

## An Unforgettable Experience

I have had a few experiences that I will not forget. About a year ago, I had one of them, and it has become a fond memory. It involves four people: Ken, Cliff, and a guy of about 30 whose name I cannot remember. I'll call him Craig.

Ken had invited me to go with him to look at a new pulpit, baptismal font and communion table at a church in another town, the town where I had grown up. He had supplied the wood from a maple tree he had cut down and sawn into boards. My brother had built the furniture, and I wanted to see the finished produce. Ken is in his early 70s, a farmer whose family has been in Canada for a couple of hundred years. He was a member of my former church. Ken lives with his wife in a small cabin in the woods, a beautiful spot if you like that kind of thing. They have four children and a bunch of grandchildren but no great grandchildren, yet.

Ken had invited Cliff to join us for the excursion. I knew Cliff from years back when he was an English teacher at the high school I attended. While I would classify Ken as being a big guy, Cliff was the opposite. Cliff is quite short, compared to Ken and me. Cliff lives in an old farmhouse in the country and, as far as I know, never married. Cliff had the unique ability to gather people together to display their various talents, and how he found people in the community who could sing, play instruments, and generally entertain the rest of us, I don't know, but he knew them and gave them an opportunity to share their gifts with others. He used just about any excuse to hold a talent show – a random birthday, anniversary of his retirement, etc. – and he would pack the hall with people from the community. When I knew him as a teacher, I did not know that he was a Christian, but he is. Cliff joined us for the excursion because he simply enjoys that kind of thing, and since he cannot drive anymore, he depends on others to get out and about.

The third individual to join us was Craig. I knew Craig's parents from years back, but I didn't know him. Craig had grown up in a Christian home, but he had a bit of a rough patch. He lived on the street for a time, but he had since found a permanent residence in the town we were visiting. Craig had tattoos and body piercings, reminders of his former days. They remained an expression of his identity. Craig did not join us for the excursion, but we picked him up at the local Walmart. From the way he looked, I would not have identified him as Cliff's friend, but they were obviously close.

And then there was me, a pastor of Dutch descent, living a fairly conservative life in rural Ontario. I was along for the ride. More accurately, I acted as the driver, so perhaps the others were along for the ride.

After we picked Craig up, we went to a local restaurant for supper. After we ordered, I was about to suggest that we pray before the food arrived, but before I could get to it, Cliff said to Craig, "Why don't you ask for a blessing on the food?" We bowed our heads together and this tattooed, pierced, 30-year old man who had lived rough, prayed the most beautiful prayer, thanking God for his provision, and asking for his blessings on our lives. I should note that I expected that I would be praying for the meal, being I was the pastor and people seem to expect that of me. Cliff was wiser and he chose the right person to lead us in prayer, and I was blessed, and God was glorified.

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As we ate, we talked among ourselves, and I learned something about what living on the street means. I also gained some insight into the graffiti that we find on train cars that are loaded with grain and fertilizer. Craig was familiar with some of the artists who take it upon themselves to paint these cars. He himself was also an artist and perhaps his art has crossed the Lethbridge tressel at one time or another. During our meal, a woman approached our table and she acted like she knew us. We talked with her for a while, and all of us assumed that she knew one of us. She didn't, and we don't know why she picked us to have a conversation with, but she did, and it was pleasant.

As we spent time together, I could not help but marvel at the picture we must have presented to those around us. We sat together, an 80-year old retired teacher, a 70-year old retired farmer, a 55-year old pastor and a 30-year old tattooed and pierced former street person. Anyone seeing us would have wondered what brought us together.

Of all the meals I have shared over the years, this is one I will not forget. The food was no more than average, and the restaurant is not memorable. But the company was excellent. And what brought us together was an opportunity to view a newly built pulpit, communion table and baptismal font in a church none of us attended. But you would not know that from looking at us.

Circumstances brought us together, but what made the meal great was our common faith. All of us believed that it is by God's grace that we are saved through Jesus Christ. Our life journeys were radically different, but our common faith made us brothers in the Lord. And while we may have all started in different places and had very different experiences, our destination is the same. I don't expect I'll sit at the table with the four of us again while here on this earth, but perhaps in heaven, we'll share a meal together once more. And just as Jesus was present among us then, so he will be present among us on that day as well.

My advice: if you are invited to look at some newly built church furniture (or some other seemingly random reason to take an excursion), take a few hours out of your day and do so. Maybe God will give you an experience you will be stamped into your memory.

*Pastor Gary*