

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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Blessing in Disguise

Sunday morning, I was preaching at the Oasis Christian Fellowship in Pleasant Hill, about an hour's drive from Ripon. My friend and fellow pastor in the Free Methodist denomination, Rob Baker, invited me to come and share with his congregation. I readily accepted.

Pastor Rob has been there quite a number of years, bringing an infectious energy that is contagious when you are in his presence. His congregation is an eclectic bunch covering the spectrum of Americans of all shapes, sizes, ethnicities, ages, disabilities, and diversity of spiritual journeys. Isaura and I came away convinced that we had been blessed by these folks more than any words I shared from the pulpit.

Music is one of Rob's loves, having written many worship songs in the contemporary genre of church music. I have had a few of his CDs for the past several years. The congregation is lively and very loving. It couldn't have been more than five minutes after Isaura and I walked in that we were approached by John. We were sitting in the back row, listening to the worship team practice. This was twenty minutes prior to the service starting. I always plan to be at a speaking/preaching engagement well ahead of time so as not to be a concern to the person who has invited me, wondering, "Is he coming?"

So, anyway, John comes up beside my chair and says "Hi. Welcome to Oasis!" I stood up to greet him, reaching for his extended hand. I immediately noticed that he was holding a white stick in his other hand. His sunglasses confirmed his blindness. We chatted a bit, explaining that he had lost his vision six years earlier due to diabetes. At this point he introduced his wife, Dalia, who was sitting across the way. She gave us a big smile and waved. I walked over to shake her hand, only to realize that she was confined to a wheel chair. The way she was seated told me her legs were of no use to her.

This encounter made a profound impression on me. Here Isaura and I were, fully mobile with all of our senses in operational mode. Yet John and Dalia extended themselves, despite their physical limitations, by warmly welcoming us into their fellowship. And they were at the church well before the service was to begin, no doubt seeking to be a blessing to someone, as they were to us. They simply could not have been more gracious. It set the tone for the rest of our time with these folks at Oasis.

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I next approached the audio/video guy, Daniel, to ask if he could put some passages of Scripture up on the screen during my sermon. He assured me that he could and had it loaded up in a couple of minutes. As I watched his dexterity with the computer, envying his prowess, I suddenly paid a bit more attention to what he was doing. It was then that I noticed his arms and hands did not work naturally. His elbows were splayed, with fingers pointing in awkward directions. But he never missed a bit in accomplishing his task.

After several rousing songs of worship, Pastor Rob asked if anyone had something for which they would like to praise God. Normally, in most churches I've been in, an awkward moment of silence is uncomfortably endured until someone offers a praise. Not at Oasis! My goodness, these folks were sharing answers to prayer, thanking God for others in the congregation who had been praying for them during serious illness, or offering to help one another. This must have gone on unabated for at least twenty minutes at which point Pastor Rob brought that part of the service to a close. I was so enjoying this blessing that I was somewhat chagrined that it had to end.

I was introduced by Pastor Rob in his typical tongue-in-cheek tomfoolery concerning my military service, travels around the world, and other nonsense which his congregation thoroughly enjoyed. Stepping up to the pulpit, I remarked that I was going to ignore his disparaging remarks. After all, he referred to me as an ex-Marine! As everyone should know, there are no ex-Marines. Once a Marine, always a Marine. The congregation took delight in this bit of repartee between us.

The Scripture I used was taken from Ephesians 6:10-20, which describes how any follower of Jesus must put on the whole armor of God. Why? Because we are "not fighting against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces." I concluded by reminding these dear people that God has equipped us to do spiritual battle by providing us with two weapons; God's Word (the Bible), and prayer.

After the service, Isaura and I went to lunch with a lady (and her son) who used to attend the Ripon Free Methodist Church when I was the pastor. She now attends Oasis. We spent the time getting caught up on each other's comings and goings, all while consuming delightful Chinese cuisine. I had sweet and sour pork. Yum!

To top off the day, late in the afternoon, I picked up Alyssa, my nine-year-old granddaughter, and took her golfing at Spring Creek. She has become quite the golfer, hitting the ball well over one hundred yards from the tee. That sure does my heart good to see her enjoying this sport which we can play together. I am truly blessed.

Have a great week! And look for God's blessings! You might just be surprised!