy. Right?"

"That thought has crossed my mind," answered Tom.

"There will probably be a lot of people ahead of you right now," said Rick.

"In due time, my friend," said Tom. "In due time ... Besides, you must have a connection somewhere, don't you?"

Dexter Hawkins loved the game of baseball. An average pitcher and fielder in Little League, Dexter had an extraordinary ability to hit. His first four at bats as an eleven-year-old, he hit four home runs. Opposing teams pitched very carefully to him, trying not to give him anything good to hit, but he still managed a home run with every other at bat. Eventually, the other teams just began walking him, so he hit no more home runs that year. This pattern continued throughout high school and college. A major league team drafted him #1 when he finished college. He signed and started out in A ball

where Tom and Rick first saw him. Within a month, he started for the Jaguars, the AAA team in the parent's farm system. His second year of professional baseball, he attended spring training with the parent club.

During spring training, Dexter drew huge crowds just to watch him take batting practice. Confident, seasoned major league pitchers saw the ball with every other at bat clear the outfield fence. Nobody had ever seen anything like it in the sport's history. The team owners could not contain their joy. You can imagine the hoopla in the sports media. Statisticians pointed out that he could hit 300 home runs a year.

A very quiet man, Dexter just loved playing the game and paid little mind to all the attention he received. Then came the opening game of the major league season. The ace pitcher of the visiting team looked a little nervous, pacing around the mound and talking to himself. When Dexter came up to bat, the crowd roared. The first pitch was a nasty curveball and Dexter swung and missed. The next two pitches had the same result and Dexter

struck out. A hush fell over the crowd, but the roar returned for Dexter's second at bat. The cycle repeated three more times, as Dexter struck out all four at bats in his major league debut. Of course, the hoopla in the media equaled a level as if Dexter had hit four home runs.

Unfortunately, Dexter struck out every at bat for the first ten games. He also appeared befuddled in the field, making many mental errors. The team sent him back down to AAA for a little more experience.

When Dexter got back to the Jaguars AAA minor league team, the fans didn't know quite what to think. His teammates weren't exactly sure how to approach him. His first game back, he hit four home runs. In his next five games, he hit two home runs every game, until the cycle of intentional walks began again. Attendance at the farm club games, home and away, shattered every record ever kept, which benefited the entire league.

The next season, Dexter continued to amaze during spring training with the parent club. Then

came the first game of the season, and everyone eagerly anticipated his power at the plate. But it never came for Dexter, as he struck out four times and made three errors at first base. Management struggled for an answer. They sent him back down to AAA again, where he continued his home run production. Dexter played two more seasons in AAA setting records for home runs and walks that will probably stand forever. He retired from the game of baseball after those two seasons, never playing for the major league team again.

*Tom Peterson sat down with Dexter after his last season for a lengthy interview. Absolutely fascinated by Dexter, Tom called me and asked if I would meet with them one day. Tom saw a wonderful, gentle giant of a man succumbing to failure and struggling to decide what to do with his life. The rest of this story tells of my interaction with Dexter.*

*Pastor Fred Anderson*

The birds in the trees chirped loudly on a beautiful spring day when baseball fans across the nation were about to head to ballparks for the first games of the season. Three men and a walk in the park on such a fine day seemed only right for conversation. We soon came upon some members of my flock, Madelyn Jacobs with her new baby daughter and her son, Todd. They, too, were enjoying the beautiful day and the peacefulness of the park.

“Good morning, Pastor,” said Madelyn.

“And a beautiful morning it is, Madelyn,” I replied. “Madelyn, this is Dexter and Tom.”

“Nice to meet you, gentlemen,” said Madelyn.

Before either could reply, Todd said excitedly, “I know you. You played for the Jaguars, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did,” answered Dexter.

“I have one of your broken bats,” said Todd. “I collect broken bats.”

“I wish I had known,” said Dexter. “I would have brought you another one.”

Reaching into the red covered wagon that he brought with him to the park, Todd pulled out an intricately carved wooden bat. It had just about anything you could think of about baseball on it.

As he looked at the bat that Todd showed him, Dexter asked, “Where did you get such a cool bat, Todd?”

“I made it,” answered the lad.

“You carved all this?” asked Dexter.

“Yes, I did,” replied Todd.

“This is awesome, Todd,” said Dexter. “You’ve got incredible talent.”

“I want you to have it, Mr. Hawkins,” said Todd.

“No, I couldn’t do that. You worked so hard on it.”

“But I want you to have it,” insisted Todd. “It’s your broken bat.”

Dexter looked at me, and I gave him a thumbs up.

“Are you sure, Todd?” asked Dexter.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I’m going to hang this someplace special in my house. Maybe over the fireplace where I can always see it and remember you.”

As we walked away, I began telling Dexter and Tom a little bit about Todd.

“That is one special boy,” said Dexter.

“Yes, he is,” I replied. “God has given him some wonderful gifts, but they have come in a very shy package. That is the most I have ever seen him talk to a stranger. Of all the conversations I’ve had with Madelyn and her husband about their concerns with Todd, I could sum it up in one thought, ‘Let Todd be Todd’. I know some will think that to be too simplistic and that I don’t know what I’m talking about. But I’ve seen him when he is left alone and loving what he’s doing.”

Dexter stopped and turned around. He stood there with an inquisitive look on his face, watching Todd working on another bat. Then he looked at the bat that Todd had given him, holding it up as if he were holding it up to a mirror.

I could tell you that my words to Dexter created such an impression that he completely changed his life and went back to professional baseball and became a world-class major-league player. But that's not what happened.

Here is what happened:

Rick Paulson of Peterson and Paulson, Inc. called on one of his real estate partners and they found a farm for sale in Jack Valley. Rick hired Dexter to run the farm, giving him a free hand. The farm turned a respectable profit during its first two years, but that seemed secondary in Rick's mind. At the entrance to Diamond Farms stood a regulation baseball field. At any given time, you might find a group of kids from all walks of life and all economic levels playing and learning all about the game of baseball. And there among those kids you

will find Dexter Hawkins ... well, just being Dexter, sharing his love for the sport and for the joy of the unique life that God has given him and every kid there.

And hanging on the wall just above the fireplace in the farmhouse is an intricately carved, broken bat.

# CONFESSIONS OF A PEASANT

*I received this letter about two months ago. After reading it, I shared its contents with numerous colleagues, friends, and fellow members of my flock. The comments generated spanned a range from challenging to controversial to provocative to heretical. I give the letter to you in its unredacted entirety so you can ponder its contents.*

*I don't know why it was sent to me, and I have never discovered the identity of the author.*

*Pastor Fred*

Dear Pastor Anderson,

I am a peasant in the verdant fields of theology.

I have followed Christ all of my life including the time in my mother's womb.

I do not hold a degree in any higher study of the nature of God. Unable to read or speak Latin, Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic, I depend on the work of all those who have translated scripture into English.

Which translation is the inerrant word of God? Did translations such as the King James have errors? Is the Revised Standard Version now the inerrant word of God? Or will future discoveries of archaeology and manuscript fragments bring us a new inerrant word of God? Will nuances in language bring scholarly changes to some words and meanings that change the big picture painted for us? The Bible is a complicated book with a simple message – a message that I do not think can ever be retranslated, revised, or improved upon. It is that simplicity that appeals to my limited theological knowledge.

I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, the Father's

only Son who came to earth to save humanity from spiritual death. I believe in the Holy Spirit, who though I don't always understand how He works, I know He does work to enlighten and keep me on the path of Christ. Whether they are a triune God or three separate Gods, I don't know. To me, it does not make any difference. They are all supreme beings. The concept does not change how I live my life. I will continue following Christ and live under the influence of all three with every aspect of life.

For me, I find much of the Old Testament to seem almost irrelevant. Oh sure, you can find parallels to today in some of the writings. Genealogies, the history of Israel, and countless rules that have no meaning in this modern world may be of great interest to the scholar, but less so to a peasant. I believe that Jesus was who He said He was. While I struggle with a lot of the Old Testament, I believe the Bible as a whole gives us the big picture of how God wants us to live. The Ten Commandments and Jesus's further simplification are clear:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your

mind, This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On those two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”

I look around at all the division among those who call themselves Christians. There are so many denominations out there that I have lost count. Each one insists their interpretations are the correct ones, and they work hard to keep them pure.

The two biggest divisions seem to involve the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. They divide when they should unite.

I fully believe Jesus said those words at the Last Supper, and that He meant something with them. Did He mean we should build a table and declare it to be God’s, only to exclude others that God will be welcoming into heaven despite our exclusive doctrine? I have a recurring dream where I am sitting in church with Billy Graham on my left and Mother Teresa on my right. When it comes time to go up for Holy Communion, I start to walk up and

look back to see that they are not allowed to come to God's table.

For those fellow Christians who do not accept infant Baptism, I wonder how the Holy Spirit feels about it. I wonder if it is really about a lack of understanding as to what the Holy Spirit can do through a child. I know, the learned theologians will always have explanations for these divisions, but they often seem to me to be man wanting to be in control instead of leaving it to God.

I look at beautiful, architecturally elaborate, and expensive churches sitting on every other street corner. I see them sitting empty for 90% of the week. I have to wonder what kind of an impact on the spreading of the Gospel would occur if the money spent on buildings, pipe organs, and all the other trappings of adornment were used for local missionaries and shepherds.

I go into church on Sunday morning and usually end up sitting in the same pew with the other worshippers following the same pattern. Woe to the visitor who sits in someone else's seat – of course,

I am exaggerating, though there is very little rush to welcome that newcomer. I hear the robotic recitations and see the pious religious rituals. I listen to the reading of the scripture, and no explanation follows from the shepherd for the waiting sheep. Does a visitor learn anything about God from a service that is liturgically designed for those who already know what's going on?

I do not mean to sound so unsophisticated in my meandering questions. As a rustic, I suffer from a lack of refinement or elegance in trying to understand the mores of my religious superiors.

I do know that if someday the bombs start falling or the rockets come screaming, I won't be rushing down to the church to try and save the gold communion ware, gold collection plates, and gold Bibles. I will gather round my family, my neighbor, and a well-worn Bible. I will trust in God that no matter what happens, I will be at his feet in due time. If it is not my time to go, I will remain vigilant and ever thankful for life. I will continue to live as God would want me to live with every minute of my life. When I fail at times, I know that I am

forgiven if I am sincere in seeking God's forgiveness, and He will know if I am sincere.

And all of this is not really that complicated.

But what do I know? I am just a peasant.

*I have thought about this letter often over the course of the last two months. As a pastor, I will say that I see some of the things the author wrote in a little different light. But ... I have to wonder ... If the veil of manmade denominational rules were to be lifted ... I wonder how many of my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world might not make the same confessions as the peasant writer of this letter.*

*Pastor Fred Anderson*

# PHILOSOPHY 704

Professor Ludwig von Booring

*Frederika Schultz, the assistant to the professor in this story, is a member of St. Peter's. Occasionally, Boone College will ask other learned members of the community to sit in on selected lectures and offer an independent critique. Per Frederika's suggestion, the committee chose me for the initial class of Philosophy 704.*

*Pastor Fred Anderson*

At 8:00AM on Tuesday morning, Professor Ludwig Von Booring and his able assistant, Frederika Schultz, walked through the classroom door. The knowledgeable teacher stopped in front of his desk and tapped on the right front corner with his hand carved wooden pointer. Frederika, all bent over from the heavy load of books she carried, followed his command, and set the volumes on top of

where he tapped. Straightening herself, she then walked over to the podium and waited for the professor to welcome the students.

Standing in front of the blackboard, the professor spoke, “Gutt morning, students.” Raising his pointer to the first name listed on the blackboard, the learned man continued, “I am, of course, Professor Ludwig Von Booring ... and this is my capable assistant, Frederika Schultz. As we begin another term of the school year, I want to remind you that you are in Philosophy 704. If you find that you are in the wrong class or that you have changed your mind about taking this class, you may leave.”

In response to Professor von Booring’s reminder, eight students got up to exit the classroom.

“Sit!” ordered Ludwig. “Sit!”

Five students sat immediately, while the three remaining upright murmured something about the professor saying they could leave.

“Sit!” demanded the professor. “Sit!”

Two of the exiting students then sat down and the last one standing appeared to be holding to his convictions.

The professor aimed his hand carved wooden pointer at the last student and said, “Sit!”

Reluctantly, he sat down, allowing the professor to continue with the class introduction.

“Since this is an advanced class in philosophy, we will study questions that have mystified mankind for eons. It is my belief that one cannot grasp the depth of such questions without first absorbing the collected wisdom of a wide variety of intellectuals. And so, this will be the format of our class lectures and discussions.”

Walking back over to the blackboard, Professor von Booring wrote the question for the first class. “Now, our question for today will be, ‘Why did the chicken cross the road?’”

He continued by drawing a chicken on the left side of two vertical lines that represented a road. “At this time, Frederika will read for you various

opinions from a selection of noted individuals. You may proceed, Frederika.”

“Why did the chicken cross the road?” proposed Frederika, as she began citing the opinions before her.

The evolutionist, Genesis Goodwin says, “It was by pure chance. A random selection predicated on its necessity to find food for survival. There was no grand intellectual plan here.”

Prominent attorney, F. Law Money says, “Do we have any witnesses to this crossing? No. I submit to you that, if there was a crossing at all, it was someone who gave the impression of a chicken. We don’t even know if this alleged crossing occurred in daylight or the dark of night. There is a strong possibility that if it allegedly occurred at night, reliable identification is questionable at best. This whole charade could well have been the concocted story of some phantom chicken hater afraid to show his face in public.”

The philosopher and revolutionary, K. Comrade Redsky says, “The chicken was obviously seeking to escape from the capitalist bully of a farmer who was lining his pockets with the profits from the fruit of the chicken’s labor. The chicken could do nothing but advance to the inevitable conclusion that it must join its fellow oppressed and form a socialist society.”

Author and right-wing conspiracy theorist, D.C. Morales says, “The mere fact that we, as rational human beings, would assign any didactic significance to the *Gallus domesticus* and its predilections is a dire attempt to justify the existence of a multilayered educational bureaucracy. The chicken’s behavior, as so questioned, has little relevance except as a prime example of pork barrel politics.”

Beverly Hills oil tycoon, J.D. Clampett, says, “It was mostly cause Granny had a powerful hankerin for some fricassee and we was fresh out of possum.”

“And so, there you have the opinions upon which we shall begin our discussion.”

“Thank you, Frederika.”

“May I say something, Professor?” asked Frederika.

“If you must, Frederika.”

“What if the chicken crossed the road because of a religious experience?”

“What are you talking about, Frederika? This is a chicken. Chickens have no souls. That is ridiculous.”

“Yes, sir, it would be ridiculous if we only took the literal meaning. But what if the chicken was a symbolic representation for mankind?”

“What?”

“There are many examples of a metaphorical relationship between the chicken and man, but I will cite only a few,” said Frederika. “First, there is the schoolyard taunt of a timid child as being ‘chicken’ when it comes to a dare. Then there is the slang term for a young female of ‘chick’. Next

would be the term for someone who's in a frantic state as 'running around like a chicken with its head cut off'. An overprotective mother carries the title of a 'mother hen'. A grouchy old man is often called an old 'rooster'. Lastly, there is an expression that the elderly often use, 'we're no longer spring chickens you know'."

Going over to the blackboard, Frederika wrote the word 'man' on the left side of the road. Then she wrote 'God' on the right side of the road. Finally, she drew two horizontal lines that crossed the vertical lines of the road.

"So, you see, sir," she continued. "With the metaphor that I have given, we have man on this side of the road and God on the other side of the road. Man, feeling lonely and guilt ridden in this materialistic world, has a desire to get closer to God. Now, the key word in this question is 'cross' for when the chicken crosses the road, we become aware of the bridge of the 'cross' that God gave to man so he could come to Him."

“My, my, my, my,” said the professor. As he put his arm around his assistant, he continued, “Dear sweet Frederika, you have so very much to learn. Why don’t you run down to the lounge and get me a cup of coffee?”

His able assistant bowed to him and left to do as he wished.

“My, my, my, my. Chicken, man, God. My, my.”

When Frederika left the room, the professor turned back to the blackboard and stared at her words and illustration. Though he thought it ridiculous, he couldn’t stop himself from going over to the blackboard. He followed the drawing and the words with his hand carved wooden pointer. His furrowed brow betrayed his mocking of his assistant.

“Chicken, man, God,” he mumbled to himself. “Chicken ... man ... God. Perhaps, if the chicken...” Then he realized that the entire class had been witnessing his intense study of the blackboard. “Uh, class dismissed.”

# THE LIGHT OF A HARVEST MOON

A bright harvest moon continued to play peek-a-boo behind dark, sullen clouds. Nowadays, the precious light provided by our lunar neighbor has lost some of its significance. Oh, we still comment on it when we see a particularly bright one, but today's massive tractors and combines with intense headlights extend the day for most farmers. There are a few old-timers around Cedar Crossing with small farms who swear its reflected light is more revealing. Perhaps that is scientifically impossible, but it could be a more revealing light of the veteran farmers themselves.

Amos Franklin sided with the group of harvest moon proponents. I had been meaning to visit him for a while, but I thought a harvest moon visit would be extra special.

The long, winding dirt path to his farmhouse was well lit – yes, by the light of a harvest moon. As I rounded bend number five, a pair of cottontail bunnies scurried across the path in front of me.

With the house in sight, I saw Amos sitting in a rocking chair on his front porch. We exchanged greetings, and he handed me two bushel baskets.

“I thought you might like to experience some harvesting tonight, Pastor,” said Amos.

“What did you have in mind?” I asked.

“Picking apples,” answered Amos. “It’s not often that I get some free labor.”

“Well, I guess it’s good that I wore my harvesting shoes.”

“This first tree is a Golden Delicious. You ever picked apples, Pastor?”

“It’s been a while. I don’t recall any courses in the seminary on picking apples, but I think I remember the fundamentals.”

We picked for about fifteen minutes when our harvest light disappeared behind the clouds. The rest gave Amos a chance to talk (rarely do the old-timers talk while they work).

“You know, Pastor, the apple has gotten a bad rap.”

“What do you mean, Amos?”

“Every painting that I’ve ever seen with Adam and Eve has the apple as the fruit of temptation.”

“Now that’s a good point, Amos. Most Biblical scholars do not think that it was, given the climate of the area that the Garden of Eden was thought to be. A lot think it was more likely something like the pomegranate.”

Our discussion ended quickly as the moon reappeared in full light. Another thirty minutes of picking and we got another rest period.

“Ever heard of the creature of Dalton Valley, Pastor?” asked Amos.

“No, I don’t think so. I’d probably not forget something like that.”

“You know where Dalton Valley is?”

“Yes, it’s ten miles or so west of here, isn’t it, Amos?”

“About. Now, mind you, I don’t buy everything about the story, but there is some strange evidence that points to something out there.”

“Well, some stories do gain a certain amount of embellishment over time. Are you talking about evidence that points to a creature existing today?”

“Possibly.”

“Like what?”

“Let me go back to when I first heard the story. My daddy told me about it, and his daddy told him about it. It started back on old Dewey Hudson’s place with a harvest moon just like this. My granddaddy farmed next door to Dewey and was the first in my family to witness something. Granddaddy heard Dewey hollering from his orchard next to their fence line. Dewey was back a dozen trees in and staring at one tree. All the trees in his orchard were full of leaves and apples, but that one tree. All its leaves and fruit were gone – completely disappeared. The branches cast an eerie, barren shadow under the moonlight. They saw giant footprints around the base of the tree, so they

ran back together (neither one interested in staying out there alone) to get some paper and pen. Just as they got back to the tree, the clouds on both sides of the moon opened up and released a torrent of rain. Naturally, the footprints were washed away and, unfortunately, neither of them remembered enough fine detail to recreate an accurate picture. Of course, the local weekly newspaper ran a front-page story on it. It became a big deal because there weren't that many newsworthy front-page stories at the time in the small farm town. After a while, Dewey and Granddaddy started to become the butt of jokes. Apparently, they never talked about it again. Dewey cut down the apple tree even though it was putting out fresh spring growth. As far as I know, there were no other incidents. The Cedar Crossing Gazette ran one of those '100 years ago' columns about it, but I've not seen anything else."

"What made you think about it tonight, Amos?"

"I don't know. Just one of those eerie feelings, I guess. You see those two cloud banks on

either side of the moon that seem to be acting as a frame for our light?”

“Yeah.”

With the moonlight now reappearing, we went back to picking. As I grabbed apples, I started to wonder about the alleged creature. The valleys around here have produced fossils of dinosaurs before. God’s Creation, including the dinosaurs, is such a wonder. Could the creature really have been a dinosaur that survived and lived for all that time? It hardly seems likely. It would have been a scientific impossibility. I looked up at the moon and noticed the cloud banks had moved on, leaving a clear path for the light of the harvest moon onto our apple trees.

After about an hour more of apple picking, Amos said, “Time to head for the barn, Pastor. Those clouds are coming back, and we still have enough light to see the path.”

Of course, the way my fingers felt, I could have quit half an hour sooner. By that time the orange globe sat lower in the sky. Just as we turned

to go back, it got completely dark. If I hadn't been a skeptic, my eyes would have thought they saw something big – big enough to block out the moon – move across the horizon in front of the moon. It only lasted about thirty seconds. Then we felt the ground rumble rhythmically for about a minute. At the far end of the orchard, we could vaguely see leaves and fruit being thrown up into the air. Then everything became quiet. Amos and I looked at each other in silence.

Finally, Amos said, "I'm going to check it out. Are you coming?"

Oh, that temptress 'fear'. Forced to confront her, I managed, "Well. Amos, I can't let you go out there alone."

We easily found the only barren tree in the orchard. Large pads and claw prints surrounded the base of the tree.

"We need to go back to the barn, Pastor."

"Okay, Amos,"

When we got back to the barn Amos started up his tractor and then hooked up a utility trailer behind it. He grabbed a chainsaw, and I grabbed shovels and rakes.

When Amos went to put his rifle in the trailer, I said, “Amos, if that creature was big enough to blot out the moon, then a shot from that rifle would only seem like a pin prick. Besides, it might make him mad.”

Amos stood there for a few seconds thinking about what I had said. Then he put the rifle back in the cabinet.

We spent two hours cutting down that apple tree and raking out all the footprints. When we got back to the barn, my back hurt, my hands had blisters, my arms hurt – even my brain hurt. Amos and I made a pact to never talk about that night again.

Amos passed away four months ago without breaking our pact. I also remain true to the agreement. After all, no human sustained injury. The only victim was the apple tree and that actually came at the hand of man and the chainsaw. If God

wanted to keep a dinosaur alive for all those years,  
then He could certainly do it.

I have not picked apples in the light of a harvest moon since then.

And I NEVER WILL.

# THE VALUE OF TIME

*There is an old joke that surfaces occasionally about God, time, and money. It goes something like this: There was a man who was contemplating the meaning of his life when he prayed to God, "God, how long is ten million years to you?" God replied, "One second." The man sat there and thought about what God had told him and then he asked God another question, "God, how much is ten million dollars to you?" And God replied, "A penny." The man considered the implications of God's answer to that question. Then he asked God another question, "God, can I have one of your pennies?" And God replied, "Sure. It'll just be a second."*

*The following story actually happened to one of my flock here at St. John's. Although it is not at the same level of finance and time perspective as the joke above, it does have parallel truths. Jack Cober, the victim in this story, is one of the most*

*patient men I know. Of course, I have changed all other names in the story to protect the innocent.*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

A mechanical engineer by trade, Jack Cober always examined his checking account bank statement with a fine-toothed comb, so to speak. He didn't really like credit cards because he had seen so many cases of abuse by both the issuers of the card and the users. Yet, in the modern world, it was a necessity to have at least a debit card. He used it for both business and personal items, meticulously documenting and separating each receipt so there would be no question as to tax relevance.

One Saturday afternoon in May, Jack sat at his desk and began the task of opening the day's mail. Outside the birds sang, the flowers dressed in their finest array, and the children laughed and giggled in play. Jack's dogged loyalty to the duty of work and the forces of the world outside waged a battle in his head. Being a man of compromise, he

threw the obvious junk mail in a pile for opening later and focused on what looked like it might be important. The first envelope he opened appeared to be something very official from the law office of Frederick Bartholomew, Esq. They addressed the letter to Mr. Jackson Rodney Cober and began as follows:

Dear Mr. Cober:

It has come to my attention that you may have some interest in the estate of one of my late clients ...

After that professional sounding opening, the letter quickly degenerated into just another sales gimmick for time-share vacation accommodations at an unnamed Caribbean island.

The second envelope Jack opened contained his bank statement. He immediately made a complete copy of the statement and pulled the two file folders that contained his receipts for business use and his receipts for personal use. He had a receipt to match every charge on the statement, and he

reconciled the bank balance and his checkbook balance. As he was putting the statement in the filing cabinet, a single sheet fell away from the rest. When he picked it up, he saw the receipt for \$39.99 from the renewal of his computer antivirus program. He realized that he hadn't followed through with the bill. He got the serial number of his computer and checked to see if it matched what the antivirus program showed as being covered. He was glad that single sheet of paper had come loose because the numbers of his computer and the program paper didn't match. Pulling out the file that contained all the information he had on every computer he had ever owned, Jack discovered that the number on the antivirus program bill was from a computer he had six years ago.

Picking up the phone, Jack punched in the customer service number on the bill. After eight steps of pressing a number to get the right help for his particular problem, Jack finally reached a human being.

"Customer Service," said the lady. "How may I help you today?"

“Yes, I recently had my antivirus subscription renewed automatically via the internet, and I have a little problem with the bill. The serial number of the computer on the bill doesn’t match the serial number of the computer that I have.”

“Yes, sir, that does sound like a problem,” she said, light-heartedly. “May I have your customer number on the bill, sir?”

“Sure. It’s 45820865317.”

“It will take me a couple of minutes to bring your file up, sir. Can you hold on?”

“Sure,” replied Jack. “If it will help you find the problem, I’ve discovered what appears to have happened.”

“Certainly, sir,” said the lady.

“The number on the bill is from a computer I had six years ago. I retired it two years ago and bought a new one. The number on last year’s renewal is correct, so I don’t know how they came up with the old one.”

“Thank you, sir. Let me get into your account and look for that. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Okay,” said Jack.

Approximately fifteen minutes of time and twenty-four repetitions of the same commercial passed by when the lady finally came back on. “I’m very sorry for the delay, sir, but our computers are just running slow today. I found your file, and it is just like you said. I can’t explain why they picked up the old number, but it was obviously a mistake. I am making the changes to your account, and you should receive a letter in the mail acknowledging the problem and showing the corrections made. I’m very sorry for the inconvenience, but should anything happen, we will cover your new computer.”

“That was easy enough,” Jack said to himself.

But, alas, somewhere in the dark recesses of interoffice bureaucracy, the simple correction failed to take root. Two weeks later, Jack received a letter from the company that said their computer system couldn’t simply correct the contract for the service. They would have to cancel the contract

with the incorrect number and reissue a new contract. Unfortunately, such action would require them to issue a refund to his debit card and then process a new charge for the new contract. They provided a special customer service number for him to call to approve the transactions.

Jack called the number and gave his approval. He inquired as to how soon he should get his refund. It should be credited to the card number that was originally charged within 7 to 10 business days was the answer he received. One month later he had still not seen the refund, so he called the customer service number. Jack gave the representative the whole story; the lady recorded it all and gave him his third case number for reference. She said they would call him back within 7 to 10 business days. By this time, the little gray cells in your brain have deduced that Jack never received a call back and the refund had not shown up.

The story is further chronicled as follows:

January–February 2011—I received two more case numbers with my phone calls that comprised the same original conversation.

March 2011—A sixth case number accompanied my call that the operator rerouted to the back office. The customer representative told me that they had issued a refund three months ago. I sent them three months of bank statements showing that I had not received the refund.

April–May 2011—I received two more case numbers with phone calls where they said the back office was still working on the problem.

June 2011—I talked to the back office, and they said I needed to get with my bank to find out where the money was. I went to the bank, and they told me it would cost \$10.00 per month to go back and research all transactions—meaning if they go back to when the refund was supposed to have been credited, it would cost me \$60.00 to research where the \$39.99 refund was.

July 2011—I received a tenth case number from another customer service representative who took

down the whole history of the problem and said I should hear from the back office in 7 to 10 business days.

August–September 2011—Two more case numbers were issued to me during calls in which I repeated the whole story again to two other customer representatives.

September 2011—I talked to another customer representative and gave her the complete history once again. After listening to the same song on hold for fifteen minutes, I talked with the lady who came back on the line. She read back the information in the file about the refund—they credited it to Visa card ending in XXXX four months ago. I told her that I didn't have a Visa card, only a Mastercard debit card. She said her supervisor would contact me in 7 to 10 business days.

October 2011—After thirty minutes on hold listening to a recording telling me how much they value my call, I get a customer representative who listens to the story and then says she would have to get a supervisor. I informed the supervisor that the Visa

card that they credited the refund to was an old card that expired four years ago. She said she would get back to me in 7 to 10 business days.

November 2011—I talked with a supervisor and reminded her that their company policy stated that a refund could only be issued to the card that was originally charged, and they had clearly not followed company policy by refunding to a different card.

December 2011—The customer service representative I talked to gave me a sixteenth case number. After being disconnected two times, I finally got a customer service representative who told me that I needed to get with my bank to find out where the refund was. I explained how much it would cost me to do that and that I didn't feel it was my responsibility since they had made the mistake in crediting the wrong card.

January 2012 - June 2012—I received six more case numbers.

July 2012—On my twenty-third case number, customer service told me they had reissued a credit to

my debit card, but when they read off the card number, I told them that wasn't my card number. A supervisor should contact me in 7 to 10 business days.

August 2012 - December 2012—I received five more case numbers.

January 2013—A refund credit shows up on my bank statement.

As was his nature, Jack had established a file for the issue and had recorded every conversation and every case number and every person he had talked to. He never talked to the same person twice, nor did he ever receive a phone call back. Jack added up the time spent on the matter and found that the \$39.99 refund necessitated an input of his time amounting to 44 hours. But in absurdities such as this case, to try to assign the value of one's time is, well ... absurd?

*I asked Jack if he ever got mad or frustrated by the whole affair. He told me that, as a child, he remembered his mother having a similar experience and she had told him that the best way to handle it was to always be a pleasant, persistent pest. I asked him what he thought made the difference. He said “attrition”—he just wore them down. I mentioned that in theology, “attrition” usually meant repentance for sin out of fear of punishment rather for love of God. Jack just smiled.*

*Later that day, I gave some more thought to Jack’s experience and how he handled it. We’re given a limited amount of time on this earthly journey, and we should consider every minute a valuable gift from God. Sometimes we just don’t know the value of the time we put into something because we don’t always see immediate results. How do you measure the impact of Jack’s approach to all those people that he talked to? Would the value of his time have increased if he had gotten mad and really gave it to whoever he was talking to? Perhaps I should give it a try the next time I’m faced with an absurd situation. Doing some basic math, though,*

*I offer the following calculation as to the value of Jack's time: 44 hours x 60 minutes/hour x 60 seconds/minute x 10 million dollars/second (God's time value standard, considering time as a gift from God) = \$1,584,000,000,000.00. Of course, he did save \$39.99.*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*