

EPIPHANY

“I told Nichole we would pick her up at 8 o’clock,” said Tom. “It’s only about 5 minutes to Epiphany from her house, so that should give us time to get oriented.”

“Are you about ready, Nancy?” asked Rick.

“Just have to put my shoes on.”

“Remind me to tell you later something about Pastor Sawyer, Tom,” said Rick. “Henry actually knows him, and I’ve got a story to tell you.”

“Okay.”

“All ready,” said Nancy.

They headed out the door and drove to Nichole’s house to pick her up. Nichole stood on her front porch waiting for them.

“Gloves, Nichole?” asked Nancy. “I guess I didn’t think about that.”

“They just feel right this morning,” replied Nichole, as she winked at Tom.

“Well, here we are already,” said Rick. “Interesting structure, is it not?”

“Didn’t this used to be an old warehouse?” asked Tom.

“Yes, and that’s part of the story I’m going to tell you later,” answered Rick.

“I haven’t had a chance to talk to you since you got back from New York, Nichole,” said Nancy. “After church, I want to hear the whole story.”

As they walked towards the church, three people greeted and welcomed them in the parking lot. When they reached the front walkway, two more couples welcomed them and asked where they were from. Those two couples then called two other couples over and they greeted the visitors.

“Rick, is that you?” asked another man.

“Well, hi, Harry,” answered Rick. “I didn’t know you went to this church.”

“Yeah, we’ve been coming here for a couple of years. Rick, this is my wife, Michelle.”

“My wife, Nancy, and her sister, Nichole. And that’s Tom, an old friend and business partner.”

“Well, we’re glad you could be with us today,” said Harry.

“Harry?” whispered Nancy to Rick.

“He’s one of my suppliers,” said Rick. “Good guy.”

Before they reached the front door, numerous other people shook their hands and welcomed them. No official greeter stood at the door, but then they hardly seemed to need one. The usher at the door handed them bulletins and also welcomed them. He told them they could sit wherever they liked. When they got seated, the people behind them welcomed them and asked where they were from. The people in front of them heard them talking and turned around to greet them. Tom passed a note to Rick with the number forty-three written on it.

“Forty-three?” asked Rick, quietly. “What does that mean?”

Before Tom could answer, a couple with two children sat down at the end of their row. The father

stood up after getting the kids settled and shook Tom's hand and then Rick's. The mother greeted Nancy and Nichole. Tom passed Rick another note with forty-five written on it.

“Ah ...,” said Rick, quietly. “That's how many have greeted us so far.”

Tom gave him a thumbs up.

Pastor Sawyer walked in front of the congregation from his chair on the side and welcomed all present.

“Rejoice in another day to gather with your brothers and sisters, my friends,” said Pastor Sawyer. “Let's begin with a hymn of praise.”

After the hymn, Pastor Sawyer read from the Old Testament, Judges 3:7-12:

“And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and serving the Sith and the Asheroth. Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Jabba the Hutt ruler of Tatooine; and the people of Israel served Jabba the Hutt eight years. But when the people of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who

delivered them, Obi-Wan Kenobi. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went to war, and the Lord gave Jabba the Hutt into his hand, and his hand prevailed over Jabba the Hutt. So the land had rest forty years. Then Obi-Wan Kenobi died.

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord strengthened Emperor Darth Sidious of Naboo against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord.”

Pastor Sawyer paused and looked out at the congregation. “Does any of what I just read sound strange? Some of you may have noticed that I inserted names and places from Star Wars. Why?” Pastor Sawyer smiled and continued, “First of all, I just wanted to see if you were really listening. Second, I wanted to illustrate how difficult it can be wading through all the strange sounding names and places given in the Old Testament. For someone who knows little about Star Wars, the reading from Judges could have sounded just like the real thing. The comparison ends there, though. Star Wars has epic battles, lightsabers and blasters, classic confrontations between good and evil, ruthless

emperors, heroes and heroines, Jedi masters with wise sayings and power over the natural laws ... uh ... wait ... come to think of it, the Old Testament has epic battles, Joshua blasting down the walls of Jericho with trumpets and shouting, Aaron's rod that became a serpent, classic confrontations between good and evil all the way from Genesis to Malachi, a shepherd felling the mighty giant Goliath, Solomon and his wisdom, the strength of Samson, the miraculous parting of the waters of a sea, angels that shut the mouths of lions to keep Daniel safe ... yes, it is all in there, but it's also easy to get bogged down with all the strange names and places. It takes practice to work through those things and get to the point of the story. And you get that practice by reading what all those old prophets had to say. Hopefully, those of us who call ourselves shepherds can help to shed some light on that path occasionally, too.

Okay, so here's the real reading from Judges. 'And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and serving the Baals and the Asheroth. Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushanrishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the people of Israel

served Cushanrishathaim eight years. But when the people of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who delivered them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the Lord gave Cushanrishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushanrishathaim. So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord.'.

The passage begins with Israel doing evil and ends with Israel still doing evil. In between, though, God sent a deliverer who freed the people of Israel, albeit temporarily. And that is a mirror for us to look into today. Mankind has been doing evil in the sight of the Lord since Adam and Eve and will continue doing evil until Judgement Day. The good news is that God has sent us a deliverer, his own Son, Jesus Christ, to free us from the bondage of sin. The freedom that Christ has given us is not temporary, but permanent. It's up to us to live our

lives like that really means something every day and not just on Sunday for a couple of hours.”

The father that sat next to Tom passed him a card and a pen. The ‘get well’ card was addressed to Sam Waters and everyone in the pews ahead of them had signed it. Tom added his name and passed it to Nichole.

“Brothers and sisters, let us join in with all Christendom and profess our faith with the Apostles’ Creed. Before we do that, though, how many of you know where we got the Apostles’ Creed? ... only a few. That’s okay. The apostles wrote the Apostles’ Creed, right? ... actually, no—at least not in the exact form that you see in front of you. There is a legend that the Creed can be broken down into 12 parts, with each part having been written by one of the apostles. Most scholars do not think the legend to be true, but they do believe it is a solid statement of our Christian faith and certainly represents the teachings of the apostles at the time. The earliest historical evidence of the creed, which was also called the ‘Symbol of the Apostles’, came in the late fourth century. It has appeared in various forms since then, until this commonly used one today. So, were the apostles

standing in front of you today, I'm sure they would be reciting this creed right along with us."

After the Apostles' Creed, the hymn of the day followed. As the hymn was being sung, those in the pews passed along another card to sign addressed to Becky and Tom Smith. Becky had just had a baby boy, and the congregation offered their thoughts and prayers with the congratulatory card. Pastor Sawyer then read the Gospel for the day.

"The Gospel reading is from Matthew 22:34-40 - But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?' And he said to him, '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 these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.'"

Pastor Sawyer continued, "In the Old Testament, God gave us a simplified, condensed form of what it takes to obey and please Him, with the Ten Commandments. Here, Jesus simplifies and

condenses it further to just two commandments. This text is the basis for today's message, so I will be expounding on it in more detail with my take on the practical application of it."

In his message, Pastor Sawyer emphasized, "Loving God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind means that our relationship to God should affect every aspect of our daily lives—our family, our work, how we are entertained, politics—everything should be influenced by it. If we are doing something that fails to be influenced by our love for God, then in all probability, it will not be pleasing to Him. It is a serious charge by Christ (for His grace did not come cheap), yet a life that is pleasing to God is not a burden dragging us down. It is a life filled with the uplifting joy of being close to the Creator of everything that there is. And loving God with our entire essence naturally follows with the second great commandment of loving our neighbor. Jesus also said, 'for the tree is known by its fruit.' How will other people see your fruit?"

Something that many of us do every day is driving. How we drive our cars in traffic can be a simple witness or fruit. I met a man at a restaurant

last week from Wisconsin who had visited Epiphany last Sunday, so he recognized me. He told me about this experience with another church he and his wife had recently. They were on the road heading to church when a car came barreling up behind them with the driver honking their horn. The car then blew by them passing in a no passing zone. Tad, the man's name, said they kept catching up to the other car at every red light, but the driver floored the gas and continued their erratic driving of weaving from one lane to another. They made a left turn, as did Tad. His wife said, 'wouldn't it be funny if that car was going to the same church that we are.' Yes, the car pulled into the church parking lot with the driver frantically looking for the closest parking place to the sanctuary that they could find. The car door opened and a little old lady about 4 and a half feet tall climbed out, adjusted her flower hat, and proceeded to majestically walk into church ... A tree is known by its fruit.

How we treat the cashiers we face and how we can make or break their day with our attitude, even when they get the order wrong, is another case of loving your neighbor. From the doctor's office to the Department of Motor Vehicles, in all cases, I give you this question, do we share the joy of the

life that Christ has given us from the cross or do we give a different impression altogether?”

Pastor Sawyer gave numerous other examples of our daily witness and then closed with a quote from Lionel Blue, “The real evidence for Jesus and Christianity is in how Jesus and the Christianity based on him manifest themselves in the lives of practicing Christians.”

There was no passing of the collection plates during the service. There was a simple basket at the front of the aisle and one at the rear.

Prayers were short and to the point—for the Christians in the Middle East who were under constant threat, for our neighbor across the street, First Baptist Church, who were breaking ground on a central food pantry for the area, and for all those in the parish sick or in need (he reminded everyone to put the list on their refrigerators, pray for them every day, and send a card or make a phone call if possible).

Communion was pretty traditional. He spoke the words that Christ spoke, gave a brief statement as to what Lutherans believe, and left it at that.

Before they sang the last hymn, Pastor Sawyer stood up and said, “My friends, this last hymn, ‘Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming’ originated in Germany in the late 15th century, so it has been around for a long time. The author is unknown and there have been a number of different translations made. Most all the hymnals of mainstream Christianity include it. I’m going to read the words for you, so we can think about them before we sing them with the music.

Lo, how a Rose e’er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse’s lineage coming
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flower bright,
Amid the cold of winter
When half-gone was the night.

Isaiah ‘twas foretold it,
The Rose I have in mind:
With Mary we behold
it,
The virgin mother kind.
To show God’s love aright
She bore to men a Savior
When half-gone was the night.

This flower, whose fragrance tender
With sweetness fills the air
Dispels with glorious splendor
The darkness everywhere.
True man, yet very God.
From sin and death He saves
us
And lightens every load.

“Yes, it is ripe with symbolism—from the reference of the rose to Virgin Mary to Isaiah’s prophetic words to the reference of the lineage of Jesus from Jesse. ‘From sin and death He saves us and lightens every load’ fits well with the message of today and how loving God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind is a joy and not a burden.”

After the hymn, Pastor Sawyer made a quick announcement before the benediction.

“We didn’t have time to get this in the bulletin, so I just wanted to tell you that Tim Rogers, who served here as a vicar three years ago, has accepted the call as an associate pastor at Nativity. We will, of course, be working closely with Tim as we spread the Good News and identify the paths

we should take. We'll let you know when Tim and his lovely bride will be moving back so you can give them a hearty welcome."

When the service concluded, numerous other people came up to Tom, Rick, Nancy, and Nichole, welcomed them, and said they hoped to see them again. They finally made it up to where Pastor Sawyer was shaking hands with people.

"Well, greetings, Tom and Rick," said Pastor Sawyer. "It's good to see you under better circumstances. I'm glad you could join us today."

"Pastor, this is my wife, Nancy," said Rick. "And her sister, Nichole."

"And my fiancé," added Tom, as Nichole took off her gloves, showing the ring on her finger.

"Nichole ... why didn't you tell me sooner?" asked Nancy, as she gave her sister a big hug. "I ... I'm ... so happy for you guys ... the gloves ... clever."

"A surprise, I take it?" asked Pastor Sawyer.

"Not to me," said Rick, calmly, as Nancy still held onto her sister. "I could have told you this was

going to happen six weeks ago. Once we got Hans' approval, it became inevitable."

"Hans her father?" asked Pastor Sawyer.

"German Shepherd," answered Rick.

"I can certainly understand that," said Pastor Sawyer. "Well, congratulations, Tom and Nichole. If there is anything we can do for you, please let me know."

"Nichole and I will probably be getting in touch with you sometime in the near future," said Tom. "In the meantime, I'd like to sit down sometime and talk with you about your background and what all is happening in this church."

"We can certainly do that. Give me a call on Tuesday and we'll find a time. I try to keep a lighter schedule on Tuesdays and Thursdays for unscheduled things that come up."

"Thanks, Pastor," said Tom.

"You guys take care and come back anytime," said Pastor Sawyer.

As they walked back to the parking lot, three more couples came up to them, shook their hands,

and told them how good it was that they were with them today.

“Why did you want to talk to Pastor Sawyer about his background, Tom?” asked Nichole.

“I think he’s a fascinating guy. I’ve liked everything I’ve seen about him, and you never know, I could write a book about him.”

“Well, what did you think about the service, girls?” asked Rick.

“I liked the way he explained the scripture instead of it being, well, what sometimes seems like an obligatory or token reading,” answered Nancy. “And the same with the Apostles’ Creed and the last hymn.”

“It’s funny, because sometimes when I’m out on the road, there’s always somebody speeding and tailgating and cutting in and out of lanes,” said Nichole. “I’ve often thought, when I see them go by and they have a crucifix hanging from their mirror or a bumper sticker from some church, what do other drivers think when they see that? With Pastor Sawyer reinforcing what I’ve thought, I’m going to make sure I don’t get in a hurry and start making moves that aren’t a good witness to what Jesus

meant about loving your neighbor, even if it is just in your car on the highway.”

“I hear you, Nichole,” commented Rick. “That does strike home sometimes.”

They arrived back at their car and when everybody had gotten in, Tom handed Rick a note with seventy-seven on it.

“The final total on how many people welcomed us?” asked Rick.

“Yeah,” replied Tom. “Do you know when I started going to the church back down south, and it was a big church with a big school, that I attended almost every service for eight months and not one person ever greeted me like those people did today. Oh, sure, the official greeter at the door shook my hand, but never asked who I was or where I was from. Then, of course, you had the official time during the service when the pastor told you to greet your neighbors around you ... Oh, I take that back. One person did come up and greet me and ask where I was from, but the funny part was, he was a visitor from Minnesota.”

“Okay, so where are we going for lunch?” asked Nancy.

“I know a great little ...” said Rick, before being interrupted.

“Don’t you dare say a great little pizza place,” demanded Nancy.

“Why the thought never entered my mind, dear,” replied Rick. “What I was going to say is, I know a great little steakhouse at the other end of town.”

“Okay, Rick,” said his wife. “That will work. We’ve got celebrating to do and you are going to pay for it all, honey.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” answered Rick. He then turned to Tom and Nichole and whispered, “Okay, you guys are potential investors, and this is a business lunch to try to convince you to ...”

“I heard that, Rick,” said Nancy.

“Just kidding, Nance.”