

Creation

Karen was someone who was unmistakable in my small, rural church during my time in Louisiana. I first noticed her on Sunday mornings as I would go into the sanctuary to put my sermon and bulletin on the pulpit.

Like clockwork I would see the top of her head as I looked out at the little sanctuary. She was on her knees close to the back of the church, in a fervent attitude of prayer.

I asked one of my elders about her and their eyes lit up.

“Oh, that is Karen. She was quite something in her day. She ran the Sunday School here at the church. She also did all the youth programs. That was when we had a good attendance and children.”

It turned out that Karen had been instrumental in setting up the lay visitation programs in the church, a clown ministry to cheer up the sick, she had helped start the food pantry, and had helped pushed for the churches participation in the soup kitchen their pastor had helped start with the help of other local congregations 40 years ago. I was impressed by the amount of work this woman had done while she was an active elder in the church.

Now in her 80's she still seemed full of energy, but as with any person of age the mind was willing, but the body was not helping.

Every person I talked to in that small church had a glowing account of how Karen had done something in their life at some point that had made an impact. She had truly seen her faith turn in a fruition of good works.

Yet, even with all these glowing reports I could sense there was another side of the story. In any fallible, human story there is always complexity. Each of these glorious reports were in the past tense. Everyone thought that Karen was still wonderful, but every single one of the people who I talked with was

extremely worried for her in her current state. They would cryptically say that since Donna had died Karen was not the same.

She had never been the same since the woman she had shared 50 years of her life with had passed away. The story of this woman's partner's death was related with sadness. They cared for each other, loved each other, Donna had been the person who worked a job, Karen had been the one who cooked, cleaned and worked at the church. When Donna died the family came in and took all of Donna's possessions and assets leaving Karen destitute. She had come to the church asking for a funeral for the person she loved more than anything in the world and the church denied her request. She was never the same.

Still an almost daily deliverer of food to the needy, and a person that could be counted on to contact anyone in the hospital for prayer Karen's good works were sometimes abused. I was told that people had convinced her to give them her credit cards because they needed something desperately. These people had run up exorbitant bills. Someone actually convinced her to buy them a car, even though the one she had was rickety and on its last legs. It seemed that her financial situation was precarious.

Everyone was concerned, no one knew what to do. So, they did what most churches do in that situation, they asked the pastor to help solve the problem.

I remember the first time I visited Karen. I had a beatup station wagon that had been donated by a member of Carol's church because we were too poor as new pastors to afford one ourselves. This automobile had certain bad ticks one of which was that it had a tendency to stall when I was doing left hand turns in traffic. The worst by far was that its air conditioning did not work. That June day in South Louisiana was sweltering. My blue dress shirt was soaked because of the humidity. I was embarrassed when Karen came to the door, but she did not let on she noticed anything.

“Come in pastor, come in!” she said excited as she ushered me into her living room. All the lights were out and, of course, she was not running air conditioning. The room smelled heavy of dog and as I sat a very overweight Collie lumbered into the room and collapsed in its center.

Over the months I would return and take tours of her overgrown garden, an empty kitchen, and finally sit at her dining room table that was filled with pile after pile of papers. Her conversation was always consistent. She was asking about others in the church, she was worried about a neighbor, and she wanted to make sure that I was okay.

The piles of paper in front of me were ignored by her, but they were impossible for me to ignore. So, I finally asked why there was so many bills laid out with the telltale red border, the border that proclaimed past due. Bills from collection agencies. Bills that were large amounts for someone of such spartan means.

She said they were nothing. They were under control. She had a minor cash flow problem and that God was going to take care of it. She knew that God’s promises for her meant that she was close to a major breakthrough in her life.

I noticed brown bags on the floor and walked over and looked inside one. It was filled with televangelist responses to her gifts to their ministry. They thanked her for sowing her seed of faith and that God would surely reward her faith with riches. In the midst of them were lottery tickets and sweepstakes responses to the multitude of magazine subscriptions she had signed up for to qualify to win a million dollars.

She told me that those bags were her miracles. That God was just around the corner with a miracle to change her fortune.

Over the weeks and months I became increasingly aware of the precarious situation she was in. No living family, in massive debt, and moving toward a solution that increased her vulnerability. Through argument after argument I

was able to get her to allow a lawyer and accountant in the church to look at her situation. When we finally came to a forensic determination it was dire. Karen was weeks away from losing her house, the only thing left that she had as a connection to her dead wife. I was told she needed to file for bankruptcy immediately so that she did not end up on the streets.

Unfortunately things are never that easy. For Karen to admit that she needed to file bankruptcy meant that she did not have enough faith in Jesus Christ. It was a struggle, and more sad conversations than I want to recount. Finally, she agreed to the filing. I was relieved and sad at the same time. I had so many questions left, many of them for God.

Yet, one thing I learned is that denial is powerful. We can pretend that the crack in the roof is unimportant only as long as there is not a waterfall in our living room from the latest downpour.

Karen was in denial of her situation, but the church was equally in denial of their situation. During that time I was being pressured to support the church's position that those who were Gay or Lesbian were living in sin. The Presbyterian Church was making important votes on these issues and I had elder after elder in my office attempting to convince me that my position was wrong.

Yet, no one could answer my simple question, "Who is going to tell Karen that she can't be an elder anymore?"

Most would leave my office silenced. They knew I had exposed the hypocrisy in their arguments. It was all right to condemn from a distance, but when you had to deny someone the calling of their baptism as an elder in the church, a person who had taught their own children about Jesus they were unwilling to go that far in condemnation. That too is denial.

Today's Ephesians text is amazing in the aspirational nature of the relationship we have with the Christ claiming to bring us salvation. That God is not asking for us to change the essential nature and character of who we

are. We are not asked to perform a series of cleansing acts to become worthy. We are told that we are to accept the free grace that is already given us.

Grace by its very nature is undeserved. We are told by Paul that good works are the result of our acceptance of Grace in our life. The problem is that one thing we now about the living Word is that it is illuminating. It will shine in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it. When we accept the grace of Jesus Christ it ruins our ability to stay in denial or to accept the denial of others in the community of faith. We know that denial may usage the moment, but it will cost much more in the accumulation.

The truth sets us free, but we are sometimes afraid of freedom and chose those things that keep us in bondage. Today let us take a painful, truthful gaze at ourselves so that we can fulfill the glorious promise made in us at our creation. Let us look with an unwavering gaze toward truth and reject falsehood so that we can excel in good works.