

Went to church yesterday, and it wasn't all that bad. The gospel text was from Matthew, Jesus' story about the laborers in the vineyard, and the last ones to go to work getting paid the same as the first, which was downright offensive to the first ones who'd worked all the day long. But they got their just desserts, the owner said, and then asked if they just might happen to be a little jealous of his generosity? Did grace extended to others leave them green with envy? The choir was magnificent as usual, and what a fine organist we have. The Choir Director somehow chooses just the right hymns for each Sunday's theme and text, the prayers were fitting, and even the babies refrained from crying too loudly during the moment for silent reflection. It was as if God massaged and maneuvered the human efforts to bring forth worship from what could have been a haphazard happening of unrelated events. Each Sunday the miracle of creation happens anew as God's Spirit broods over the waters of worship chaos and brings forth light and life, and all so decently and in good Presbyterian order. Amazing.

But as I walked into the courtyard, the order and decency gave way to a disordered discussion of the latest giant misstep in the life of the church. It seems that we make quite a few of them, but this one had an air of offensiveness which simply could not be ignored. I eased over to where Myrtle was holding court to catch up on the latest ecclesiastical fiasco.

"I can't believe it," Myrtle was exclaiming, "how could they do this? I'd really like to see the vote count, and I'd REALLY like to know who voted and how they voted. Oh, THAT would be revealing. But still, it is just a slap in the face to the many, many women who deserved it far more."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more," chimed in Ms. Ella who could always be counted on to agree and support Myrtle's position on just about anything. "Why she is so young, and, just what has she done? This is supposed to be an award of a lifetime, what's it called again..."

"A Lifetime Achievement Award," answered Ida Mae, "that's what it's called."

"Well, then she's had a pretty short lifetime," interrupted Myrtle. "It is a crying shame. How old is she, 25? At best. How could she receive the lifetime achievement award at that age? What has she done? Has she raised a family? Is she married? Whatever she has done she's been able to do because she hasn't got some needy, no count husband hanging around all day, along with two, three or four whiny kids to deal with. Why anyone with no worries could have done what she did..."

"What did she do?" I asked, unable to hold my tongue.

“Oh my God, are you the only person in the whole church and community who doesn’t know what she’s done? Why it’s been in the news and in the church newsletter and out on that web thingie, and well, all over...”

Myrtle was hot. A bit of a crowd had gathered around her little group and the emotions were rising.

“I’ve been a member of this church since 1936 when my folks bought the property just south of here. Every time the preacher was here, I was here, and my folks kept the stove stoked for winter and made sure the preacher and his family had fried chicken on Sundays. I grew up in this church, and after I went to school and came back, I taught Sunday School, I led the youth group, I was a deacon, and I sang in the choir, and then when they brought in refugee families to resettle here, I made room in my home for them, I fed them, I got their children into school and spent long hours trying to teach them English. I’ve served on just about every committee there is and Harlen and I always give to get the gospel out to those poor folks in Africa. I’ve served with you ladies on Women of the Church committees... Oh, listen to me. What am I saying?”

“Myrtle,” said Anna Lee, “Look, we know you’ve done all that and more. Your achievements go beyond a lifetime. Maybe this young lady was selected because of some adversity she’s had to deal with while still remaining faithful and active and missionary minded? Maybe we should give her a break and just give this a rest.”

“I think you’ve every right to be upset, Myrtle,” countered Ms. Ella. “Why, we’re all upset about this. It’s just not right, it’s not fair, it goes against our tradition here, it’s, it’s, it’s... it’s just not the way things are done. I know your God and Jesus and all you do for the church is ‘cause of that, and I know you don’t expect any reward or prizes for what you do. But surely a little recognition was in order.”

“Oh, but that’s not what I’m talking about,” spouted Myrtle. “It’s not that I’ve done so much. What gets me is that, well... it’s that she’s done so little. So little, but oh how the so little she’s done has gotten so blown up and exaggerated and written up and reported on the TV and, well, you’d think she was Mother Teresa come to our rescue.”

“And she didn’t do all that much, did she?” added Sarah. The intense emotions were giving even the meek and mild voice.

“Oh she’s hardly been a member of this church for 4 years. She’s gone through a nasty divorce... I can’t say I blame him for leaving... but now she’s got plenty of money from their settlement coming in, no kids to bother with, and all sorts of time on her hands. Why, if I hadn’t had to raise a family and look after a husband, and work part time think of what I could have done!” Myrtle wasn’t letting this go.

“Now Myrtle, “Maybe you’ll receive it later, next year, or the year after that?” said Barbara Jean. “Your record is extraordinary, your service long and sacrificial, your love of this church is unquestioned. Don’t fret, you’ll be the one soon.”

“I don’t even want it,” Myrtle shot back. “After this, after a woman whose lived barely a quarter of a lifetime gets a lifetime achievement award, well, if they gave it to me next year, it’d be a slap in the face. I’d turn it down. I’d throw it down. It doesn’t mean anything anymore. It’s just not like it used to be.” Myrtle turned, started to walk off, and then stopped, “They just give out an award like this with no thought, just willy-nilly to whomever happens to be the poster child of the day. Those with a lifetime of unsung service, well, what do they get?” And off she marched with all her virtues firmly in tack, if not publicly recognized.

“You know,” said Anna Lee to the small crowd still gathered, “This is not the last award we’ll give. We do this every year, and I do believe that Myrtle will have her lifetime of achievement duly recognized at last. But this year it was sort of nice. For the first time, instead of giving out the just deserts for a life well lived, we bestowed a sort of first fruits of grace, that will hopefully help a young lady live her life well.”