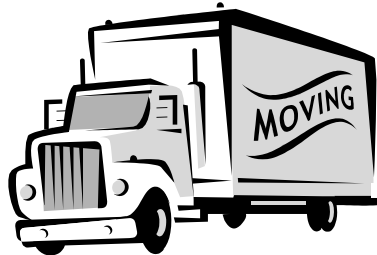


T H E
M O S S Y
C R E E K
C H R O N I C L E S



Rev. Dr. Steven L. Frazier

CHAPTER TWENTY



Settle Down...

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Luke 17:11-19

You might not know this, but it's true: Pastors who take a new call have their hands full. First off, they don't know anybody. Then they don't know their way around town. And there isn't a whole lot of time to figure those things out. The world is going 100 mph, and the new pastor is putting along at 40. There's no easy way of putting this: You've got to get going and do it in short order. People are counting on you.

That is why Pastor Marianne made a point of stopping in to see the new pastor at Mossy Creek Lutheran Church. The church secretary, Emmy Lou was a member of Our Savior Presbyterian Church, one of Pastor Marianne's flock.

So it wouldn't be too hard getting in to see the new pastor. And it probably wouldn't take much time either. Pastor Marianne just wanted to say "hello" and be a friend to someone who probably felt like he was bear huntin' with a switch.

When she walked in the church office, Emmy Lou smiled and asked, "What brings you to our corner of the kingdom this mornin'?" Pastor Marianne chuckled and said, "I thought I'd stop in and meet the new pastor." Emmy Lou said, "Hang on just a second while I find out if he has time to visit." While Pastor Marianne was waiting she thought, "If he has time to visit... Wow, that's a big change around here." When Emmy Lou came back, she said, "He'll be out in a minute." It was almost like she was reading Pastor Marianne's mind when she whispered, "He likes to be called Rev. Backstrom. He's way more formal than Pastor Mark was."

A couple of minutes later, the new pastor strode into the office and introduced himself. "Good morning. I'm Jacob Backstrom. Thank you for stopping in." Pastor Marianne smiled and introduced herself and said, "I'm sure you're busy, but I thought I might take you out to lunch one day this week. When would be a good day?"

Well, sir, in Mossy Creek you just don't turn down an invitation to lunch. But he sure did. Heck, it didn't look like he even gave it a second thought. Pastor Mark had kept office hours, but his schedule was a "might could" list of emerging possibilities. Pastor Marianne was getting the impression that Rev. Backstrom did things by the book. He was playing by his own rules, rules in a chapter he had written himself.

Pastor Marianne smiled and said, “Well, let me know if there’s anything I can do to help you out.” Rev. Backstrom said, “I will. Do you have a business card I can have?” She handed him one, and he tucked it into his jacket pocket. Then he said, “I’m looking forward to working with you from time to time.” And with that, he turned around and headed back to his office. Emmy Lou just rolled her eyes.

One evening a week later, Pastor Marianne bumped into Rev. Backstrom at the Piggly Wiggly. She was tired. And he sounded aggravated when he said, “This is some grocery store, isn’t it?” Pastor Marianne chuckled and said, “Yes, it is. It’s like a lot of things in Mossy Creek—it kind of grows on you.” That is Pastor Marianne for you. She is always playing with words and looking for the best in everything and everybody. That is just the way she is.

But her comment went over Rev. Backstrom’s head. He just nodded his head at the produce section and said, “Collards. Okra.” Then he asked, “Do people actually eat that stuff?” Over the next few minutes Pastor Marianne found out just how much he liked good restaurants and just how much he hated the fact that Mossy Creek didn’t have a single one. Turns out, he didn’t like cooking either. And he missed Minneapolis. His transition to Mossy Creek was a work in progress. It wasn’t growing on him.

Pastor Marianne asked, “Why don’t you join me for supper at Melvin’s in a half hour? I like it. Let me get finished here and drop everything off at the house, and I’ll meet you there.” He looked doubtful but agreed. Maybe it was because he was tired. Maybe it was because he was hungry. Or maybe he was near the

end of his rope and he didn't know what else to do. When Pastor Marianne left, he was still looking for something he could cook and would eat.

A half hour later Pastor Marianne slipped into a booth at Melvin's and struck up a conversation with Andrea as she waited tables and kept the counter wiped down. A few minutes later Rev. Backstrom showed up in dress pants and a collar. He sat down and looked around the booth. If he was looking for a menu, he wasn't going to find one. There is no such thing at Melvin's, just a blackboard with the things Melvin is serving that day. He makes everything fresh. He also makes the things his customers love to eat and the things he likes to cook.

Andrea asked, "What'll you have? The soup's good tonight." Pastor Marianne didn't even give it a second thought. She said, "Sounds good. I'll have that and some sweet tea." Rev. Backstrom looked doubtful but ordered the soup after Andrea finally assured him there was no okra in it. After that he asked her for a glass of water with a slice of lime and ended up settling for lemon.

While they waited for Andrea to get their order, Pastor Marianne asked him how things were going. He took a sip of water and replied, "OK, all things considered. I've discovered I don't have most of what I need. This is going to take some doing." Heads turned, but he never noticed. Before he could say another word, Pastor Marianne whispered, "Settle down! You don't want people to hear you talking like that." Rev. Backstrom frowned and said something under his breath. Pastor Marianne didn't hear what he mumbled, but she was pretty sure she heard the word "backwater."

Over the next hour Pastor Marianne finally found out what was eating at Rev. Backstrom. He had asked his bishop for a new call so he could be near his parents who were both in declining health. He had expected to be placed in a large church with staff just like the one he left in Minneapolis. No such luck. Now he felt stuck. As far as he was concerned, he was overqualified for his call. If there was anything good about Mossy Creek or his congregation, he hadn't found it yet. And that is when it came to Pastor Marianne. Jacob Backstrom was a man who thought he was in exile and had few if any prospects of ever getting out of a place he really disliked.

She also realized she was looking at a man who was going to do his best to turn a small town Lutheran church into the spitting image of the much larger church he had left behind, a project that was doomed to failure. But there was one thing he might do: He might succeed in getting a lot of people riled up and getting himself run out of town. She said, "I can see you're frustrated. I wonder if I could make a suggestion. People here love their pastors, they really do. Why not start out by loving them back? Love your church for what it is and enjoy making some new friends. This is a great place, and there are lots of things you could do that would help your congregation and Mossy Creek."

He scowled and asked "What exactly am I supposed to do? Start a soup kitchen for the homeless? Well, there aren't any. Or should I preach sermons on social justice? People here think the world begins and ends at the edge of town." He was getting madder by the minute. And so was Pastor Marianne. But she coolly replied, "You're right. We don't have a problem with homelessness."

That's because families are so strong here. They look after their own. But we do have a problem with rural hunger. It's really hard on the kids. A ministry that addressed that problem would be valuable. The people in Mossy Creek are good-hearted people. And they want to help. They just need someone to point them in the right direction."

He glared at her and asked, "Rural hunger? How on earth do you fix that?" Pastor Marianne replied evenly, "You might ask your congregation to collect non-perishable food, bag it, and deliver it to homes out in the county. Or you could start a program in the schools that sends kids home with food for the weekend. Social services will give you a list of families who need that kind of help. Trust me, that will keep you busy for a while."

She paused and then said, "You'll pardon for me saying so, and this will probably sound a little old fashioned, but it sounds like you think Mossy Creek is godforsaken. You know as well as I do that the church settled the issue of where God is and is not a long time ago. When the people of Jerusalem and Judah were in exile, Jerusalem was in ruins. The temple was destroyed. They wanted to know where on earth God was. It took a while, but they finally figured out God was with them right where they were. He had been there all along. Imagine—God had gone with them into exile."

Rev. Backstrom replied sarcastically, "Thanks for the lesson in the Old Testament." He slid his water glass in circles and looked at the trail of water it left behind. "I asked for a change in my call, but I didn't sign up for this. I guess I'm just going to have to make the best of it. I mean, what else can I do? This

place is just so different. I swear, sometimes I feel like I need a passport to live here.”

Pastor Marianne said, “You only need a passport if you’re going to be a visitor. Think about what Jeremiah told the exiles in Babylon. ‘Build homes and plan to stay. Plant gardens. Go ahead and marry. Have children. And work for the peace and prosperity of Babylon. Pray to the Lord for that city where you are held. If it has peace, you will, too.’ That’s not bad advice. Whether it feels like it or not, God is right here with you. And He is certainly with the people you’re pastoring. Just settle down. Then do what you love and love what you do. I think you’ll be amazed at what a difference that will make.”

He laughed and said, “I swear, you Presbyterians think being faithful means being miserable.” Pastor Marianne coolly replied, “I don’t know about that. But I do know what Luther has to say about a situation like yours. He said Jeremiah’s advice to the exiles in Babylon anticipated Jesus’ command to love the people you don’t like, the people you wouldn’t choose to live with. I get it—you didn’t choose your church or this community. But trust me, God chose to send you here to be your congregation’s pastor. He sent you here to work for the good of this community. And He came with you. God didn’t stay behind in Minneapolis. Luther is right about what Jeremiah said. Think about it. We’re supposed to love our neighbors no matter who they are, where they live, or where they come from.” She paused and then said, “Or where we come from.”

Rev. Backstrom replied, “Presbyterians say God is the author of history. Do you think God is writing this chapter in my life for me? Do you really think it is

God's will for me to be here and be miserable?" Pastor Marianne quickly answered, "I think God is the playwright of history and gives us parts to play. But you're right; He is also our director. God gives us our directions in the Bible and our prayers. Then we do the best we can, and God makes the best of how we play our parts." She smiled and said, "We don't always get it right, but God keeps on forgiving us when we ignore Him and mess up our parts."

Rev. Backstrom mused, "So I have a part to play... Do you think I'm angry because God has given me a bit role?" Pastor Marianne replied, "I don't know. Only you can answer that. But let me ask you this: How would your life and call change if you did everything you possibly could to love your congregation and Mossy Creek? What would happen if you gave them everything you've got?" She paused for a second and said, "Including your heart. It's worth thinking about."

Just then someone started pounding on Melvin's plate-glass window. It was two elementary-aged girls with brown skin and black hair. Pastor Marianne waved them inside and said, "They're members of my congregation. They've been here for about a year. They and their mother were relocated here after her husband was killed in Iraq for cooperating with the Marines. He was trying to stop the religious and political violence in their city when he was killed." By that time the girls and their mother had reached the booth, and Pastor Marianne introduced them. "Rev. Backstrom, this is Raneen and her daughters, Amir and Shatha. They moved here from Iraq."

Rev. Backstrom said, "I didn't know there were Presbyterians in Iraq." Raneen said, "Oh, yes. There have been Christians there for centuries." Then she smiled and said, "And some of them are Presbyterians. But this is our new home, and now we're Mossy Creek Presbyterians." Rev. Backstrom replied, "You must miss your old home." Raneen said, "Yes, but not so much anymore. This is the home God has given us. I have faith it is the one He wants us to have. We are grateful to be here."

Rev. Backstrom arched his eyebrows and mused, "Grateful to be here..." Raneen paused and then said, "Our Lord Jesus once healed ten lepers, but only one thanked Him. I think that is how he confessed his faith. Such grace—he knew Jesus must be God's Son. His thankfulness for a new life reminds me to thank God for everything He has done for my daughters and me. In the terrible times after my husband's death, I had faith God would take care of us, and He did. Now every morning I remind myself of what God told His people when they were in exile. 'For I know the plans I have for you. They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and hope.' God brought us here. He has given us a new life. We have a future and hope. That is how we have been able to—how do you say it?—settle down."

Rev. Backstrom looked at her and said, "Settling down—that's easier said than done." Raneen replied, "Perhaps. When my husband was killed in Iraq, it was the most terrible thing. It wounded us. I felt like I was dying. And when we came here, it felt so strange. I wondered what would happen to us. Would we be accepted? But then God gave us a house. He gave me a job. He gave my

children friends. I had faith God would heal my family, and He did. I am so grateful. How can I keep from singing?"

Rev. Backstrom asked, "So you don't feel like you've been sent away from your home?" She replied, "Oh, no! This is our home. Coming here is how God has healed us. That is how I know this is where God wants us to be." She smiled and said, "You are where God wants you to be, too. I hope you will love Mossy Creek and this will be your home. You are like my girls and me—God has brought you here, too. This is the gift God wants you to have. Settle down. Perhaps we will become good friends, Pastor Jacob." He smiled and said, "Perhaps. But I am already sure your faith is making me feel better." Raneen smiled and said, "I am glad. But it is your faith that will make you well." Nobody but you and I know this, but Pastor Marianne whispered, "Amen."

