

THE PARACHUTE

Delbert Gomes is a member of our parish here in Cedar Crossing. He recently returned from a trip out west to visit his brother; who's 94 years old. On his way back, he decided to stop at a Lutheran church he had passed on the way out. Fortunately, he got there just before the service started. He told me of his experience and what it reminded him of from his time in the military.

Pastor Arnie

“It was kind of interesting, Pastor,” said Delbert. “The church building looked to be about the same size as ours, but maybe thirty or forty years older. Now I am old. There is little question about that, but I would say I was probably the youngest person there. Some of the people were friendly enough, but many just looked tired. By the time the service started, many pews sat empty. I just had a feeling that the people making up the congregation had been coming there for 40 or 50 years. I saw no

one other than myself who even remotely looked like a visitor.

The liturgy pretty much followed the one from the old blue hymnal. Of course, most of those in the pews didn't bother to follow along with anything printed. They had probably been hearing and reciting it all their lives. All the ingredients were there—an opening hymn; readings from the Old & New Testament; Apostle's Creed; confession; absolution; Gospel reading; sermon; prayers; communion; and so on.

The sermon carried a fine message. I'm sure it met all the parameters established by the higher ups, if you know what I mean. There are no more important words to speak than those that proclaim that Christ has died for our sins. He saved our spirits from certain death. I have known that for what, over fifty years and I am comfortable with it, so to speak. It is certainly something safe to preach on. When I walked out of that church, I had the feeling, 'okay, it was a nice conservative service, nothing controversial'. As I drove away, though, I had a gnawing feeling that it was like preaching to the choir. I don't mean this as a criticism, but if all those people had been going there all their lives,

shouldn't they have gotten the point about Christ by now? If they were living every aspect of their lives as followers of Christ, did they need the constant reminder about it? Again, I don't mean to sound like I know better than them or the pastor. Whatever it takes to keep people close to God and following Christ is what's important. But it did kind of remind me of something that happened to me in the war."

"What's that, Delbert?" I asked.

"I was an Air Force pilot in the Vietnam War. Did I ever tell you that, Pastor?"

"No, I had no idea, Delbert," I answered. "You've never talked about it."

"Anyway, they shot us down near the coast. Fortunately, a Navy Seal team was nearby, and they rescued us quickly. Most of my crew were pretty banged up, but all were alive. I had some pretty severe injuries that kept me in the hospital for nearly six months. In severe pain, they kept me on morphine for a long time. I'm just glad I didn't become addicted to it, but I had some weird hallucinations and dream-like periods. There was one

recurring dream that I can still remember to this day.

I had taken some shrapnel and was pretty dazed when I bailed out. I can remember pulling the cord in my mind over and over. My chute opened cleanly, and it seemed like I was floating down to earth forever. Then I eventually hit the ground and the next thing I remember guys were loading me on a stretcher. I remember asking if the other guys were okay and then I blacked out.

When I woke up, instead of being in a hospital, I was back in a pilot training class. The way they set the room up with the chairs and the lectern on a little rise, it reminded me a little of church. When the commander walked to the lectern, we all stood up and saluted. Then the commander pulled out the Air Force Training Manual and read various sections from it. When he finished reading, he closed the manual and sat down. We kind of looked around at each other and waited for some explanation of what he had read, but it never came. Then we recited our pledge as pilots and patriots of the USA. Then an instructor came out and began giving us instructions on how to operate a parachute. He spent a long time going over every detail of its

construction and use. When he finished, the commander dismissed us, and we headed back to our barracks. This happened over and over every day. The commander would read different sections from the manual, and the same instructor would give us everything we needed to know about the parachute. Then he would dismiss us, and we would head back to our barracks.”

“That’s fascinating, Delbert,” I said. “I’ve never been on morphine, so I can’t relate to the hallucinations, but I’m sure we could tie some of it to the parachute saving your life for real.”

“That’s what I’ve always figured, something subconscious,” said Delbert. “Sometimes I felt like I was falling through the air. The nurses said I would always reach up with my hands and say, ‘I’ve got to pull the cord’. But it gets weirder. Like I said, the scene from the training class seemed to be on replay over and over. Then the commander finally came out and congratulated us. We had been officially certified as pilots. He dismissed us and we went back to our barracks awaiting our orders. The orders finally came, and we reported to the airplane hangars. Looking at the line of planes, we stood there perplexed. We had learned everything

anyone would ever want or need to know about the parachute. They reminded us every day of how it could save our lives. But the whole time we were in pilot's school, nobody ever taught us how to fly a plane. We tried to tell everybody we could that nobody had taught us how to fly the airplane. The response was always the same—we were on our own every day in the cockpit. The most important thing was that we knew about the parachute. That's how every hallucination or dream ended every time."

"Hmm ... so you think we get that way in the church sometimes?"

"Not so much with you at St. John," replied Delbert. "But I have been in a lot of churches, such as the one I visited and told you about, where I think that to be the case."

"Okay, let me make sure I understand the analogy. The commander reading out of the manual without offering an explanation is like when the scripture is read without an explanation. The robotic pledge as pilots and patriots is like our reciting of the creeds and the responses and the confessions. The instructor talking only about the

parachute over and over again is like the sermons that focus on telling us that Christ is our salvation when we need to call upon him, but never get around to telling how to apply it to life every day; that we're kind of on our own to figure it out."

"That's pretty much it, Pastor," said Delbert. "I know it was all the morphine talking to me, but that one has stuck with me. Am I wrong about the comparison?"

"Complicated answer ... I think your parachute story has some valid parallels with the church today. You must remember that you're dealing with human beings, including members and pastors. Everyone is different in their approach. To continue with the analogy, it's like every pilot has to do some things the same to keep the plane in the air because of protocol and basic physics. Yet each pilot has their own way of doing other things. Pastors are the same ... take that apparently dying church you visited, it's a little bit like the old chicken and egg question of which came first. Is the church dying because the pastor's way of doing things is rigid, robotic, or ritualistic, causing the young to flee ... or did the pastor become that way because an aging church wants him to be that way?

I remember my vicarage as a young man. I was still learning, and I didn't have a lot of experience in the real world. So, when it came time to give a sermon, I usually stayed with a safe subject as far as what I thought the congregation might accept and that was, of course, something they heard all the time—Christ died for our sins. Youthful inexperience, despite all the schooling, kept me from trying to tell all those older members how to apply that to their lives when they left the building. Then I graduated and took that first call. I was fortunate to serve with a senior pastor who taught me a lot. A couple of years later, I got married, and we came to St. John. Then we started a family, and I am experiencing a whole other area of life. My first year here, I still had the tendency to play it safe, so to speak, with my sermons. It wasn't until I had really gotten to know the people that I realized they wanted something more than the safe sermon. So, as you know, we started to do things in a little different way, such as explaining the readings, trying to make the creeds and responses come alive, and focusing on practical application of what's given in the sermon. Of course, we still give regular reminders on the parachute, if you will, but ... the people

of St. John are unique in many ways. Their ancestry, for the most part, is that of hearty pioneer folk, which you know. Family units are very strong, and the kids grow up without any questions as to right or wrong. I've come to know that the people here would rather I give it to them straight and not dance around the subject. In some ways, it is a little easier for me because I'm leading a fairly homogeneous group of people demographically, politically, and vocationally. And like I said, once I really got to know the people, I found it easier to put something into a sermon that I knew they could take home and put to use every day because I have a pretty good idea of what their 'everyday' is."

"I can understand that, Pastor," said Delbert.

"I've got a friend who pastors a large, diverse congregation in a large city, and he sometimes tells a little different story about sermons. It's a highly polarized political atmosphere among his people. He has to be careful about what he says, because what might make sense to a conservative Republican banker might offend a liberal Democrat attorney or vice versa, yet God has given a parachute to both. He and I have talked about it a lot, and we agree that we must always give the truth. My friend

has learned to frame that truth with the strongest, most clear aspects of God's moral law. He admits, though, if I may continue your comparison, that he always steers his vicars towards emphasizing the parachute and not flying the plane."

"Here, I've got something for you," said Delbert. "It's a little piece of my parachute. I broke my leg when I hit the ground, so the Seal medic cut some of my parachute into strips to use with the splint. I'd like you to have it."

"Well, thank you, Delbert. It takes on a greater meaning since I know your story."

"I guess, in the end, Pastor," remarked Delbert. "If we're serious about following Christ with our whole life, then we need to know how to fly the plane and be grateful we have a parachute."

"Couldn't have said it better myself," I answered. "I tell you what I'd like to do, Delbert. I want to put this piece of parachute in a frame and put it on my desk where I usually write my sermons. It should remind me to always remind those in the pews to always wear their parachute when they're flying their plane. And, if you don't mind,

I'd like to share your story with some of my pastor friends when the occasion seems to fit."

"I don't mind at all," said Delbert.

"I'm going to drop your brother a line tomorrow. Please let me know if anything changes with him, will you?"

"Thanks, Pastor. I will do that."