

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'.