

THE
MOSSY
CREEK
CHRONICLES



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CHAPTER TWO



All Dressed Up...

Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

It all started with folks saying Bobby Ray was a new man. Everybody said so. Some of them just shook their heads and smiled. Others said he must have had a come-to-Jesus meeting with somebody, somewhere along the line. But people really got to talking when he and the worship committee put that new carpet in the sanctuary. Now that shocked everybody. But it didn't shock 'em near as much as much as what he did after that. He said the Lord was calling him to do something different for the church. Turns out he meant leaving the worship committee for the evangelism committee. Time was, Bobby Ray didn't talk about his faith much or invite people to church. But now he was talking about Jesus most of the time. And when he wasn't doing that, he was talking about being a part of God's new creation and living a changed life and who knows what all. It puzzled Pastor Marianne as much as everybody else. But she

agreed to let him make the switch. Then she stood back and watched right along with everybody else. I'm tellin' you, Bobby Ray was a new man. Everybody said so.

Well, it turns out Bobby Ray had some ideas about how to introduce more people to Jesus. "We oughta have more people in church. I've been thinkin' about how we might do that." But since he was new to the evangelism committee, first he had to get caught up on what the rest of the committee was already doing. They were putting ads in the newspaper. They were advertising with the chamber of commerce. They had Pastor Marianne writing notes to their visitors in worship. They had a website with all kinds of information, directions to the church, and plenty of pictures. They fixed up the nursery and had parking spaces just for visitors.

Bobby Ray had to admit there was no lack of ideas. They just weren't setting the world on fire. Now don't get me wrong. Our Savior Presbyterian Church got some new members now and again. But Bobby Ray could see the committee members were discouraged. He could hear it in their voices. They were tired of trying so hard and not succeeding any more than they did. Why weren't they succeeding more often? It was a mystery.

Well, it wasn't a mystery to everybody. Earl had been around a little while. He knew a few things about how people spent their time in Mossy Creek. "Bobby Ray, here's what our members are telling us. The Sundays before Memorial Day and Labor Day they go to the lake. Fishing, grilling, and just lying around—you can't hardly beat that. And the Sundays after Christmas and Easter? They're just wore out. Then there's vacations. If you have a little time and money you go north in the summer and south in the winter." Bobby Ray nodded his head. Earl went on, "Parents go see their kids play ball. And people work. Some have to; some want to." Bobby Ray said, "On Sunday mornings?" Earl nodded his head and said, "Sure do. It's hard, son. We've been inviting. But seems like folks always have something to do. Maybe it's a miracle we're doing as well as we are." Well, that slowed Bobby Ray down for just a little bit.

Here he'd been thinking the committee just needed some new ideas or a little more energy.

He said, "Well, what if we went to people's houses and invited them? You know, face to face invitations?" Well, the way the committee members reacted you woulda thought Bobby Ray had just talked about somebody's momma. Ida Mae looked across the table at him and said, "Bobby Ray, you've been a Presbyterian all your life. You know better than to ask a question like that. Knocking on doors isn't our gift to the church." But it turned out committee members knew that because they had tried it once.

Now it was Bobby Ray's turn to be puzzled. "So why not try it again? It won't hurt to try will it?" And that's when he found out that it can hurt to try. Lee said she knocked on doors and invited people to church once. It was terrible. Some people didn't want to hear what she had to say. Some didn't have time to listen. Some even said awful things to her. Then it was Jake's turn. He told Bobby Ray about the time he went out to the campgrounds at the state park and invited folks to church. One guy threatened to hit him with a wrench. He said he came to the park to get away from people like Jake. Everybody had a story. And there Bobby Ray was backing up again. "I'm sorry. I had no earthly idea. I thought if we had enough ideas and tried hard enough, more people would come to church. I didn't think anyone ever got hurt trying to introduce people to Jesus."

The next Sunday, Bobby Ray went to church same as always. But when it was over, instead of going home he went looking for Pastor Marianne. Her sermon had been about this king and a great big ol' party he was throwing. Everybody was invited. And everybody had an excuse for not coming. Or they picked up a wrench and beat the king's messengers to death or close to it. But it was the next part of the story that was fretting Bobby Ray. He remembered it word for word. "Then the king became furious. He sent out his army to destroy the murderers and burn their city." That's what got him to worrying, "What does this mean for our church?"

When he found Pastor Marianne he asked her just that. She rocked back in her chair and said, "Bobby Ray, I don't see God going to war with us or any of His people as far as that goes. But here's one way of thinking about what Jesus is saying. What if the Lord quit inviting? What if the Lord quit inviting folks and just let them just keep on making excuses and using their time anyway they want? According to this story, how are things going to turn out?" Bobby Ray thought a second and then said, "I guess things can turn out pretty bad if you keep turning the Lord down long enough." Pastor Marianne nodded her head. "Maybe that's Jesus' point." Lord, have mercy. That nearly took Bobby Ray's breath away.

Later that day, Clinton and Ike stopped by Bobby Ray's. They were two of Bobby Ray's friends who didn't get what he was up to anymore. All this talking about Jesus? It was driving the both of 'em crazy. But Clinton had to admit Bobby Ray was a changed man. And it wasn't just going to church. He was spending more time at home. He was spending more time with his wife. Emmy Lou loved that. And he was spending more time playing ball with Taylor than watching ball games on TV. He was more patient with people. Heck, he was even giving ten percent of his paycheck to the church.

That afternoon Bobby Ray was still thinking about what Pastor Marianne said. He remembered in Jesus' story the king told his messengers to invite everyone. Well, if the Lord was throwing a party and needed another messenger to hand out invitations, Bobby Ray was going to hand 'em out. So he invited Clinton and Ike to church. "Y'all come on to church Sunday. It won't hurt you, and it might even do you some good." Bobby Ray was smiling, but they could see he was serious.

Well, miracle of miracles, Clinton accepted the invitation. But he'd be the first to admit he wasn't all that good at church. You know, it's like a dance. You've gotta learn the steps. And like most things, the more you do it, the better you get at it. So Clinton started showing up anytime he didn't have something else to do. Everybody was glad

to see him. They thought it was great he was coming as much as he did. Some folks even thought they might be seeing a change in him, too.

Then came one Wednesday night. Clinton was late for church. It was the middle of July, and it was hot. So when he got off work, he stopped and had a beer. Mighta been two. I don't know if anybody else knew, but Bobby Ray sure did. He took Clinton aside. "Man, I love it you're coming to church. But you can't come here like this." Clinton tried to duck. "You talkin' about my work clothes, B. Ray?" Bobby Ray said, "You know better than that. Wear what you want. But church is all about a new way of living. We aren't supposed to be wearing our old used-to-be life anymore." Well, if Clinton was being thrown out, he decided he'd beat Bobby Ray to the punch and leave on his own. But he didn't take off until he told him what he thought of his preaching. "I'm sorry I'm not good enough for you. I was doing you a favor being here. I won't make that mistake again." It killed Bobby Ray to hear that.

But Clinton couldn't get away from him. Bobby Ray didn't hold grudges anymore. He kept treating Clinton the same as he ever did. Bobby Ray was always glad to see him. He always had a joke. He always asked Clinton about his momma. And the more Clinton thought about it, the more he wished he could be just a little more like Bobby Ray. And then one day Clinton got it. Bobby Ray had changed all right. He had turned into an engraved invitation to church. And if church was a dance, then Bobby Ray was dancing up a storm.

A week later, Clinton ran into Bobby Ray at the gas station. Bobby Ray smiled and said, "Come on to church Sunday." Clinton asked, "What's there to come to? Best I can tell, church isn't just a building. And it isn't just preachin' and prayin' on Sunday. Looks like the main thing is how you live the rest of the week." Bobby Ray smiled and nodded his head. "Oh, you got that right. But Sunday services are important. Can't do without 'em. That's where we're learning to live the life and look the part." Clinton could see that, but he just shook his head. "I can't come. Ain't good enough."

Well, Bobby Ray knew better than that. God loved everybody just the way they were. The Lord just loved them too much to leave 'em that way. He just couldn't convince Clinton that was the Gospel truth. But Bobby Ray kept on inviting him. And he kept treating Clinton like a friend and a brother. And he kept living his all-dressed-up-and-I-got-a-party-to-go-to life. Bobby Ray may have been wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a ball cap to work, but Clinton knew there had to be a tux underneath there somewhere. It looked like Bobby Ray was wearing that thing twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. When Clinton asked Bobby Ray about that, he quoted the Apostle Paul. "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, keep thinking about these things."

So Clinton kept on thinking about Bobby Ray's brand new life. And the more he thought about it, the more he liked the way it looked on Bobby Ray. And the more Clinton liked the looks of it, the more he wanted to get all dressed up himself. And you know Bobby Ray—he kept on telling Clinton he was invited to the Lord's party. He had to dress, but that tux he wanted was his for the asking. Bobby Ray said the invitation and the tux—the whole thing—was grace. It was the thing you get even though you don't deserve it. And finally he did it. Clinton finally came back to church. If there was a party and he was invited, then he was going to show up.

Well, when he did that it was a Wednesday night. Clinton came straight to church from work. He was wearing his work clothes. And he was sober as a judge. Bobby Ray was the first person to meet him. It was like he'd never been gone. Then Pastor Marianne came over, shook his hand, and gave him a great big ol' hug. And then there was so many Clinton lost count. There were working men in jeans. And there were business men in pinstripes. There were professional women in stylish suits. And there were stay-home moms in shorts. There were the mamaws and papaws. And there were kids with long hair, short hair, and no hair at all. They all dressed different, but they all had a few things in common: they loved Jesus. They loved people who already loved Jesus. And they loved people just like Clinton—folks who were invited to

the party and wanted to meet Jesus. No matter what they were wearing, they all had tuxes and ballroom gowns underneath. Some were clumsy, and some were graceful. But every last one of them was dancing away and inviting someone else to dance with them. And the invitin' and dancin'—that's what made them the church. Clinton thought, "Lord, what a party! Now that's what I'm talking about." And that's the day it started. That's the day Clinton got all dressed up and started dancing. Amen.

