

If I Let You

I picked up the phone in the church office on the third ring, a habit from my law practice days. It made my parishioners think I'm busy, not sitting by the phone. "St. John's Lutheran. This is Pastor Charles."

"Are you busy?"

"Hi Bev," I said, feeling relief at hearing her voice. "Somewhat. What's on your mind?" I paused, listened to her soft breathing. "Hello? Bev?"

"My parents went home, thank God. Then the load of firewood got delivered. I can't even lift a match the way I feel. Can you? Can you help stack the wood?"

"Why not? I have a new member coming in soon, then I have to see two people at the hospital."

"That's okay."

"I'll be over after that. Is that okay?"

"I said it was okay," she said, then hung up.

I wondered if I was crazy. Bev buried her son two days ago. David had been working with the churches in El Salvador when someone, we don't know who or why, shot him as he walked along a street in San Salvador.

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When Charles arrived at Bev's house he went right to the pile of firewood where the delivery truck left it. Bev came out briefly, unlocked the door to the cellar, pointed to where she wanted him to stack the wood. Then she went inside. Bev chose to sit at the breakfast room table in a chair she rarely used herself. It gave her a view of the back driveway near the garage. She watched Charles moving the firewood, stacking logs in the wheel barrow and hauling the wood out of sight to the basement steps. *To the bowels of the house*, she imagined. Each load represented another evening before the fireplace, another night without David, looking into the fire for some answers.

There isn't enough firewood in the world to give me what I want, she thought, staring out the window, no longer following Charles' movements, instead remembering last night's phone

call with her father, when he asked why she was crying. Her sharp reply, “Because David is dead!” opened the distance between them more. She ignored his reply of wanting to know the particular circumstances, what special memory had come to mind. She told him he wouldn’t understand.

She peered out the window at Charles. *Half way done*, she thought. For a moment she felt pity for him, for his wanting to help a messed-up person like herself. *He’s struggling too much with the firewood. I should ask him to rest for a while.* Instead, Bev sat, watched Charles until he finished. She went upstairs to lie down, as though she had been doing the work.

Charles waited in the kitchen, not disturbing her. He was prepared to wait. When she finally came down, Bev insisted on going to the cemetery to put more flowers on David’s grave. “I need to go,” she told Charles, and he took her.

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At the cemetery, we stood together, silent, our shadows from my car lights on the still-settling grave. The footing for the stone had been installed, but it would be months before the proper monument would be ready. “He’s not there,” Bev said. When I put my arm around her, she added, “He’s in heaven. I know that.”

In the stillness, as I felt her body shaking from tears, I spoke to the grave, “Where ever you are, David, I promise. I will take care of your mother.”

“He heard you,” Bev said, and, after a while, we left.

Back at her home, we sat in front of the fireplace and the faltering flames that failed to warm the morbid chill I knew she felt deep in her bones. The distance between us on the couch seemed impenetrable. The room now felt too big and too empty, lifeless. Finally, she spoke of not understanding God’s motives.

“Neither do I,” I said.

“So what *do* you understand?” she asked, pulling David’s high school sport letter jacket around her. She had piled up some of his things that he didn’t take to El Salvador, as if to find him in the memories and physical contact with his things.

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid I know more about the motives of people than why God acts or, in this case, didn’t act.”

“Then *you* should know why someone killed David.”

“We don’t have the facts. Just what they told you.”

“I don’t believe them.”

“We could try to find out why David died,” I said. Bev could see me watching her carefully. Bev offered an almost imperceptible nod of agreement. What I said were words she needed to hear. There could never be peace for her until she learned what had happened, or at least exhausted all avenues in the search. She knew she would become obsessed with tracking down her son’s killer.

“I can’t tell you how I feel,” she said. “It’s not revenge but my need to make sense of life. I’ll hunt relentlessly, even decades, until my grave rises up to claim me.”

“Even if we don’t learn everything,” I said as I got up and stoked the fire, “we can try.”

Bev sat quietly, surrounded by keepsakes and reminders of her son, tears again rolling down her cheeks. She could no more control those tears than rein in the wind. “Charles,” she said, “I’m not much good to you now.”

“Don’t say that.” I moved to her, wrapped my arms around her, not knowing how else to offer comfort.

“I’m not. I just can’t feel anything but pain.”

“I wish I could take it away. The intensity will ease up, of that I’m sure. Time heals. Staying busy helps. And you’ll always have your memories of David.” I knew I shouldn’t be saying anything.

“But not *him*. Not until I die.”

“Bev . . .”

“You say we could find out what really happened?”

“We can try.” I wondered if I had dodged a bullet, or maybe it just hadn’t been fired yet.

“I know I can’t have David back.” Bev paused, swallowed hard, and pressed three fingers against her quivering lips. “But if I understood why he died, if his death meant something, then maybe I could settle for that.”

I let go of her, let her sit back on the corner of the couch, pull David’s jacket over her legs. She seemed to get more comfort hugging herself than anything I could do.

“I’m going to El Salvador.”

“Sure. With my church delegation.” I wondered what she was really saying. “We agreed. I’m working on the arrangements.”

“I don’t need them. I went to Guatemala. Why do I need them?”

“You had David in Guatemala, had a limited, though nice, agenda of visiting your son for a few days. In El Salvador you know no one, don’t speak the language.”

“I know what delegations do. They go to meetings and hear compelling stories from oppressed people, and talk about solidarity, then they go home to their normal, safe, middle class life. I don’t need that. I don’t care about that stuff any more.”

“It’s what David did.” I wanted to hold her, squeeze her until she agreed but I stayed away. “Listen, Bev. I called someone in El Salvador. She didn’t want to talk, out of fear that the call was monitored, which it probably was, but she did say that the priest I know, Padre Rafael, had been with David that morning, and that they were to take part in a commemoration.”

“For Romero. I knew that.”

“Right. And she thinks we need to talk to Padre Rafael.”

“We?”

“Bev, I don’t know what the future holds for us. But right now, even the fact that we enjoy being together isn’t important. If I were you I would want to know what happened, what really happened to David, and you have said you want that.”

“Charles. Are you saying you will help me? Really help me?”

“Yes.”

“When I had David, my son, my anchor of sanity in this ugly world, solidarity didn’t seem so bad. No,” she said, pausing as if to find the words, “don’t tell me you’ll be my anchor. It isn’t the same.”

“I would never presume to say that. What I wanted to say is that you have David in your memories, and we are going to El Salvador to gather more of them. You are doing the grief work. I’m just a resource. The nice thing is, I want to be more than just a resource.”

“Maybe some day, but not now. Go. You have work to do. Get that delegation organized for me. I’ll go with you.”

Of course I knew the unacceptability of a death like David's causes a disorientation in grieving persons that prevented them from functioning normally. Life no longer makes sense, and even simple tasks seem impossible. Bev desperately needed help. I vowed to provide it. I called daily, came over three or four times a week, took her on errands on days she didn't have the strength to go by herself.

One day I took Bev to the grocery store, taking the list from her quivering hand, reminding her what she had gone there to buy. Another day I accompanied her to the hairdresser, not explaining to the beautician why we left after only five minutes, Bev in tears and the whole shop staring.

Before the fatal bullet in San Salvador changed her life, our lives really, I had begun to dream of coming home to a warm greeting from a loving wife I hoped she would become, sharing enthused conversations. Not any more. Now, after parking my car in front of her house and saying a silent prayer for strength and guidance, I would cautiously cross the threshold of the unexpected. Then the search began: a game of hide-and-seek Bev didn't know she was playing. The hunt might lead me to her bedroom, finding Bev kneeling in front of the open cedar chest rearranging David's baby clothes, saved twenty years for the grandchild she would never rock to sleep, or sing a lullaby to, or cuddle in her arms. Another time Bev would be curled up by the breakfast room window gazing outside almost catatonically, "seeing" a different backyard where David and his friends played catch, and tag, and marathon Monopoly games, and shared problems, secrets, and dreams peculiar to pre-adolescent boys.

Some days I had to stay away, busy with ordinary ministry to the congregation, keeping up my work at the church and in the community. The dream of being home with Bev around-the-clock had been banished from my consciousness. When I looked at her, she seemed so vulnerable, and I could not hug her, hold her. I couldn't do that. Her bereavement became a private agony, something she could not share.

A few times, Bev would stop in at St. John's Church when she went out. She would try to run an errand, then need to talk to me to calm her down. One time she came into my office and I told her, "I got some black grouper. I went to the Reading Terminal. Great seafood."

Bev looked around, like she expected to see a fish on my desk. "What's special about black grouper?"

"Just wait. I coat it with Old Bay seasoning, then fry it in olive oil and a little butter."

“Sounds good,” she said. Bev looked weak, as though she couldn’t remember how to stand. She moved over to the chair in front of my desk.

“Your tongue will think it is in heaven.”

“Heaven? Do Lutherans believe in heaven? I mean, not just for tongues?”

“Sorry, Bev,” I said quickly. “Extremely poor choice of words.”

Bev looked at me, hopefully saw my contrition. “Sorry. There is so much in this world to be sorry for. David and I often talked about El Salvador and the tragic lives of the poor.” She made a fist, as though to shake it at me. “You didn’t mean anything. At least you talk to me. I should shake a fist at my parents. It’s me, not you. Remember, you said I had to do my grief work. Dealing with heaven is part of that. I just can’t see David in heaven, looking down on me, seeing me cry all the time. My parents won’t let me cry. I told them not to come over anymore.”

Bev did talk, however, mostly rambling speculation on why and how David died. Feeling and sounding miserable, her words were still punctuated by occasional great sobs, Bev seemed beyond consolation when she wondered about her son. I tried to answer her, to comfort her, but soon realized that saying nothing was probably best. I listened long after there was anything new to hear. A few times, unable to fathom the depth of her pain, I offered suggestions —as the minister perhaps— and quickly wished I hadn’t. She was drowning in grief, beyond self pity, disoriented, spiraling downward into an abyss.

At dinner one evening, I said, “I can find someone who understands.”

“Now I’m one of your bleeding heart projects,” Bev snapped.

“You’re the liberal,” I said, too quickly, then winced in regret.

Another wave of pain flowed through Bev as she sat, silent, unable to deny what I had said. I knew she had to be thinking that she’s the one who let him go.

“Charles, back when he and I were alone, when David helped out with our expenses, just the two of us, giving me money from his paper route, we were into causes. Issues. ‘Looking for justice’ I used to say. Now, I don’t need his money. It doesn’t matter that I don’t need his gifts. I went to her, put my arm around her. As the immediate tension subsided, she smiled. “I know my grief is keeping me from seeing you as I had before. But I’m not a project,” she said. “Looking for justice has never been that. Now I can’t even do that for David.”

“What I want to do is to introduce you to someone I know whose son died.”

“How?”

“Car accident,” I said, frowning.

“No. Introduce me to the mother of a murder victim. In fact, do that for me in El Salvador.”

“I would help you.”

“If I let you,” she said, pushing me away, then pulling me to her, hugging me, as if she was trying to hurt me with her strength. Later, I learned that Bev spent all night looking at David’s letters.