

THE  
MOSBY  
CREEK  
CHRONICLES



*Rev. Dr. Steven L. Frazier*

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN



## Right in the Middle of the Road...

2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 4:1-8; Matthew 22:15-22

It was cold. And it was damp. It was the kind of morning that grabs you, chills you to the bone, and just won't let go. Days like that are always unwelcome visitors. But folks in Mossy Creek expect them come December. You just put up with them and wait for a better day. I guarantee you Pastor Marianne and Pastor Mark were waiting on a better day when they showed up at Melvin's. The regular morning crowd was there getting some coffee and a little breakfast. But two of the town's pastors? It was a little unusual to see those two white collars at 7 o'clock on a Wednesday morning. But nobody said anything. Maybe it was too cold. Or maybe it was too early. It was too something, that's

for sure. The radio was turned down low and the clicking of forks and knives almost covered up the little bit of conversation that was going on.

Pastor Mark and Pastor Marianne slid into a booth looking out on Main Street. Andrea called from behind the counter, “What’ll you two have this fine morning?” Pastor Mark smiled. You just couldn’t beat Melvin’s down-home service. He replied, “Coffee—black. Oh, and make it the real thing—no decaff.” Pastor Marianne winced at that and then said, “Diet-Pepsi.” She looked at Pastor Mark and exclaimed, “Unleaded first thing in the morning... How do you do that?” He replied, “It’s all about the caffeine. Can’t have too much of that first thing.” Andrea bustled up and said, “I heard that! Caffeine—the breakfast of champions.” Pastor Marianne and Pastor Mark just laughed as she rushed off to another table.

After Pastor Mark took his first sip of his coffee, he told Pastor Marianne, “I got a great advertisement in the mail yesterday. ‘You too can be a chaplain in the Air Force.’ It was a nice ad. I was tempted for a minute. But right there at the bottom they had their age requirement.” He laughed, “That took care of me.” Pastor Marianne asked innocently, “What’s the cutoff age?” He chuckled, “You’ll have to do better than that. I’m not telling you how old I am. I think they just want athletic pastors that look good in a uniform.” Pastor Marianne laughed and replied, “Yeah, I’m sure that’s it.” Then she wrapped both hands tightly around her glass and thought out loud, “How hard would that job be?” Pastor Mark looked into his coffee cup and said, “I can only imagine.”

A few minutes and a little small talk later, Andrea called to them, “More coffee and DP?” Pastor Marianne nodded and Pastor Mark said, “Sure.” Then he said, “You know, I was thinking about what it must be like to be a pastor and serve in the military. I imagine that’s hard to pull off. There are plenty of folks who have trouble with the whole idea of serving the church in that kind of setting.” Pastor Marianne pushed her empty glass toward Andrea as she set a refill on the table and refilled Pastor Mark’s coffee cup. She turned to leave and then turned back and said, “Y’all look nice today, real nice. I like it when you’re all dressed up.”

After Andrea left, Pastor Marianne said, “I get that line of reasoning. I don’t agree with it, but I get it. The people who are making the argument against clergy serving in the military sound way too comfortable with leaving a lot of people without pastoral ministry to suit me.” Pastor Mark sipped his coffee and then put his cup down and said, “Yeah, I agree. They’re banking everything on what Jesus said about turning the other cheek.” Pastor Marianne nodded and said, “Yeah. That and Isaiah’s peaceable kingdom of God. You know, that argument has a lot of support in the Valley. The Amish, old school Mennonites, and Brethren are part of the old peace church movement. They’ve been here forever.” Pastor Mark picked up his coffee cup and nodded his head in agreement.

After he put his cup down, he said, “But you know what? Turning the other cheek isn’t the only thing Jesus has to say about being His disciples. His enemies wanted to know, ‘Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?’ He

turned that right back on them and said, 'Give to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor, and to God the things that are God's.' Nice touch. Those are instructions for His disciples, too. He's keeping them out of the ditches by driving right in the middle of the road." Pastor Marianne chuckled and said, "That's an interesting way of putting it." Pastor Mark quickly objected, "I'm not saying He's didn't take a stand. I just think He's saying we can be subjects in God's kingdom and still be citizens of the republic. It's not one or the other. You know, Luther argued that the state carries out God's will, or at least it should." Pastor Marianne said, "Mmm... Calvin makes the same point. I don't see him telling Christians to avoid being involved in the military."

Melvin's was starting to empty out, and the diner was getting even quieter. Andrea walked up and asked, "Refills?" Both pastors turned her down. Andrea said, "I've been listenin' to y'all. Not eavesdroppin', just hearin' bits and pieces of what you've been talkin' about. Y'all may not know this, but I grew up old school Mennonite. My folks told me we had to stay focused on God and nothin' else. If we got confused about that, we'd end up gitting' confused about a lot of other stuff, too." Pastor Marianne replied, "I get that. But what did they say about situations where innocent people suffered because no one did anything to stop it? You know, there are plenty of times when the military's mission is to keep the peace and keep civilians safe. I can't see Jesus being against that. You know, there are times when doing nothing is unfaithful." Then she murmured, "Following Jesus is easier said than done."

Andrea pulled up a chair from a nearby table. She paused for a second then said, "But Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek." Pastor Mark said, "Yeah, we were just talking about that. That's tough. There are places in the Bible where it sounds like we have two sets of marching orders. Figuring out what to do isn't always easy." Pastor Marianne looked at Andrea and asked, "What do you think Jesus means when He says give to God what is God's, and to Caesar what is Caesar's? I'd be interested in your take on that." Andrea knitted her eyebrows together, thought for a second, and then said, "Well, my folks said that meant paying our taxes." Pastor Mark asked, "But how do you separate the tax revenues that are used to build schools from the money they use to build tanks? Sometimes our actions have unintended consequences. That's something that has always hung me up."

Now, I know you're probably thinking nobody has much to do if they're just sitting around a diner making conversation all day long. But now the diner was empty and Pastor Marianne and Pastor Mark didn't look like they were in any hurry. So, the conversation just continued. Andrea mused, "Keeping innocent people safe..." Then she went on, "I don't know near as much as y'all do, but it seems to me sufferin' is just part of life. The Lord did." Pastor Mark replied, "I get that. But He chose to suffer. And He did that to keep us out of harm's way. And He did things that kept innocent and guilty people from suffering. Wouldn't that be our job, too? If He is the Prince of Peace, and we're His disciples, we may have to do things to keep the peace. But I get what you're

saying. And I agree with Marianne. Following Jesus can be hard to figure out at times.”

Pastor Marianne interjected, “Here’s the thing: What Jesus is saying about God and Caesar isn’t an argument for the church and against the government or vice versa. They aren’t competing loyalties; they’re complementary. He is saying we have to honor both of those responsibilities. Look, Calvin said that God sent Jesus out of respect for our human limitations. Calvin didn’t think we would ever have anything like an accurate understanding of God without Jesus to show us who God is and what God does and what God values. We have bodies. And senses. Jesus helped us understand God by living with us so we could see and hear God for ourselves. We live in a real world. Our faith has to be real, too. What we know and believe will never be very important if it doesn’t affect how we live. Army chaplains do that. They bring counsel. And comfort. Making God’s presence real in the middle of chaos—that’s what chaplains do, right?”

Andrea sighed and said, “I hadn’t thought of it that way. I can see what you’re saying. But aren’t chaplains doing things to help their side win? And the chaplains on the other side—aren’t they doing exactly the same thing? How can God be for both sides at the same time? How does that work?” She sighed and said, “There’s a lot about this I just don’t understand.”

Pastor Mark said, “I don’t know about that. I can see where your family is on the right side of this thing. Our first loyalty is to Jesus. But being a chaplain in the military is all about being faithful to Jesus by doing ministry in a particular

setting. Paul tells Timothy to ‘Preach the word of God. Be persistent, whether the time is favorable or not. Be sober, endure suffering, carry out your ministry fully.’ Chaplains do that. Sometimes that’s easy, and sometimes it isn’t. Not everybody listens to what they have to say. Heck, people tune us out, too. But here is another way of looking at what Marianne is saying. What does Matthew’s account of the Gospel call Jesus? Immanuel—God with us. That is who chaplains are representing. Chaplains are saying to soldiers and their families, ‘The Lord is right there with you. Whatever you’re doing, wherever you are, you aren’t alone. The Lord is with you.’ That’s good news. It’s ministry at its best. I think chaplains can do that without selling out to the government.”

Andrea looked thoughtful and said, “My daddy told me this. During the war in Vietnam he said there were Quakers who were conscientious objectors who wouldn’t fight. But they believed they should serve in the Army. It was that whole thing you were talking about where Jesus said give Caesar what belongs to him and give God what belongs to Him. So they served as medics. Daddy said they died at a higher rate than anybody else in the war. It was like the cross on their helmets was a target. Are you sayin’ they were representin’ Jesus on the battlefield?”

Pastor Mark exclaimed, “Absolutely! The thing is, chaplains are doing the same thing. They’re doing their best to be the pastors they were called and trained to be. They’re just doing it in a setting that is different from the one most of us work in. For me, it’s just like being a pastor here. I wouldn’t serve a church in a city setting for anything—couldn’t pull it off. Where we serve and who we

serve is a part of the gifts God has given us for ministry. It's also part of the claim God makes on our lives. Chaplains have gifts and a calling for what they do."

Pastor Marianne interjected, "Oh, yeah. That's true. And God's mercy and grace and the power of His love are greater than all the chaos human beings can create. Surely God's plans for us include someone to remind soldiers and their families of that. I don't think there is anybody or any part of the world that God isn't concerned about. If anything, maybe chaplains have a special kind of faithfulness. They're doing everything we do, but they're doing it under some of the most hellish circumstances. People give me a tough time, but I'm not serving under fire. I can't even imagine what they go through, the courage they must have."

Pastor Mark looked at his watch and slid out of the booth. "I've got to go." Pastor Marianne replied, "I've got the check. I'll see you later." He nodded his head and left Melvin's. Andrea put her chair back, took Pastor Mark's coffee cup and Pastor Marianne's glass, and headed for the kitchen. She was back in a minute to wipe down the table. When she finished, she sat down and said, "I don't see how y'all do it, I really don't. There's things y'all do that I wouldn't do for anything. Like today—I just don't see how you do it." They talked for a little while longer. When Pastor Marianne reached for her purse, Andrea said, "Uh uh. Melvin says it's on the house." Pastor Marianne smiled knowingly and said, "Thanks. Tell Melvin Mark and I appreciate his hospitality. Well, I've got to go, too."

When Pastor Marianne went outside, she shuddered and looked around. It was still cold. And it was still damp. And it was still the kind of mountain morning that grabs you, chills you to the bone, and just won't let go. Mornings like that are expected visitors to Mossy Creek in December. Folks just put up with them and wait for a better day. Pastor Marianne looked up Main Street. There was Mossy Creek Lutheran Church, dead in the middle of town.

And there was Pastor Mark, standing on the front steps of the church. The sidewalk leading up to the front door was in the process of being flanked by a military honor guard. Main Street was a shallow, gray canyon with businesses and sidewalks on both sides. The sidewalks were filling with people. There was an American flag on every light pole on Main Street. All you could hear was those flags flapping in the breeze. When Melvin, his kitchen help, and waitresses came out, Andrea stood next to Pastor Marianne.

Now, I know you're thinking this must have been a funeral for someone killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Like a lot of places, Mossy Creek has had its share of those. But it wasn't that. It was a funeral for an Army chaplain. John McElroy was coming home to Mossy Creek. The way folks in Mossy Creek figured it, the church lost a faithful pastor, and the nation lost a great chaplain and soldier.

When the hearse came down Main Street, it was right where it was supposed to be, right in the middle of the road straddling the double yellow line. It got so quiet, it was plain eerie. But then somebody started humming, and then a few started singing, and then the next thing you know the only thing you could hear was Mossy Creek singing *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* as the hearse

passed by. It got to be so loud nobody ever heard Andrea say, “There’s a lot I don’t know. But I know this: John McElroy, you fought the good fight, you finished the race, you kept the faith. Well done, good and faithful servant.”  
Amen.

*(This sermon is written to the glory of God and dedicated to the memory of the Reverend James McCormick, a chaplain and major in the U.S. Army.*

*Revelation 14:13.)*

