

A MATTER OF THE HEART

2014

I was halfway done with my morning walk when I stopped briefly in front of the small church in the Park of the Palms community. This is one of many others that my little town offers to its residents. In fact, more than a dozen churches of different Christian denominations serve a population of roughly two thousand people. I'm guessing not many little towns out there offer that many choices. But this morning, as I stood there, I was wondering what God thinks of all the many churches and denominations out there. *Oh, I really wish I could meet the Preacher to discuss this with him*, I thought as I headed toward the opposite side of the retirement community.

Well, my wish came true when I saw him, all by himself, playing shuffleboard amidst the majestic oak trees that adorn this part of the Park. Happy to have found him there, I briskly walked up to him.

"Hi!" I said cheerfully. "Playing by yourself? Don't like competition, I'm guessing!"

"Oh, good morning, dear lady! Who says I don't like competition? You're too quick to judge! Quite the opposite, I always enjoy playing a good game with other people, but I also like playing by myself. This way I'm able to concentrate on improving my game!"

I quickly surveyed the area. "So, this is where you live... A retired preacher living in a Christian retirement community. It makes perfect sense!"

"The cat's out of the bag!" he said, amused.

"It sure is! Listen, do you have time to spare or should I come back later?"

"As I always say, at my age I've got all the time in the world! So, let's sit on a bench and talk."

He rested the long stick against one of the posts of the canopy that shaded the narrow and elongated court, and led me to the far end where a mild breeze carried the sweet fragrance of jasmine.

"So, what's on your mind, dear lady?" he asked as we both sat down.

"Based on our previous conversations, I know that you'd give me your honest opinion if I'd ask for one."

"Definitely!" He answered without any hesitation. "I have a feeling that you're looking for a sounding board this morning, and I'm all ears, dear lady!"

"Great! This morning as I stopped in front of the church here in this community, I was thinking of the many Christian churches out there with their different denominations, and I was wondering what God thought about that?"

This old man is never lost for words, so I expected a quick reply from him. Instead, he kept quiet for what seemed a long time, staring at God knows what in front of him... The thought that he could have been shocked by my question ran through my mind, and I was about to speak up when he finally said: "You know, dear lady, this is a good question that everybody should ask themselves. For what's more important in life than knowing what God thinks? After all, He's our Creator!"

"Listen, we're both Christians, so let me just say that the first place to look for answers is in the Word of God, the Bible. And the most insightful ones mainly come from the mouth of Jesus himself... Notwithstanding the fact that other scriptures play an important role in our spiritual growth, His teachings are the foundation of our faith. Up to and including His death on the cross, He was always a living

testimony of His Father's love and will for us. And His resurrection was not only the supreme proof of His deity; it also confirmed the Old Testament prophecies about it, and His own claims that He would be raised on the third day. In fact, apart from Christ's resurrection, we have no Savior, no salvation, and no hope of eternal life... As the apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians, our faith would be 'useless', the gospel would be altogether powerless, and our sins would remain unforgiven.

"But to come back to your question, we need to make one thing clear. The word 'church' in the Bible always refers to the corporate body of believers, not a building per se. Another important point to mention is that having read Jesus' words many times, He never mentioned anything about joining a denomination to be in good standing with God. Jesus paid a high price in giving His life for us, sinners, so we can be reconciled to a holy God. And to believe in Him as our Savior and Lord of our lives is the only criterion... Actually, the apostle Paul says it this way in the book of Ephesians, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." Of course, as the Word of God also says, the assembling of people of the same faith is in no way to be neglected mainly for our spiritual growth, to encourage and pray for each other, and to spread the Good News around us. Now, the place to do this is usually at church, but it's not specifically limited to a building either. Look at us here, in this gorgeous environment where God's nature abounds, sharing about spiritual things!

"As for the different Christian denominations, it was never God's plan for His church. But such is the imperfect, sinful nature of mankind... It is true that each denomination has a slightly different doctrine or emphasis from the others. But the point of these divisions is never Christ as Lord and Savior, but rather honest differences of opinion by godly, although imperfect, people seeking to honor God; to retain doctrinal purity according to their understanding of His Word. Now, as believers, there are certain basic doctrines that we must believe, but beyond that there's latitude on how we can serve and worship, which is the reason for denominations. Now, one more thing I'd like to emphasize here is that no matter which church we choose, the gospel of Jesus Christ should always be preached without fear. This is the basic foundation of a believer's faith. Did I answer your question, dear lady?"

"You certainly did!" And as I was about to continue our conversation, a little old lady, all skin and bone, with her back arched like a bow, came out of nowhere, sitting on a motorized wheelchair. She was wearing a flowery dress down to her ankles, her white hair was tied in a bun on top of her head, and a pair of silver frame glasses were sitting on the tip of her nose.

"Hi ye all! Fine day, ain't it?" she said as she parked under the canopy. We both greeted her, and the Preacher stood up to offer her a seat.

"Thanks, but I'll stay in my Cadillac if ye don't mind! Once I'm in, I cain't let go of it!" she said with a squeaky little laugh that sounded like a mouse wiggling its way out of a trap! "I saw ya two lovely people sittin' out here talkin' about serious matters judgin' by yer looks. And I thought ye could use the help of an ol' lady like me to liven thangs up a bit! But don't ye worry none, I tire easy and I'll be out of yer hair soon enough! If ye find me snoozin', just poke me in the arm, and I'll be on my way!" she said, with that same little laugh.

We're in for a treat! I thought as I glanced at the Preacher sitting on my right. And judging by his expression, I could tell he was thinking the same.

"So..." he started, "I presume you live around here?"

"Yup! I've been livin' here from Adam, I reckon! First, I've got me an apartment, but after a while I couldn't live by myself no more, so they finally found me a room in the assisted livin' facility out yonder," she explained, pointing with her crooked fingers at a nearby elongated beige building with a brown trim. "I'm too old for takin' care of myself and too young for dyin', I reckon... I really don't know what the good

Lord's waitin' for, I keep askin' myself. I'm ninety-one years old, ye know. I've accepted Him as my Savior and Lord when I was just a teen. I always do my best to live a life my Lord would be proud of, go to church, do whatever He asks me to, try not to badmouth anyone, help folks when I cain... So, I reckon I should be ready for the great by-and-by, don't ye think? But nope..., He's takin' His sweet time. So here I am, makin' good of the little time I've got me."

"And they let you roam around the property on your wheelchair without supervision?" I asked, surprised.

"They got no sayin' in it, honey!" she replied as she straightened herself up on her seat. "I'm still a free woman, ye know, and I'll go berserk if I cain't roam around whenever I feel like it. I've lost a couple of my bearings already, and I ain't losing what's left of them! Plus, I ain't never alone... I've got my own guardian angel to protect me. Yes sirree! That's what I keep tellin' them ladies at the facility, and they know better not to fuss with me or my angel! Now, enough babblin' about me. Tell me somethin', young man, what's with that red scarf and ponytail of yers? Ye look like a hippie comin' back from Woodstock, if ye don't mind my sayin' so! Peace...love..." she added, giggling and making a 'V' with her index and middle finger.

The Preacher and I got so hysterical that a couple of squirrels scurried around us desperately looking for a tree to hide in! I glanced at the Preacher and said, laughing: "She's a little firecracker, isn't she?"

"She certainly is!" he replied, trying to contain himself. "Well, to answer your question, I have no special reason for keeping my hair long. It's been this way since childhood; not that I didn't have it cut a few times since then! But I never thought of changing it... As for the scarf, it was given to me by my father before his death. I had tucked it away in an old trunk since I had no need for it at the time, but I found it recently when I was going through some old stuff of mine... And I've been wearing it since then every time I go outside. It keeps the sweat out of my eyes in the summer and when winter comes, I wrap it around my neck to keep me warm... I also found out that I'm very easy to spot when I wear it. Isn't that right, dear lady, sitting here on my left?" he asked as he glanced at me with a broad smile. "Seriously though, it's an heirloom given to me by the man I only had a great admiration for. And I intend to keep it as long as it survives the everyday wear and tear, which shouldn't be too long considering my age!" he said with a faint smile.

"For some reason, I like ya, young man! Ye seem to be a good man, and ain't afraid of speakin' yer mind. So, tell me somethin'... What were ye two young'ns arguin' about before I got here?" she asked with an inquisitive look on her face.

"Well, this dear lady here was asking herself a question about what God thinks of all the churches and the denominations that are out there, and she wanted my opinion on it."

"Ain't that so..." she interjected, rubbing her chin with her hand. "And what did ye tell her, if ye don't mind my askin'?"

"Well, I don't want to go into all the details, but to sum it all up, I told her to refer to the Bible. Jesus never talked about adhering to a certain kind of church or denomination to be in right standing with God. Believing in Him, and surrendering our lives to Him as our Savior and Lord were the only criteria. That's pretty much where we've left off when you got here."

"And I don't suppose you'd like pickin' my brains, or what's left of it, on the matter..." she commented, shrugging her shoulders.

"Oh, of course we'd like to know what you think about it!" I replied, as I gently put my hand on her knee. "Wouldn't we?" I asked the Preacher.

“Definitely!”

“Much obliged! But I ain’t one to beat around the bush. I always speak my peace and I may ruffle some feathers, but I don’t mean no harm by it!” she warned us. “So, like the good Book says, God don’t care one bit about none of them denominations out there, and all our good works to get to heaven, I reckon. Bein’ too big for our britches ain’t never a good thing, if ye know what I mean! Ye cain go to church all yer life, do all the good ye want, but when ye finally meet God face to face, I reckon He won’t be askin’ what church did ye go to, but what did ye do with My Son, Jesus. What God’s carin’ about is the heart... it’s what’s inside here that counts,” she said, as she put her tiny hand on her chest. “And we better be ready to tell Him that Jesus was the only One that mattered, our only ticket to heaven, and our Lord! Yes sirree!”

No doubt, this little old lady had a way with words, and I sincerely appreciated her candor in sharing about her faith and love for the Lord...

“So, Granny, have you been going to church all your life?” I asked her, apologizing for calling her this way.

“Don’t ye worry none, honey! That’s what everybody call me around here! But comin’ back to yer question... Yes, I’ve been goin’ to church all my life, I reckon. It’s been so long, I cain’t even remember *not* bein’ in church Sundays and Wednesdays... I’m one of them holy rollers myself that ain’t afraid to do a little shindig in the pews whenever I feel like it, and lift my arms up in the air to worship our good Lord! I just love bein’ around folks and makin’ some noise, if ye know what I mean... Then, we all listen to some good preachin’, pray for each other, hearten one another to keep the good faith, and then go on home all charged up for the rest of the week. Oh, there may be some fallin’-outs between some of us sometimes, but we try mendin’ fences and we move on. Let me tell ya, honey, ain’t nothin’ like that for me!”

“Well, dear ladies,” the Preacher said, “I don’t want to put a damper on our little gathering here, but it’ll be lunch time soon, so what would you think if I now close with a prayer?” And we both agreed.

His prayer was short but heartfelt. As for Granny, she started to sing an upbeat song, praising God, clapping her hands and stomping her feet. The Preacher and I joined in, and our little trio ended up having a little ‘shindig’ of our own amidst God’s beautiful nature! After our little celebration, Granny drove back to her room aboard her Cadillac, the Preacher stored away the shuffleboard equipment, and I walked back home.

Well, dear lady, I reckon you just went to church, ain’t that right? I asked myself. *I believe I just did, and I enjoyed every minute of it!* I heard myself reply. And with a grin on my face, I just kept walking...

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