

Preacher's Week

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The Reverend Stephen Elders paced, avoided looking out his office window. He knew what he'd see and it wasn't pretty.

Hands behind his back, Elders stopped and started, stared at the stained glass window where Jesus held a shepherd's crook over his head and shooed sheep along a rocky path. All the sheep were white. Something Elders hadn't noticed before. There wasn't a sheep of another color in the bunch. Not a black one. And every family had at least one black sheep. Every church congregation had several. He stopped in the doorway, "If it is the Lord's way, then nobody told me."

"You reckon you got a private line?" Thelma Smathers pushed her glasses up on her nose and leaned back from her computer. She didn't look at him, but set her coffee mug carefully on her own private little warmer, one of her gifts from the Women of the Church.

The WOCs, Elders thought, made too big a to do over something as silly as secretary's week. And when was Preacher's Week? There wasn't one, but there should be.

Next thing he knew, Thelma would start thinking she was good at her job. Every week the church bulletin had a new error. The month of the year spelled wrong or one of the days of the week. "Use your checker," he told her.

She bristled. "You think this computer knows every word in the English language. I got news for you. It don't."

He knew what the WOCs were trying to do, but he didn't think it would work. Not for a minute.

"Who says it's the Lord's business where he goes and where he stays?" Thelma waved her coffee mug at him. The gold lettering said "World's

Best Secretary." The first time Elders saw that, he nearly choked. He wished. Oh Lord, he wished. Most of all he wished she'd stop being so pragmatic about the problem on the church lawn. The squatter. The loiterer. The bearded man with his tent and dog. God, what a dog! It looked like a thin pony wearing a horse's head. Its tail, bumped with knots, hung dark and frayed like a piece of burnt rope. The squatter made himself more at home every day. In the two weeks since he'd pitched his tent, he had connected a hose to the church's outdoor faucet and late afternoons stood under it, wetting his clothes to the skin. Then he blotted himself with a rust colored blanket and hung it to dry on the clothesline he's strung between the maple tree and the front stair rail.

It wasn't like he hadn't been invited in. Clois Heartman did that the first morning. She took the squatter by the elbow, ushered him up the stairs and into the sanctuary before he stopped, shook himself and said, "I don't think so. I don't think so. Not today."

Which to Clois meant tomorrow or when he was ready. Clois believed God moved in his own good time and mortals neither rushed nor questioned after they'd made the first attempt.

The homeless man had been fed. Lord, had he been fed.

Plates taken out to him from the men's prayer breakfast, pizza from the youth groups, casseroles from the ladies' luncheons, barbecue from the fund raising and slices of twenty kinds of cakes. At this rate, the man would never leave. He'd be like a stray dog on the church doorstep forever.

The first week Elders' phone had been a constant buzz. Half the congregation wanted him gone. They didn't care where or how. After all there were Homeless Shelters. Or what about the Salvation Army and other groups that provided homes for his kind? Was it drugs or alcohol? They wanted to know. If alcohol were his problem they said empty bottles and cans on the church lawn would be an abomination. They said this man was desecrating the house of God. Trespassing was the word they used and loitering and against the law. Have him arrested. Anything to get him off the church lawn. He was an eyesore. His residence wasn't helping the finance committee. Nor the building committee. Not to mention recruitment of new members.

All that came from the very vocal members of the congregation. The rest of the congregation approached Elders in quieter ways. They pulled

him aside after prayer meeting or wrote him notes. They felt "the stranger" had been sent to test them in some way. That he was a challenge to their faith. Someone they could rescue and set on the right path. Someone who would thank them for showing him the way to God's love and living in the light. Their answer was to wait and see what the Lord had in mind. They would serve in patience and quiet faith.

They felt the congregation should do the same.

Elders was in the middle. Where he'd been all his life. And where he should have been comfortable, but he wasn't. He had prayed with the stranger who said his name was "Wind," but it could have been Wynn, Elders didn't ask him to spell it or write it down. The dog's name was Mary.

"A good Christian name," Elders said. He rubbed the dog's bony head, felt grit and matted fur.

"My first wife," said the stranger. "And she was anything but. The woman made shoes. Shoes, can you imagine?" He stretched his sandaled feet, wiggled his bare toes. Dirty hairy toes with a silver ring on the middle one.

"Was this in Maine?" Elders asked. "She worked in a shoe factory?" He wanted to place this fellow somewhere, draw out his history, trace his path. Maybe find out how he landed here.

"Nah," the stranger said. "Had her own shop. People come to her and she'd measure, make a mold, then cut and stitch on all these machines she had. Inherited from her father."

"I'm sorry things didn't work out," Elders said. He'd brought the stranger a cup of coffee. They sat on the church steps, dog at their feet.

"What was to work out? She wanted to stay. I had to go."

"Had to go?" Elders asked. Was that a clue he'd move soon? On his own accord?

"Too long in one place and I get to feeling like I'm a wall of a building. A tree. Grass."

"I've never thought of things that way," Elders moved his feet from under the dog's rear end which had gotten heavy. The dog rolled on her back, stretched her dirt caked belly toward the sky. Elders watched a traffic of fleas race and chase each other on the dog's pink stomach. She must have had pups at one time. Her nipples were large, leathery, snubbed and broken off. He wondered where the pups were now? How

long ago? If there would be more? That would tear the congregation apart. Half of them wanting the dog taken to the pound. The other half saying we must care for the least of these ... God's creatures. He could chalk up how the vote would go. The pound would get the most. The dog snored; a deep, rusty, wracking rotten kind of snore. "What kind of dog is she?"

"The best kind," the stranger answered. "Free." He laughed, raked his fingers through his beard.

"She like water?" Elders thought maybe if he'd suggest it, the stranger would turn the hose on his dog one day. Couldn't hurt. He'd send Thelma out to buy flea soap. She would fuss, but it would give him an hour's peace and solitude.

"Can't stand it," he said. "I turn on the hose and she yelps, runs like she'd been shot. I think somebody drowned her pups, tried to drown her." He reached down and rubbed the dog, scratched between her ears.

"You ever try to find her owner?" Elders asked though he couldn't imagine any posters or classified ads wanting this dog.

"Don't believe in it," the stranger said.

"Returning things to their owners?"

"Owning things," the stranger said. "Nobody owns another living creature."

Maybe another word would work better. Belongs. "The dog belonged to somebody."

"And now she's with me," the stranger said. "For as long as she wants."

"And you belong to ...?" Elders asked. He'd finished his coffee long ago. There was an inky film of grounds in the bottom of the Styrofoam cup. He wished he could read coffee grounds and they would say something like "There is a journey in your future," or "Obstacles of objection shall be quickly removed." He'd give the journey to the stranger and that would mean his obstacle was removed. There would be no need to call a meeting of the session like Chalmers Kerr kept demanding.

"We're the laughing stock of the whole town," Chalmers said on the phone the last time he called. "A hundred times a day somebody comes in my bank and says what's that mess down at your church? And I have to act like it's not bothering me. Truth is, it's bothering the hell out of me. Got my ulcer flared up like a furnace."

"Ah," Elders said, "why can't you pretend it's round two of the 'Over the Hill Gang'?" The past several years some of the guys in the Lions

Club had a running gag. When one of them reached sixty, the others decorated their lawn. In the wee hours their fellow club members hauled in the remains of an outhouse, draped trees and shubbery with toilet paper in as many colors as they could find. They tied black balloons to a wooden coffin laid across two sawhorses. They used silver spray paint to letter, "Over the Hill At Last."

The stranger's tent was neat by comparison. There was no litter. He even walked his dog.

Chalmers Kerr spat out a disgusted noise followed by, "Preacher, this is serious. Ours is a joke in good fun and everybody knows it. This is different. A whole nother ball game. He's a squatter. Not even a taxpayer. I think the law's on our side."

"I'll see what I can do," Elders said, hung up the phone, poured two cups of Thelma's godawful coffee and went out to talk to the stranger. They sat on the church steps.

So far the talk had not gone anywhere Elders could see.

"No one," the stranger said now. He leaned back, stretched his long legs in faded jeans, looked at the sky, and shaded his eyes. "I belong to no one. My name is Wind."

Elders could say things like he was a child of God, that he belonged to the universe or something like that, but he didn't think it would go anywhere with this guy.

He could say wind did not camp out in one spot. It moved. It was always on the move. "You believe in prayer?"

"I got this far without it," the man said, "but I guess a little wouldn't hurt me none."

Elders closed his eyes, bowed his head. Traffic sounds moved farther away, the traffic light clicked as it changed and the town clock a block away chimed eleven. "Lord," Elders began, "this is Stephen and I have a friend here who is lost. He's camped out on this detour in his life and he's waiting for you to show him the way to go from here. Bless your servant, Lord, guide him from this day to his next destination as you guide all of us to our heavenly home. Amen."

Elders stood, shook the stranger's hand, patted the dog's head and walked back to his office where the lights were off, the computer silent and covered. Thelma had used his absence to leave for lunch an hour early. Thank God for small favors.

He picked up the pink telephone message pad from the corner of her desk. Chalmers Kerr called. Rether Budd. Wriston Ingold. Clois. All called but there were no messages to either return their calls or they would call Elders back. No word as to what they wanted, but he could guess. Most of what they'd say had been said before.

He ate an apple at his desk. His wife Ann poked a sandwich in his pocket as he left that morning, but he fed it to the dog on his way in. The dog didn't whine but stood silent, drumming his tail. Elders couldn't walk past him with food in his pocket and not offer it. The dog didn't gulp the sandwich as Elders expected, but licked it in small bites from his hand.

Elders started notes for his sermon about Jesus' relationship with strangers: the woman at the well, the man at the parade, the traveler.

At two Elders had a meeting at First Baptist with ministers from the three downtown churches. Thelma still wasn't back. She'd left the answering machine on and several times it had clicked on when the phone rang, Thelma's voice responding. She sounded as if she had a mouthful of maple syrup.

He locked the office door and outside door. Thelma had her own keys for whenever she decided to come back. The stranger never used their bathroom facilities. He'd always gone to the old hotel building across the street. Somebody out of town bought it years ago and rented the rooms by the week and month. Mostly people passing through lived there a few months and moved on. Or regulars who sat in the town park drinking during the day, drinking and singing. Somehow Elders didn't see his stranger as one of them. Then he caught himself, calling the man HIS stranger. When had he taken possession?

But that's when the two other ministers met with him. "How's YOUR stranger? Your visiting preacher?" They laughed. "We always put OURS up indoors at least. This your Revival?"

Elders put up his hand, "Okay, guys. You're laughing because he's not on your church lawn, but that doesn't mean he couldn't pull up stakes and be YOUR visiting preacher for a couple of weeks."

Their faces quickly darkened and they sat down to business: planning the community Thanksgiving service. It was the First Baptists' turn to host the community, with Trinity Episcopal delivering the message, doing the service.

"Looks like you're off the hook this year, Stephen," George Arden from Trinity said. He ran his finger inside his collar as if he'd like to loosen it a little. "I could be too, if I let the town visiting preacher do the service." He grinned.

The joke had gone around and back again. It was enough. Elders would call the proper agencies when he got back to his office. The stranger wasn't doing anything but making Stephen's church ... Elders caught himself as he thought that ... HIS church. Before, he'd always felt he worked FOR the church, not owned. Maybe that's what all this business had done to him. Made him go some place in his thinking he didn't want to be.

Before he left, Elders offered turkeys. Twenty of them baked by the WOCs. They'd love that. Have half the ovens in town going from dawn until noon Thanksgiving Day. Or, the way things had been lately with most of the members either working full time or getting older, they'd take their funds and order all the turkeys out from one of the grocery stores in town.

The other two ministers waved him out and bent back to their note pads. Everything was under control.

Except the stranger.

Instead of heading toward the church, at the corner, Elders turned the other direction. Toward home. Toward Ann. And Christine.

Except when he got there, Ann was out. He found a note on the refrigerator in her school teacher's simple cursive. "Dry cleaners, florist and drug store. Supper with the Wilkins. Be sure to shave again. A." She'd drawn a fat heart under her name and a daisy on a stem.

He poured himself a glass of milk. The yellow and white kitchen was so quiet when the ice maker dropped its load, he startled. And the cat?

"Christine?" he wandered through the dining room into the dark paneled den to the bay window. Between the ferns and red geraniums brought in before the frost, the orange cat raised its head, yawned and licked his hand. Its tongue was rough as wool. "Crissy," he said. "Do you know how to think?" The cat stretched and purred. Its stomach was clean, soft and shiny as silk. "Never missed a meal, have you?" He scratched behind the cat's ears and felt only velvet smoothness. That cat had been Ann's when they married. Stephen never liked cats: he'd grown up owning dogs. For the first six months he and Christine circled each other.

She'd even hissed at him when he carefully moved her from the foot of their bed at night. Then it became his job to feed her. They were the early risers. Ann slept late. In those morning hours, he and the cat developed first an understanding, then friendship and now love. Evenings, most of the time, the cat preferred his lap to Ann's which caused Ann to raise both arms toward the ceiling and sigh. "It's just body fat. That's all. You've got more than I have, and your body temperature is warmer."

He finished his milk, rubbed the cat's head, rinsed his glass and left it in the sink.

As he rounded the corner to the church, he stopped. Something was different. Something had changed. The front lawn was bare. The stranger's tent and blankets were gone. Vanished. No tent. No stranger. There was only a matted pale square of grass where they had been and a pinkish ring around the maple where the clothesline had been tied. It would heal. The grass would be green again before the weekend. There would be nothing to show the stranger had been.

Except the dog.

Tied to the church rail was the godawful rack of bones and fuzz that had been at one time, a dog. Mary. "Okay, Mary," said Elders untying her rope. "You're his tracks to say he has been."

He led the dog to the church office where it licked his hand, dropped down in a heap and curled up like a bundle of rags.

"The least of these," he'd remind Thelma when he got back and she lashed out at him. "This is the least of them," and he'd send her to buy flea soap, a collar and vitamins.

Her desk was still dark, computer covered, but there was a note taped to his lamp. "Social Services took him after I called. He's got people in West Virginia. They been looking for him. Who says the Lord don't hep those who hep themselves. Ha!" She'd signed her name with a big, swirled T embellished with a cross and vine.

Ha! Indeed.

He checked the office clock. Nearly four. He could make the Vet's office before it closed.

Elders didn't even have to call the dog. She just followed him out, her nails clicking on the floor like fingers on a computer keyboard.