

THE
MOSSY
CREEK
CHRONICLES



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CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

The Parable of the Ol' Broke Tractor...

Luke 10: 25-37



Farming in the mountains isn't easy. You can raise a few hogs and make a little money selling hams and bacon. Some folks raise a few sheep and keep a few chickens. But that isn't big-time farming. Raising corn, beans, and wheat? Not in the mountains. Some people make out OK by covering those hills up with apple orchards.

But serious farming in the mountains means raising cattle. And that means making hay. And during a good summer, you might get four cuttings. But

if you make that much hay, you're bound to have breakdowns. You aren't really farming until your tractor or baler breaks down and you have to run to town for parts.

And that is what Charlie Atkins was doing. His tractor had a lot of years on it. But he was going to use it until the day it quit or he died, whichever came first. He liked to fix his tractor when he could, but sometimes it got the best of him. And this was one of those times. Charlie was driving his tractor into town hoping that he would make it to the tractor dealership before it completely gave out.

But he didn't make it. His tractor just died on the side of the road. Charlie had a few words with it. But after that, what was he going to do? He was still five or six miles from town. It was too hot, and he was too old to walk that far. He would've called for help on his cell phone if he had one. But he liked to say that he had got along without one for years and he would get along just fine without one for a few more years. He always thought that was pretty funny, but he wasn't laughing now.

Charlie started feeling a whole lot better when he thought he saw the preacher's car off in the distance. As the car got closer, he saw Rev. Greene behind the wheel and raised his arm to flag him down. But the reverend must have misunderstood because he smiled, waved, and kept right on going. Charlie exclaimed, "Doggone it! Can't he see I need a little help here?" Rev. Greene was telling the truth when he said he had more book sense than common sense. He could tell you about the Good Book, but he wasn't much help when it came to

practical things. Charlie shook his head and thought, "But all I needed was a ride."

He had just about made up his mind to start walking when he saw a friend of his coming out of town. Bud was a good man. He and Charlie went to church together. Bud pulled over and asked Charlie, "What you up to?" He replied, "Tractor's broke. I was goin' to town to git it fixed when it quit on me." Charlie knew not to ask Bud about a cell phone. He didn't have one either. But when Bud asked Charlie if he needed any help, he said, "No." That's just the way Charlie's folks raised him. So Bud took him at his word and took off. He had his own hay to get up.

Charlie wasn't a mile down the road when he heard a sound he knew. It was the truck his neighbor's boy drove. That truck was as loud as the law would allow. But that boy only stopped during the week to get gas, eat, and sleep and on the weekends to take some girl on a date. Charlie turned just in time to see the truck blow right past him like he was standing still.

Well, by now he was. He was starting to feel real bad, and it occurred to him he was in trouble. Driving that ol' tractor into town wasn't such a good idea. And walking the rest of the way to town wasn't an option. But heaven's mercy! Just then somebody headed out of town pulled a U-turn and stopped right in front of him.

When the driver got out, it nearly took his breath away. It was that Iraqi woman that came to Mossy Creek after J.R. Clatterbuck was killed in Iraq. Everybody knew J.R. was a fine Marine and an even better man. But his wife got

the crazy idea that she should help this Iraqi woman and her two daughters after they moved to town. When that happened, Charlie said that was about what you would expect from a Presbyterian. That was his way of criticizing a terrible idea without having anything bad to say about J.R.'s wife. In Mossy Creek having a problem with the widow of a dead Marine would have been inexcusable.

Now this Iraqi woman was walking right up to him as bold as brass. She said, "Can I help you, Mr. Atkins?" Now that took Charlie back a little. He didn't know her, but it sounded like she knew him. Well, Charlie always speaks his mind. So the first thing he said was, "Mornin' ma'am. I don't believe I've had the pleasure of making your acquaintance." If he was trying to be rude, she didn't let it bother her. She said, "My name is Raneen. I live at Hay Springs. Can I help you?"

Well, Charlie was between a rock and a hard spot. He could die right there on the side of the road or ask for a ride. It's funny how an August heat wave changes things. It will melt your determination to be rude if you get hot enough. And Charlie was. But she had a pickup truck, and she and her two daughters would likely fill up the front seat. He said, "I'd be grateful for a ride to the Ford tractor dealership. It's called Wayland's, and it's on the north side of town." He paused, and then he said, "I can sit in the back of the truck." Raneen said, "Oh, no, I can't let you do that. Besides, my daughters like to ride in the back." Charlie gruffly said, "I hate to put you out. I reckon you were goin' home." He was cross, and he didn't know which end was up. He wanted a ride, and he was going to get it from a woman and one he didn't like to boot.

But he needed the ride more than he needed his pride, so he climbed up in the front seat of the truck. And Raneen's daughters, Amir and Shatha seemed perfectly happy to be riding in the back of the truck. As they pulled off, Charlie said, "It looks like you know me, but I don't remember meetin' you." He was genuinely puzzled. Charlie had a small circle of family and friends, and he did not know this woman.

She calmly replied, "One of your friends from town told me that you thought I was a Muslim and couldn't understand why I attended a Presbyterian church." She paused and then said, "People frequently make that mistake. My daughters and I are Christians. We were members of a Presbyterian church in Iraq as was my husband. We came here after his death. The Presbyterian church here has been very kind to us."

Charlie said, "Huh!" and then asked, "How did he die? In the fightin'?" She quietly replied, "No. He was assassinated for trying to help the Marines bring peace to our city. He was a Christian, and after he helped the Marines he was considered a traitor. That was a very bad combination at the time."

Charlie said, "Hmmm." He hadn't heard any of this before. He thought all Iraqis were Muslims and, as far as he was concerned, they were all enemies, too. Before he met Raneen having an opinion on Iraq hadn't been all that complicated.

It wasn't long before they pulled into Wayland's. Charlie got out and said, "Thank you for the ride. I'm much obliged." Raneen smiled and asked, "Shall I wait for you? Perhaps you will need a ride back to your tractor or a ride home."

Charlie said, "Oh, no, go ahead on. These fellows will have me up and runnin' in no time. I'll git back home on my tractor." He thanked her again and headed inside.

Once he was inside he went to the service window, pulled up a stool, and started explaining what his tractor was doing. The service manager asked Charlie a few questions as he filled in the ticket. The questions were all about the tractor until he asked Charlie, "What are you doin' riding with that woman and her kids?" Charlie replied, "Needed a ride. She gave me one." The service manager said, "That's a shame. I woulda walked before I rode with her."

Now getting Charlie Atkins riled up isn't that hard to do, but it's never a good idea. And the service manager knew that. But he got Charlie aggravated anyway. Charlie said, "Well, my preacher, a friend of mine, and my neighbor's boy left me standing on the side of the road. She gave me a ride, and I was glad to have it. When can you get to my tractor?"

The service manager scowled and said, "Tomorrow. I'll send Jamie out to get it, but we won't start working on it until tomorrow mornin'." Charlie said, "I've got hay on the ground, and they're callin' for rain this evenin'. It ain't like it's completely tore up. I think it's just something to do with fuel filter and the fuel line." The service manager never looked up. "Maybe, but I won't get to it today." He nodded his head and said, "See if your buddy out there can't give you a ride home. I guess you think a Muslim can drive about as good as anybody I've got."

Charlie looked back over his shoulder. Raneen's truck was still sitting in the parking lot. He turned back to the service manager and said, "She says she

and her girls are Christians. Go to the Presbyterian church.” The service manager said, “Figures. They’ll take anybody. She oughta be back in Iraq right where she belongs.” Charlie said, “The way she tells it, her husband got killed for helping the Marines. Sounds to me like he was on our side.” The service manager sneered, “The way she tells it...” Charlie got up to leave and said, “People that know better left me on the side of the road. She gave me a ride. I don’t have a problem with people who treat me right. Call me when my tractor’s ready.” He let the door slam behind him as he left.

Raneen called from her truck, “Mr. Atkins, do you need a ride?” Well, once you get Charlie riled up, he is as mulish as the day is long. And right about then he would have ridden down Main Street with Raneen and her daughters. He replied, “I do if that isn’t inconvenient.” She smiled and said, “Not at all.” And so Charlie got back in her truck. It killed him to pass his ol’ broke tractor sitting on the side of the road, but the truck from Wayland’s was right behind them, so he wasn’t worried about it.

They rode in silence until Raneen pulled up to Charlie’s house. As he got out of the truck Charlie said, “Thank you ever so much for the ride.” She smiled and said, “I was happy to help.” And then Charlie did it. It was like he couldn’t help himself. He asked her why she helped him. He just had to know why.

She said, “In the parable of the Good Samaritan a lawyer tested our Lord. He wanted to know what the greatest commandment was. Our Lord told the lawyer to answer his own question. The lawyer said the greatest commandment was to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Then he said that to

love our neighbor was just as important. Our Lord told him he was correct. Then He told the lawyer, 'Do this, and you will live.'" Raneen continued, "We are Christians. We must do what our Lord says. When we obey Him, we show others that we are His followers. That is how others know what we believe. Perhaps they even meet our Lord through us." Then she smiled and said, "Perhaps I have surprised you. Perhaps I am the Good Samaritan you needed but were not expecting."

Well, when she said that, you could've bought Charlie Atkins for a nickel and gotten change back. He considered himself a Bible-believing man. So he took what Raneen said to heart. He said, "Well, I'm glad it was my tractor and not me you found all tore up on the side of the road."

She smiled and said, "Yes, that was a good thing." Then a shadow crossed her face and she continued, "I have seen too many people injured and killed along the roads in Iraq. People were often afraid to stop and help. They thought they might be killed, too. But they did stop and help. Anyone can be a Good Samaritan. Our Lord's parable about the Good Samaritan is important to me. He is teaching us to be Christians by being Good Samaritans. When He asked the lawyer who was a neighbor to the injured man, he said, 'The one who showed mercy.' Our Lord agreed and told him..." And before she could finish, Charlie said, "Go and do likewise." Then he softly repeated to himself. "Go and do likewise." Then he helped Raneen's daughters out of the bed of the truck and into the cab with their mother. As they left, the girls smiled and waved at Charlie. And Charlie? Well, he gave 'em a little wave back.

Now come Sunday, Charlie was at church, the same as always. And Rev. Greene was still reading announcements from the bulletin to people who knew how to read. But there was one that wasn't in the bulletin. He said there was going to be a guest speaker at First Baptist Church in the city just down the road where the university was located. The speaker was a rising star in the House of Representatives. He would be speaking about immigration reform. And Rev. Greene said he thought that was an important subject that everyone might want to know a little more about.

And that got Charlie aggravated because he knew the preacher well enough to know which way the wind was blowing. He stood up and said, "I have something I'd like to say." Every head in the sanctuary snapped around, and all the rustling bulletins got still. Charlie didn't usually speak up in church. Folks were wondering what on earth he had to say. He continued, "My ol' tractor broke down and left me on the side of the road this past week. But that wasn't the only thing that left me standing there." He paused and the sanctuary got as still as a summer afternoon just before a storm.

He continued, "By now y'all have likely heard that Raneen—that's her name—stopped and gave me a ride to Wayland's and then back home. She's the woman from Iraq I thought was a Muslim. Well, she is a fine Christian woman who is raising her girls the best she can. She goes to the church with the Presbyterians. Did you know there's more Christians in Iraq than there are Baptists in this part of the valley? Well, it's true. I looked it up. And I'll tell you

what; if the situation had been all turned around, I don't know that I woulda stopped to help her."

A breeze blew through the open sanctuary windows. A dog barked outside. A truck went rolling past the church. Charlie paused and then continued. "Raneen taught me a little bit about the parable of the Good Samaritan. She said a lawyer asked Jesus what the most important commandment was. He said, 'Answer your own question.' So the lawyer did. He said, 'Love God with all you got and love your neighbor the same.' Jesus said, 'That's right. Do that, and you will live.'" Then Charlie slowly repeated, "Do that, and you will live."

It looked like Rev. Greene was tired of standing. But the church wasn't tired of hearing what Charlie had to say. So he continued, "The other thing Raneen said that I remember is this: Jesus asked the lawyer, 'Who was a neighbor to the man that was all beat up and layin' in the ditch?' And the lawyer said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' He couldn't even bring himself to say 'The Samaritan.' Now that's some serious hate right there. But Jesus didn't let that slow Him down. He said to the lawyer, 'Go and do likewise.'" Then Charlie slowly repeated, "Go and do likewise."

Well, by this time Rev. Greene was tap dancing and the people in the pews were squirming. But Charlie continued, "After this week, if I was gonna tell a parable I guess I'd call it the Parable of the Ol' Broke Tractor. And this would be one main point: Knowin' the Good Book don't amount to much if we don't do what it says. And it says we should love the Lord with everything we've got. But

we should love everybody we come up on just the same. Now Jesus Himself says if we do that, we'll live.

And this would be another big point in my parable: People have a name and a story, and we oughta get to know folks and hear their story before we start decidin' who we do like and who we don't. Our story and their story ain't the same. How could they be?" Charlie paused and then said, "We might think we know everything we need to know about folks we don't know. And we might be dead wrong. I was. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, that lawyer knows what's right. The neighbor to the man in the ditch was a Samaritan. But that didn't matter. Mercy—that was the only thing that mattered. That's why Jesus told the lawyer, "Go and do likewise."

Charlie took a deep breath and said, "This would be the last point from my parable: There's no tellin' where mercy might come from. It surprised me. Might surprise you, too. Raneen was the Good Samaritan in my parable. I woulda never thought it. But there she was. I guess the main thing I learned from her was, 'Go and do likewise.' That's a good thing to learn."

And with that, Charlie sat down. He showed Wayland's a little mercy and kept going there to get his tractor fixed. That surprised folks who knew him. They were also surprised to hear that he was leaving vegetables from his garden in front of Raneen's kitchen door every week. She and her girls would always track Charlie down and thank him. They even invited him to go to church with them. I know what you're thinking. An old dyed-in-the-wool Baptist like Charlie would never do that. But he did once. Now what do you think of that? People in

Mossy Creek thought they were seeing the kingdom come right before their very eyes. And all because Charlie Atkins told them the Parable of the Ol' Broke Tractor.

