

This Very Room

The afternoon sun poured in through a large picture window brightening the living room. Five middle-aged men, most of them already grandfathers, drank coffee in their easy chairs. A reverent silence filled the room: the silence of those without words to express their emotions as death approached.

Pastors can feel pressured to speak meaning into such moments, but this was an exceptionally authentic family. There were no expectations. The five brothers surrounded their father's bed, simply witnessing a sacred chapter of my ministry to their parents and theirs to me.

Pastors are not supposed to have favorites, but Karl and Grace were mine. Karl was in his 90s and Grace a decade younger. She was chatty and bubbly, and he the strong and silent type. His inner fortitude sustained him as his physical strength diminished. I realized that his inability to walk through his fields was a far greater loss than no longer being agile enough to worship in the Lutheran church which he and Grace attended throughout their sixty years of marriage.

Karl was raised Catholic and nearly became a monk. He often reminded me that he and his father had worked together, laying the stone wall around a neighboring monastery when he was in his early twenties. There he wrestled with "the call" until God and Grace revealed different plans for his life. Karl and Grace were distant cousins, introduced by family. She knew from the moment she laid eyes on him that he was the one for her. She was a spunky and determined woman, enticed by his shy and quiet demeanor.

I enjoyed hearing about their courtship as the three of us gathered around their kitchen table to share conversation and communion each month. I generally stayed longer than intended. Grace was skilled at prolonging my visits by offering "a little lunch" as I was about to leave. One hot afternoon she produced a special treat from her freezer: slush. It was so delicious that I accepted seconds, only to discover afterwards that I had been partaking in brandy slush.

Who serves their pastor booze? Only a couple so comfortable with themselves and their pastor that there is no need for pretense.

A hospice chaplain that I once worked with believed that "people die the same way they live." I disagreed at the time, for her observation sounded judgmental. Yet, the scene around Karl's death bed revealed the truth of her statement, at least from my perspective. My experience with Karl's dying was

much like our monthly visits around their kitchen table: unpretentious and comfortable.

Karl and Grace had a playful relationship. They enjoyed playing tricks on one another, like the time when Grace tried to curb one of Karl's bad habits. She had forbidden his chewing of tobacco, but suspected that he was sneaking it out in the barn. One day she snooped around and found his stash. She dumped the tobacco from its little canister, replacing it with dried horse manure. She delighted in her triumph, chuckling proudly as he grinned with a good-natured twinkle in his eye.

They were a spirited match. They also steadied one another through life's challenges. One unexpected challenge raised questions they barely knew how to ask. As we sat around their table one winter afternoon, Grace turned to Karl. "Should we ask her?" His response was noncommittal. She pulled an envelope from the bureau and handed it to me. It took a moment to discern the question.

Closer examination of an invitation to their granddaughter's wedding revealed that both names were female. They wondered whether Christians could support the wedding of two lesbians. They were neither disappointed in their granddaughter's sexual orientation nor concerned about what their neighbors thought. They simply needed to know it was possible to simultaneously honor two deeply held values: faith in God and love of family.

I felt honored to share the last chapter of their earthly years together. There was nothing to bring which they did not already possess, yet I accidentally managed to add some significance to the moment by asking a question of Grace who sat beside the bed holding Karl's hand.

"I know how you met, but where did you meet?"

She thought a long moment.

She had told me they'd met at a family gathering and that this farm had been in their family long before they married. Yes, the gathering had been on this farm, in fact...

"Well, it was... it was right in this very room."