

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