

## The Autobiography of an Old Church Pew

(adapted from a story by W.R. Evans)

Sanctity of Life Sunday – 01/23/22

Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church – Pastor Keith Besel

**The Family** - John and Mary; Margaret, Bill, Betty, and Charlie.

### **The Story (Part 1)**

- ✘ I am an old church pew, just an ordinary pew; not unlike the pew that you are sitting in right now. Like your church, mine is made up of ordinary, everyday people – people just like you.
- ✘ One of the pleasures of a long and full life is the ability to think back over one's experiences and then tell the stories of those people we have known.
- ➔ I think you'll be interested in hearing my story, because you see, it could be about you or someone that you love.
- ✘ I came from a great oak tree that stood with a lot of others on a rounded hill in northern Minnesota. From the top of our hill we could look down on a small lake hemmed in on all sides by a forest, stretching in every direction as far as a tree could see. Standing in the middle of that scene, through the changing seasons, one can't help but feel the presence of God?
- ✘ Since the very beginning, my family has always offered our service to others. It was for that reason in fact that God made us and placed us here on earth.
- ➔ Our shade furnished a resting place for weary travelers. Our branches have always sheltered the nesting birds, and the beauty and wealth of our colored leaves are a pleasure for the eyes of all who would come and look our way.
- ✘ We were used to visitors – families with picnic baskets, campers with tents, hunters with guns, hikers out to fill their lungs with the smell of the forest, and children picking flowers, shouting at each other, laughing, and trying to whistle like the birds. Oh, this world in which God planted me sure is a wonderful, beautiful world.
- ✘ One day some men came to our forest. They were carrying some strange implements - tools that we had never seen before. Their actions, when they came to our grove, made it seem like they found just what they were looking for. They said that we would make excellent lumber – whatever that is. I was one of the trees that they cut down, trimmed and hauled away.
- ➔ I soon found myself inside a great big wood shop. I admit, the strange surroundings made me a bit uneasy. But the smell of newly sawn wood was exhilarating. Moreover, according to my inherited desire to serve, I was willing to submit to any use they might intend. Sometimes the treatment seemed almost unbearable, but I trusted that it was necessary to prepare me for the service I would give. And so, I humbly endured the cutting and pressure that led to my new life.
- ✘ After many days, someone came to the place where I was and they labeled me as a church pew now. I wondered what new adventure lay before me. Then I was carried to a very beautiful place – a place with an atmosphere of peace and serenity. As I looked around this church, this sanctuary, this House of Worship, I saw many other friends, just like me.
- ➔ Soon I found that I was to serve as a "family pew". The hush of that first night in my silent, new home reminded me of midnight out on the hill in the forest. Surely the same God that cared for me and grew me there, must be present here as well.

**Hymn:** #907 (vv. 1,3) - "*God Himself Is Present*"

### **The Story (Part 2)**

- ✘ Morning came. The sun, rising higher and higher in the sky sent the colors of the window creeping along the aisle of the church. Suddenly I heard the ringing of a bell. It was like the bell from the village church out in the woods, which had called generations of people to worship God. I realized then, this must be the day of worship. People were coming to church.
- ➔ And as they came, there was a happy, excited air as they showed great pleasure at the sight of my new friends and me in their church. As the organ started its beautiful music, a pretty young woman named Mary chose me as her place to sit. I was so excited to begin my service to the Lord on that first Sunday.
- ➔ A young man by the name of John also came to sit in me. The young woman seemed as pleased as I was about his presence. They were both very pleased with me ... or else they were pleased with each other. They smiled a lot during that worship service. They happily sang the hymns while they shared a hymnal. I heard a murmured prayer of thanksgiving for the beauty of love that comes from the heart of God and into the hearts of young people – teaching them to love one another.
- ✘ Each Sunday these two young people came and sat close together. There seemed to be an increasing joy in our company. I hoped that we could go on like that forever. However, one evening something different was happening in our church. All the candles were lit. The organ played, but John and Mary did not come! Some strangers came and sat on me instead. Although I was glad to be accommodating, I was worried about John and Mary.
- ➔ And then I saw Mary coming down the aisle wearing a beautiful white dress. She was so lovely that evening as she approached my row. But she passed me right by. She kept on walking all the way to the front of the church. I looked up front and saw John there with some others – waiting for her.
- ➔ The pastor spoke about making promises to love and care for one another, until only death would part them. He said that it was God who was joining them together and he prayed for John and Mary. And as the organ played again, they hurried down the aisle, passing me by once more without even a glance.
- ✘ On the next Sunday, and for many, many Sundays after that, John and Mary sat upon me, close together. The sermons that they heard there in church opened their hearts and minds to God's love for them in Jesus Christ. The Scripture readings pointed to the forgiveness of sins and a life that would come, even to sinful mankind. Sunday after Sunday, John and Mary's lives were enriched as they worshipped their Savior Jesus and grew closer and closer together in their bond with Him and with each other.

**Hymn: # 649 (vv. 1,2) – “Blest Be the Tie That Binds”**

**The Story (Part 3)**

- ✘ Then one Sunday, John came to church alone. I was worried, but John didn't seem to be, though it seemed like his face was a little more serious. He prayed and listened and worshipped with a little more earnestness than usual.
- ➔ When Mary came back the next week, she was carrying a, fluffy pink and white bundle that made all kinds of strange noises. John and Mary only looked at each other and smiled. One more week went by and John and Mary and some of their friends carried that bundle up to the front of the church, standing by the baptismal font.
- ✘ When the pastor said, *'Margaret Louise, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,'* I knew then that the bundle was a baby. I hoped that she would come to me every Sunday in spite of all those funny noises.

- ✘ It seemed like an incredibly short period of time before there were six occupants for me to take care of each Sunday - John and Mary and four little ones sitting between them. There was Margaret and Bill and Betty and little Charlie. Sometimes they kicked and scratched me. I was so proud of them though that now I only remember the joys of those years.
- ✘ Each Sunday they came and learned the wonderful message of Jesus Christ. The pastor used God's word to warn them of how the Devil would tempt them to sin and assault them with lies. They learned from God's Word of the need to stand steady in their Christian faith.
- ➔ Their parents remained patient yet persistent as they taught those children how to worship their Lord. But most of all, as they sat and crawled and stood upon me, they received the forgiving love of their Savior Jesus and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.
- ✘ Week by week I rejoiced in the life God had given them. I saw them grow in His grace and one by one, they stood before the altar on Confirmation Sunday. Oh, that was always a special day where they openly professed their faith in Christ Jesus, and received for the first of many times, the Body and Blood of their Savior for the forgiveness of their sins.

**Hymn: #637 (vv. 1,2) - "Draw Near and Take The Body of the Lord"**

**The Story (Part 4)**

- ✘ The years flew by. One morning I heard Margaret whisper to another young woman that she was going to be married. Then, before I knew it, she was absent from her normal place.
- ➔ Soon Bill and Betty went away to college. I only saw them on the holidays. The sweet, baby face of little Charlie turned into the fine, handsome features of a young man. And it wasn't long before even he went away to the big city to work. How strange it was ... and quiet for me then.
- ✘ Yet John and Mary still sat side by side, sharing the same hymnal as they did that first day. Their prayers were more earnest now, for the years of life had brought them many experiences – experiences through which God had broadened and deepened their faith. Through those many years Jesus was always their rock and their friend. The years; the ups and downs taught them to take everything to the Lord in prayer.
- ✘ One day, Mary came to church alone. She was dressed in dark colors. As she prayed, with many tears streaming down her face, I knew that John would not be coming again. It hurt me so as this devout woman poured out her grief to God and confided in Him the loneliness of her heart.
- ➔ Yet even in her husband's death I could see within her a faith and a life that gave her the very peace of God – the peace which surpasses all understanding. Though she was weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care – in this House of God; in His word and sacrament and the prayers that were said she received the assurance of Christ's tender and eternal, love.

**Hymn: #770 – "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"**

**The Story (Part 5)**

- ✘ And then, even Mary didn't come. As I looked for her with all my might, only strangers came to occupy me and listen and worship. One rainy Sunday morning there came another woman who reminded me so much of Mary with all her sweetness and her charm. Something about this lady's quiet, thoughtful way made me realize that she was in deep sorrow – sorrow that was breaking her heart with a pain that radiated up to her face.

- ➔ Eventually I realized, this was my Margaret, the little girl who had been so young and so happy. She had grown prematurely old with the hardship of the years. Something in the prayer that she breathed as the pastor offered the morning prayers revealed the cause of her pain. God had given her a woman's most precious gift – a little child – only to take it back to His heart again in His loving wisdom.
- ✘ Now broken, she had returned to the old family pew seeking consolation in its purest form, from the Word of God. I felt that it surely had been the hand of God reaching out to Margaret as the pastor read the words of Jesus in the Scripture lesson that morning; saying, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live"* (Joh 11:25). As Margaret heard that familiar text again, she remembered and she believed.
- ➔ Renewed by God's loving word, she once again placed her trust in Jesus alone.

**Hymn: #729 (vv.1,4,6) - 'I Am Trusting You, Lord Jesus'**

**The Story (Part 6)**

- ✘ The benediction was pronounced as the service ended. Margaret and her husband rose and went out to face what had been a lonely world when they first came in. But now, they were no longer facing it alone. Now they walked in the everlasting presence of their Lord.
- ➔ Oh, my grains were filled with joy because I knew that the love of Jesus was a very important part of Margaret's life once again.
- ✘ The days turned into months and the months into years. Other families came to sit in me and grow up worshipping the Lord. But sadly, none of them were as faithful as that first family.
- ✘ One Sunday, I realized it was Easter again. The sun was streaming in with the colors of the stained glass windows. Though the church was filled with a large crowd of people, I remained empty. A few folks tried to sit in me, but the ushers for some reason, excused me from service that morning. They whispered something about having been reserved by someone else. They kept saying it was "for memory's sake".
- ➔ So I was pleased when a well-dressed man and very fashionably dressed woman finally came and sat in me. They had two children, but I could tell from their restlessness that they were not accustomed to sitting in a church pew.
- ➔ Yet I remained patient with them, knowing that the only way for them to learn about worshipping the Lord is from experience itself. Something seemed slightly familiar about the man. Gradually I recognized the features of my long-lost Bill. How successful he looked. Apparently he had been well favored by the World's goods. His wife was a pretty woman, a trifle vain I thought, but she showed every mark of culture and wealth.
- ✘ Yet I could not escape the hardness in the look on Bill's face. I wondered if he had been as faithful in his prayer life and his church attendance as his mother had taught him to be; as he had promised God he would be at his confirmation.
- ➔ The sermon that morning was about the Rich Young Ruler who could not find happiness in his life through his wealth and his high position. These words seemed to have a heavy impact on Bill and his wife.
- ➔ It was, through the word of God, that the pastor taught them that true happiness in life comes only as a gift from God – that a selfish life brings only death. Yet the pastor shared good news as well, that by grace through faith in Jesus Christ true joy awaits every human life that God has created.

- ✘ There, in the middle of that sermon a tear formed in Bill's eye. During the closing prayer he put aside his dignity and bowed down in prayer, just as his father used to do. I heard a sob and a whispered prayer to God asking for forgiveness from his careless ways and proclaiming the faith that his father had taught him as his faith once again from that moment on.
- ➔ Watching the wealth and ability of a magnificent man like Bill being consecrated to God, I knew my service as a family pew had all been worthwhile.
- ✘ Many months later, there dawned another Sunday morning. The sun was shining. The birds were singing. Again, the colors crept along the aisle as they had thousands of times before. But this morning was to be different from the others.
- ➔ An elaborately dressed young woman came to sit in me. At first, she seemed uncomfortable as she sat very stiffly with her eyes focused on the altar. It was my Betty, grown hard and sophisticated with the experience of many years. I was distinctly disappointed in her, for she obviously was so removed from the love of God that her mother had prayed would always be hers.
- ➔ It was plainly evident that she too was disappointed with her life. She missed the love that had been proclaimed to her in my presence many years before. But now she had come back – not back to me, but back to God. It appeared this was her last resort, though it once had been her first. Yet now she was back.
- ✘ The pastor announced and then read the text for the day – 1John 5:4-5. “For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”
- ➔ Betty listened, half to the pastor and half to the voice of her mother that she remembered in her head. She whispered under her breath, "Faith? Was my mother's faith better than my education, my culture, my social position, or my charitable works? Is it by faith that she had the love and peace that was so evident to all of us?"
- ✘ The sermon finished; the organ was playing now and the people passed quickly out of the sanctuary, greeting each other. But Betty did not stir. In the silence that followed, I felt the presence of John and Mary sitting on each side of Betty. I think she felt it too. She slipped to her knees crying in a flood of tears. She whispered a song – a song that she had sung with her parents so long ago.

**Hymn: #570 (vv. 1,3,5) – “Just As I Am”**

### **The Story (Part 7)**

- ✘ Then Betty rose and walked out of church with an obvious relief and radiance on her face. I knew that it was because she had found a renewed understanding of her life; of how much Jesus still loved her ... and always had. As the pastor had proclaimed it, Jesus is the one that came into the world that we might have life, and “have it abundantly” (John 10:10).
- ✘ Yet I was still sad. For Charlie didn't come. I longed for his handsome face. I wondered what had become of him. I was an old church pew now – out of style; scratched and stained, still sturdy but maybe with a little bit of wobble now. There was talk about getting some new pews, but if that happened, I might never know about Charlie.
- ✘ One cold winter afternoon, as the sun settled behind a bank of dark clouds, and the weather was very gloomy, I heard the train pull away from the elevator. And then ... footsteps shuffling down the aisle. They made such an unusual sound in this holy place.

- ➔ I felt a strange foreboding as a ragged, dirty tramp came into the sanctuary. It had happened before, but I still wanted to shrink away from him. Usually these men only came to sleep, not to worship. I hoped that he would choose some other pew to sleep in. Yet he came straight toward me, counting the rows as he came.
- ➔ He paused at my entrance. But he did not lie down; instead, he knelt down beside me. As he drew closer I recognized him even in the gathering darkness. It was the handsome face of my Charlie! But, oh, how he had changed. He was not a bright, mischievous boy anymore. He was not a clean-cut youth. He was a broken man. It was a sorry tale of a wasted life that he poured out from His very heart, confessing his many sins to the one true, Triune God. A torrent of tears flooded upon me as he broke down in sorrow.
- ➔ Then he stood up. There was a certainty in his step as he walked out into the darkness again. I knew that whatever his sins had been, he was now a forgiven man. By the amazing and forgiving grace of Jesus Christ, the grace which God has poured out to all the lost, Charlie walked away from the church in his father's faith, in the one true Christian faith forever more.

### **Hymn: #744 (vv. 1,2) – “Amazing Grace”**

#### **The Story (Part 8)**

- ✘ I was old before, but now I'm a very old church pew. They say that I have a certain comfort about me – not the comfort of a lounge chair, but that comfort which is far more needed, the comfort of prayers offered and answered for troubled hearts.
- ➔ I am content to have spent my life as a pew because I feel that I have been of more service to God and His people than if I had been made into an opera chair or a library table.
- ✘ Friends, there are some things that I have learned about life from my time in the church – things I'd like to pass on to you now if you'll allow it.
- ✘ I know that it was God's love that made the love that John and Mary had for each other so strong. Theirs was a love far sweeter and deeper than anything a human heart could ever produce. I know that God is the one to credit for John and Mary's faithfulness, as He used it to nurture and grow His faith within their children too; a faith that eventually brought them back to God in the time of their trials and temptations. I know without a doubt that it is through faithful worship and the power of God's Word that He keeps His people close to Him and to each other.
- ✘ I've also learned that in the worship life of every congregation there must always remain a place for every human life!
- ➔ For there is no one – unborn, disabled, elderly, diseased, rich, poor, and especially sinner (which includes all of us) that is unimportant to God; that He does not want in His family.
- ➔ I've heard John 3:16 so often, yet I'll never grow weary of it. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life". It is faith in that Savior that makes every person's life so precious, so full of joy and peace – both now and into eternity.
- ✘ My friends, as you look with excitement to your future in God's family and His church; to a new year; to whatever God may bring your way, remember always, that Life – all life, earthly, spiritual and eternal life comes from God. And the truly precious life, the life of faith, is a gift from the Lord that lasts forever! Amen.

### **Hymn: – “Precious Life Comes from Thee”**