

THE
MOSSY
CREEK
CHRONICLES



Rev. Dr. Steven L. Frazier

CHAPTER THREE



Who's Grading?

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

In Mossy Creek, there is a newspaper, but most folks get their news at the ball field, across the back fence, or at the grocery store. It was Friday afternoon, and Anne was getting some potato salad for supper at the Piggly Wiggly when she ran into Emma. Next thing you know, Anne was also getting the latest news about one of the local churches. Well, that's what they were calling it now. It used to be the New Life Worship and Family Center. Best Anne could remember, that name was meant to appeal to people who either didn't know that much about church or didn't care much for what they did know. The idea was if you gave it a new name, you made it a new thing.

But apparently that new thing was now a thing of the past. That's what Emma was saying anyway. "Now that they've got a new preacher, they're calling the New Life

Worship and Family Center the Lord's Storehouse Church. Everybody is excited about the new name." Emma was, too. The new preacher was telling folks they were going to be getting back to true worship. He was going to be teaching and preaching the Bible and nothing but the Bible. Emma said, "He says that's what it means to be a church. Now I know that's right." That's how Anne got the news and Emma's opinion to boot. It bothered Anne, but she just wasn't sure why.

A week later, Anne was in a committee meeting at church. Jeb and Anne were the elders responsible for the Congregational Outreach Committee. Before the meeting started, everybody was talking about the news and how tough times were. Then somebody said the folks who didn't have much were the ones who were really in a bind. Once the meeting got started, helping folks who needed a helping hand took up an hour of their time. But the committee had a plan. Instead of collecting food for the community food bank once in a while or during the holidays, Our Savior Presbyterian Church would be collecting a food offering every month. Everybody thought that plan was just the right ministry at just the right time.

Well, maybe not everybody. Joe B. started grumbling about the church turning into a club of do-gooders. "Anne, I like you just fine, you know I do. But I don't like this food thing near as much. Seems to me we should be spending more time on the Bible and less on beans. The Good Book says we're supposed to be making disciples by teaching and preaching. What good is food going to do anybody if they don't know the Lord?" Well, Joe B. probably didn't mean to get Anne going, but he sure did. Anne said, "Joe B., we are not a club. What on earth are you talkin' about?"

That surprised the members of the committee. Anne usually didn't carry on like that. But she was just as amazed at her passion for this new ministry. When Jeb asked for somebody to explain the plan to the session and the congregation, Anne signed up on the spot. After the session approved it a week later, Jeb smiled and told Anne, "I'll help you, but it looks like it might be a good idea if I stayed out of the way and let you lead the charge."

The next Sunday during the announcements, Pastor Marianne told the congregation that the Congregational Outreach Committee had created a new ministry by taking an old ministry and making it a little bit bigger and a little bit stronger. Then she asked Anne to fill in the details. She did that and then some. Anne explained that from now on Our Savior Presbyterian Church would collect a food offering every time they celebrated the Lord's Supper. This is how she put it: "We want to connect how the Lord is feeding us at His table with what we're doing to feed folks in Mossy Creek." After she finished, Anne was praying she had gotten everybody's support. She wasn't much interested in hearing her church described as a club of do-gooders again. That rubbed her the wrong way. She wished she knew why. But she just couldn't figure it out.

So Anne just kept chewing on what Joe. B. had said. She knew studying and preaching the Bible was a good thing. There was no fussing with Joe B. on that point. A couple of weeks passed, and Anne still hadn't come up with the answer she was looking for. But she had come up with a busier schedule. Now the food bank's monthly meeting was on her calendar, and its mission was nearly always on her mind. And that meeting is where she finally met Gene Muller, the new preacher from the Lord's Storehouse Church.

Pastor Gene was new to town, but he already had some ideas about how the food bank should work. When his church was still the New Life Worship and Family Center, folks there supported the food bank about the same as everybody else. But Pastor Gene was all about change. And he said his church was going to have to change how they supported the food bank if it didn't start packing paperback Bibles in the bags of food. He also wanted the food bank to use grocery bags that had his church's picture, address, and phone number on them. As far as he was concerned, the other churches could do the same thing if they wanted to. He said that was real ministry. Feeding souls was the church's one and only job. Anything else was a distraction.

Well, that sermon didn't suit everybody. When a couple from the Methodist church objected, Pastor Gene got to preaching. In no time flat he was quoting the Apostle Paul. "Faith comes from hearing, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. It's simple, folks. Jesus saves, not food. This food bank is just a means to an end. Preaching and teaching the Bible—now that's what the church is all about. No Gospel, no food."

That took Anne's breath away. As she listened to Pastor Gene, all Anne could see was an empty plate that separated knowing from doing. She just didn't get it. This was the same problem she had with Joe B. all over again. And that's when Anne figured out what was bugging her. She didn't know what to say when someone she disagreed with started quoting the Bible to make their point.

The next day Anne got up her courage, stopped by church, and told Pastor Marianne she needed a little help. "I know the Bible. I read it every day. I go to Sunday school. But if people who disagree with me start quoting the Bible, I don't know what to say. If they're quotin' the Bible, they're in the right, aren't they?" Pastor Marianne smiled and said, "Sounds like you're caught between a rock and a hard spot. Anne, when anybody quotes scripture they're basing their claim on a part of the Bible that's important to them. It's obvious preaching and teaching are important to Pastor Gene. And I can see that feeding hungry people is important to you. Maybe it's time for you to start explaining why so many Christians claim feeding hungry people is so important. Get beyond just disagreeing with people who don't share your opinions."

Anne hadn't thought of that. Before Anne left, Pastor Marianne said, "You know, both you and Pastor Gene might be right. This probably isn't an either-or situation. But you have to get to the point where scripture is helping you understand why you believe what you believe. And then you and Pastor Gene will be using the Bible to understand each other. And when you start doing that, you'll be talking with each other about doing ministry and not at each other about your differences of opinion. Start looking for the

scriptures that will help you explain to him what you believe and why you believe you're right about this issue."

Over the next couple of weeks Anne nearly wore her Bible out looking for any passages that had anything to say about feeding hungry people. She was amazed to see how many of them there were. Then she started worrying about knowing them all by heart. And that just made the whole thing feel completely impossible. But just about the time she was ready to quit, Anne found what she had been looking for. Now Anne was a teacher, and she knew a little bit about grading. And she found a place in Matthew where Jesus was handing out final grades. And it was pass/fail. Some people were getting passing grades from Jesus, and they didn't even know why. So they asked Him, "Lord, when on earth did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the King will tell them, 'I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these who are my brothers and sisters you were doing it to Me!'" There it was—when you're feeding the poor, you're feeding Jesus' family. And when you're feeding Jesus' family, you're feeding Jesus. What about when you didn't? That's where those failing grades were coming from. It was bad. Those poor folks had no idea that ignoring hungry people had gotten them those failing grades.

From that point on, Anne's passion for feeding hungry people in Mossy Creek grew deeper. She had finally figured it out. The Lord she worshipped on Sunday and followed the other six days of the week was also the One she felt wanted to feed. It was His family she wanted to take care of. And that's when it happened. Anne found her calling. She couldn't do everything at Our Savior Presbyterian Church, but she could sure answer when the Lord called on her to feed His family. Whenever she started thinking she didn't have enough time for the church, she just stopped and remembered who she was serving. That thought let Anne sleep at night and be patient when things got tough.

Well, things started getting tough in the next food pantry meeting. Pastor Gene was still saying food was a means to an end. Anne listened as long as she could. When she got a chance to speak, she knew what she wanted to say. It was scripture straight from the Bible and passion straight from her heart. “Pastor Gene, teaching and preaching are important. Nobody here is saying they aren’t. But feeding hungry people is just as important. In Matthew, Jesus says feeding the hungry is the same as feeding Him and His family. He has Christians going to heaven just because they gave people the help they needed. That’s how they ended up with a passing grade. And the people who didn’t feed the hungry failed. And it’s a terrible thing to have the Lord give anybody a failing grade when we have this scripture to tell us what we need to know about what we ought to be doing. Give your church a chance to live up to its name. No strings attached—just let your church be the Lord’s storehouse in Mossy Creek. Be a pastor to everybody and not just the folks who attend your church.”

You could’ve heard a pin drop when Anne got finished. Pastor Gene wasn’t used to being talked to that way. But he wasn’t used to arguing against the Bible, either. Now he was the one stuck between a rock and a hard spot. “Anne, I just have such a passion for the Word,” he stammered. “Pastor Gene, I know that. We all do. We just want you and your church to apply all of that great teaching and preaching you’re doing to the needs of hungry people here in Mossy Creek. Who cares what we know if people all around us are going hungry? Just ask yourself this: Who’s grading my life and ministry? It’s Christ the King. And it looks like He’s grading us on how well we apply what we’ve learned.” Now Pastor Gene knew that was right.

At the community Thanksgiving service, Pastor Gene got to preach because he was the new kid in town. People were ready to hear from the guy they had heard so much about. Well, Pastor Gene read Anne’s favorite new scripture and closed his Bible. Then he said, “A wise woman has given me a new understanding of this passage, and for that I am grateful. When we go from knowing the Word to doing it, that’s what it means to be the church. Now let me quote another wise Christian, St. Francis of Assisi. ‘Start by doing what is necessary; then do what is possible; and

suddenly you are doing the impossible.’ Friends, let’s make this our impossibly possible task: Let’s drive hunger out of Mossy Creek in the name of our King, Jesus Christ. And if we do, we’ll end up doing the other thing St. Francis wants us to do—‘preach the Gospel at all times and, when necessary, use words.’ Amen.”

