

A Good Stain

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I am an usher at my church, have been for a while. I suppose its one of those jobs you sort of fall into at first and end up with by default. Someone can't be there one Sunday morning so you step in, take his place. It's a follow-the-leader kind of job; shake a few hands, pass the plate, that sort of thing. You come early, make sure everything is how it is supposed to be. You smile, welcome the visitors, talk to everyone. You might have to feign interest for a while as you listen to an old lady tell you about her croup, or her grandchildren, and when everyone goes home, you stick around a while to clean up. As jobs go, its pretty routine.

So someone drops out, for good. Maybe it comes as a surprise, maybe the pastor has seen it coming; either way, you've covered once or twice and he feels like he can count on you. Maybe he's even been grooming you, hoping you're an usher kind of guy. When the phone rings early on a Sunday morning, you get that sinking feeling right before you hear your wife say, "of course he would, pastor. Yes sir, promptly at eight." And before you know it, the job's yours.

So I'd probably been doing it for two years when one Sunday morning, this kid came in the door. It was his first time, as far as I knew, so I approached him, introduced myself. His smile was nice enough, gave me a firm grip, but I must be honest, I don't really remember his name. I still see his face in my mind, his lips moving, almost in slow motion, but I can't recall a sound. I was too busy realizing he wasn't quite as much of a kid as I had thought at first. He looked young enough from the door, but the gray in his hair and the crows feet told me he was probably closer to thirty-five or forty. I thought to walk him in but dismissed the thought. Service was about to start and we were serving communion that morning. I had other responsibilities, so I handed him a program and let him go.

I didn't give the kid a second thought after that, just went into the sanctuary, found my place by the door. I hadn't been set a minute when the music started. We seated a few latecomers, sang a couple of songs; everyone got nice and settled in. At a break in the singing, as it always does, the congregation began to lightly mingle at the encouragement of the pastor. The aisles filled with smiling people engaged in small talk with one another. Old friends were being acknowledged and visitors were being greeted. It was then I noticed the kid again, sitting by himself on the end of the back row, not a person within three seats of him.

He remained seated, arm out on the back of the chair beside him, looking around; a subtle smile was on his lips. A few people approached him, shook his hand, leaned in to give him a name, to hear his. I also made my way around to his seat. He was as amiable as at first, shaking my hand firmly. He looked me in the eye, leaning in to hear my invitation to him to return another Sunday.

The rest of the service, I paid more attention to him. I didn't watch him really, just noticed him more. As we sang more songs, I would see him at times with his hands in his pockets, at others his arms folded over his chest. Sometimes he sang, sometimes he didn't. And he fidgeted during the sermon; leaning forward, then sitting back, arm up on the chair, then down in his lap. I got the impression he'd been in church before, maybe a lot.

He'd done this before and he was bored, like he was just waiting for it to end so he could get out of there. And I knew he would. He'd get up out of his seat and head for the door as soon as the last prayer was uttered, and he wouldn't say a word to anyone. New people come alone, they either love the place and they stick, or they don't and they never come back. It's rare to see that one who will just show up every once in a while, when he feels like it. Guys like that kid, getting on up in age, they're in church for a reason. They're not looking for a place to kill a Sunday; they're looking for a place to *be*. That's what I got from this guy. Just watching him, I knew this wasn't that place, and he wouldn't be back.

Just about that time, the pastor gave us that familiar signal—so familiar everyone in the church knew it—to come and prepare the sacraments. And thoughts of that kid passed from my mind.

Communion. At our church, it is a fairly common occurrence. Other than Christmas and Easter, we take it once or twice more a year, usually around back to school, and one other time, more random, when the pastor feels it's right. That Sunday, the Sunday the kid came was one of those last minute occurrences when the pastor just feels led. I must admit, our prayer meeting that morning seemed more significant than usual. It was a good day to take communion.

Most people here like it, the taste of a little grape juice and the bite of the bread. Not those little, white Styrofoam-like wafers, but bread made the traditional way, with no yeast, by our pastor's wife.

It's a slow process, serving everyone in the church, first the bread, then the cup. The music plays softly in the background; the congregation is more still, more quiet than usual. When we're done, we make our way back to the front and wait while the pastor serves us. Last, our senior usher and eldest member of the church board, serves the pastor.

That Sunday morning was no different. We served our body and then were served one another. Then we waited while our pastor addressed us.

“Paul tells us to examine ourselves upon taking communion, that we always recognize the body of our Lord when we do. For any man who eats the bread or drinks of the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.”

We all prayed as he prayed and when he was finished, he reminded us of the words Jesus spoke when he served communion to his own disciples. “Jesus said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ Now eat of the body.” And we ate the bread in our hands.

“He then said to his disciples, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ Now body, drink of the blood as well.” And we drank with him.

We took the bread and the wine, symbols of the body and blood of Christ, into our own bodies, and we remembered Him in doing so.

Pastor moved from the pulpit and made his way to the altar to pray, leaving his people to observe the moment as they would, in whatever manner they saw fit. For my part, I joined my wife where she was seated and for a few moments, we prayed together.

In only a few minutes, the congregation began to stir, and people made their way from their places to leave. And when I arose, I couldn’t help but notice, the kid had already gone. Just as well, I thought, he’ll find somewhere he belongs. And for the third time that day, I dismissed the kid.

Later, when my wife, and most of the parishioners had gone, I made my way down the aisles, moving between rows, picking up the cups left behind. Later, one of the others would come behind and vacuum the carpet, but that wouldn’t be me. Today, it was my turn to collect the cups.

I went about my task, thinking only of the relaxing afternoon I would have, when I found myself in the back row, in front of the end seat, where the kid had made his place. I reached down to pick up his cup from the chair, when something about it stopped me. I can’t say I was offended; in fact, I wasn’t. At first, it looked only slightly out of the ordinary. But still, I stayed where I was, unable to let myself pick up that cup. Something about it just didn’t look right, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Then something on the floor caught my eye.

A piece of bread lay crumbled on the floor. But the longer I stared at it, the more I realized it wasn’t crumbled at all, but broken; broken in four tiny, yet equal pieces. And beside it, a very small stain, barely distinguishable on our dark carpet, but recognizable nonetheless. I looked again at the cup and its placement began to make more sense to me. The little flared plastic cup wasn’t standing, but had been turned over, upside down and away from the spill. And I began to realize it wasn’t a spill at all, but an intentional act, as was the breaking of the bread.

A prank, I thought. An insensitive act perpetrated by a thoughtless individual. I picked up the cup and returned it to its place, and then I picked up the pieces of the bread and threw them in the trash. I returned with a wet cloth to try to remove the stain, but it wouldn’t come away. It hadn’t dried, but it had been there long enough. I stood up and

shook my head in frustration. As small and nearly invisible as it was, I could see it. A permanent stain in the shape of disdain.

And as I drove home, I could not get the image out of my mind. I still saw the sacraments broken and spilled there on the ground. It nagged at me, why someone would do that, why it would be funny. It wasn't funny, not to me. And it wasn't a prank. It was so clearly an intentional act, but not just intentional—*purposeful*. It was a staged scene, created to be seen. But why? I thought of all the reasons I could, but none held positive connotations for me. But maybe that was the point. And that was when my frustration became anger.

“Our church is a good church with good people,” I thought. “We don't force anyone to do anything they don't want to do, and we don't look down on anyone. Why would someone repay our hospitality with spite? I couldn't figure it out. This kid, whose hand I shook, deliberately broke the bread he took and poured out the wine he was given onto the floor, as if it were dirt, or less than dirt. Why would he do that?”

“Maybe he felt he was sinful, that he was unworthy to eat and drink. It doesn't make sense though; it would have been better if he hadn't received them at all, or left them there on the chair, whole, rather than the way he did.”

As I sat there, fuming, my anger slowly began to subside, giving way to sadness and I decided not to go home right away. I turned around and drove back to the church, where only the pastor's car remained. I missed lunch with my family that day, a cardinal sin in itself, but during the course of that afternoon, God and I came to a little understanding about the state of things.

It's been about two years and nothing is the same for me. I still go to the same church and I'm still an usher, that hasn't changed, but these days, I find myself at the church on Sunday mornings before anyone else. Sometimes even the pastor. And I'm always the last one to leave.

Always.

And I've noticed I look forward to seeing people come in the door, even the little old ladies who just want to chat me up about their grandchildren, the fond memories they have of the loved ones who have passed, or just maybe how they're doing these days. And I listen. I like to listen, and I hear every word.

And I'm always on the lookout for those guys, the ones who come in alone, who just want to sit alone and be left alone. And maybe they really do. But me, I just operate under the assumption that they really don't, that they only think they do. And those guys, they always seem to have an empty seat beside them. So I take it. And those guys usually end up at my house for lunch, and they usually come back.

I don't know why the kid did what he did. I think maybe he was just hurt or angry and wanted to let God know how much. Maybe in his own tilted way he just wanted to make a point. But sometimes I think about him, and I wonder where he is, or what he's doing. I wonder *how* he's doing. And sometimes I just randomly say a prayer for him, whoever he is, hoping I get a second chance. Or at least he will.

And then some days, I get these thoughts in my head, like it maybe wasn't an accident he ended up there that day, like maybe he was sent there just for me. Other thoughts come too, thoughts I'm a little too embarrassed to say out loud, but they're there. And thinking they might be true makes me smile.

And sometimes, when I'm at the church early on a Sunday morning, while the pastor is in his office and not another soul is around, I walk over to that spot on the back row and just look down at that stain. I guess everyone in that church at one time or another over the past two years, including the pastor, has tried to wash that stain away, but it's still there. I guess it always will be, as long as they don't change the carpet. I hope they don't. I like it there. It's a good stain.