

# 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.