

# AN ORDINARY SUNDAY

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*LUKE 18:9–14*

*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*

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*OCTOBER 23, 2016/23<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST*

It was an ordinary Sunday morning at an ordinary Canadian church.

It was a large church, a growing church, a church that had a big budget, a large, competent, well-educated staff, a bustling children’s ministry, It was a church that had a good reputation in town—a church that gave generously to a variety of worthy causes and had a good public profile.

The church was full of influential people—movers, shakers, doctors, lawyers, large and small business owners, even a few politicians. The church was mostly white, mostly middle class, mostly conservative.

On most Sunday mornings, the church coffee bar was full of people and conversation—parents who dropped their kids off for children’s’ programming but weren’t interested in adult education, various others who just wanted to come early before the service.

As it happened, this Sunday morning happened to be in the middle of an election campaign. Familiar issues had dominated in the media throughout the week.

Tax cuts, government accountability, refugees, familiar hot-button social issues, and conversation about the “agendas” of minority groups, same-sex education advocacy groups, indigenous rights activists, to name just a few.

And these issues, not surprisingly, showed up during coffee hour. Some interesting comments were heard over the clanging of cups and the sipping of lattes.

*I worked for what I have! Nobody gave me anything. I don't see why I should be expected to pay more taxes just so there's more for all these people who can't get their act together. Handouts never helped anyone, anyway!*

*Honestly, I get tired of all those special interest groups clamouring for attention and recognition and rights. Pretty soon, it's going to be crime to be a white, middle class, heterosexual man!*

*Sure, those Indians have gotten a raw deal over the years, but they're not the only ones. What about the Japanese people who were shipped in during WW2? They just rolled up their sleeves and made a new life. I mean, we should try to help however we can, but at some point they've got to figure out the solutions to their own problems.*

*Jesus never said we should be pushovers, did he? Didn't he also say that we're supposed to be wise as serpents? That means we have to be discerning. We need to protect our rights, too. What about our freedoms, our way of life? Who's going to stand up for Christian values?*

*We need to get our nation back to the way it once was. You know, a Christian nation. We're heading down a dangerous road with all this secularism and political correctness. Whatever happened to being able to tell the truth without someone claiming to be offended?!*

The coffee hour ended and the people proceeded into the worship service. The music was polished and inspiring, the sermon was funny and relevant and uplifting, the multimedia came off without a hitch (!).

About two thirds of the way through the service, the ushers noticed a man stumble through the front door. His appearance was disheveled—his stringy black hair was uncombed, his clothes were tattered, his shoes looked like they didn't fit. He had bad tattoos snaking down his arms and up his neck. He reeked of booze.

He was native.

The ushers approached him cautiously. "Um, can we help you, sir?"

The man mumbled something about just wanting to sit down for a while. His feet hurt, he said, and he had a headache.

The ushers said, "I'm sorry, sir, this isn't the place."

The man had had a hard life. He had been orphaned as a ten-year-old boy when his mother was no longer able to care for him. His dad had never been in the picture. He was then shuffled through a series of foster homes.

He was living on the street by 15, an addict by 18. He had been in and out of jail for petty offenses more times than he could remember.

Now, he was nearly forty and he felt like his life had reached a breaking point. He couldn't go on like this. He was tired. So tired.

He remembered the Roman Catholic church on the reserve that his mom had sometimes taken him to before she had to give him up. He remembered the evangelical church that one of his foster families had gone to.

He remembered always being fascinated by this Jesus—this broken man with his arms outstretched on a wooden cross, as if to welcome and embrace the whole world.

He had never had much use for religion—all the sitting and standing and praying and hard-to-sing songs, all those preachers going on about God only knows what—but he had never been able to shake that Jesus.

Jesus would understand him, he thought, even if no one else ever could.

"Sir? We're gonna need you to move along." The ushers were talking to him again.

He thought about that image of Jesus. "I just wanna pray," he said. "That's all. I won't be a bother."

The ushers looked at each other knowingly.

“You know what, why don’t you just wait here in the back with us for a while until we get someone to help.” The man slumped down in a chair in the foyer while the service continued.

A few minutes later, a police car showed up and the ushers kindly escorted the man outside. He had a resigned look on his face as he looked out the squad car window, as the church receded gradually from view.

The ushers shook their heads. “It’s just so hard to help those people...”

Ten minutes or so later, the worship service ended and people began to pour into the foyer and the church parking lot. They had smiles on their faces as they discussed plans for lunch and for the rest of the day.

One of them was overheard saying, “It’s so great to be part of a relevant and uplifting church like this. I’m so happy to be part of a church where we can worship with like-minded people...”

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It was an ordinary Sunday morning at an ordinary Canadian church.

It was a small church by most standards. It had a small budget, one part-time bi-vocational pastor who also taught at the university. It had few programs to speak of.

It was a bit of a mixed community. There were intellectuals and academics, a few professionals, some blue-collar workers and NGO reps and retired folks. It was a mostly white, middle class church, no matter how much they wished they were more ethnically diverse.

They prided themselves on being different than the other, larger churches in the area. They liked it that they were small, that they were a “community” not an “institution.”

The church had a range of political and theological views, but the most prominent voices tended to be more progressive in nature.

They were engaged in a wide variety of social justice issues, whether it was indigenous issues or creation care or gender equality or refugee resettlement.

It was a church that tried to create space for doubters. They wore their willingness to ask hard questions as a badge of honour, as an expression of what authentic faith looked like.

For the most part, they shared a conviction that a faith that made no difference in the real world, that didn't do anything to relieve the burdens of the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, the suffering, was no faith at all.

This church also had a coffee hour before their worship service. And this coffee hour was also peppered with all kinds of religious and political commentary.

*Can you believe that there are still Christians out there who think that being a Christian means voting conservative?*

*Honestly, it's so embarrassing to be lumped together with all those people who think that faith is all about being against gay marriage or abortion or evolution! Don't they realize that nobody can take them seriously when they're so determined to remain ignorant about science and cultural progress?*

*No kidding. Sometimes it amazes me that those people can read the Bible so literally. Don't they understand the importance of reading in context?*

*I get so frustrated when those people pick out six or seven verses about some pet sin that they hate and ignore the mountain of biblical instruction on caring for the poor and pursuing justice.*

*I wish some of these fundamentalists would focus less on their 'personal relationship with Jesus' and more on their neighbour! I mean, seriously...*

The worship service started. It was a small gathering filled with cerebral prayers and readings, meaningful hymns and Taize choruses. The sermon was an intellectually stimulating and challenging call to being people who pursue justice, who love mercy, and who walk humbly with God.

Part way through the service, a smartly dressed middle-aged woman showed up. She had a nametag with "Focus on the Family" on it and an armful of promotional materials. She apologized for being late and asked the ushers if she could just sit at the back. She

was just hoping to speak to the pastor after the service about a sexual purity program that she was promoting.

The woman had a story. She had grown up in a good Christian home and met a nice young Christian man at the conservative Christian college they both attended. They had gotten married young, had a few kids and were living an idyllic life.

A year or so ago, her husband started getting distant and dismissive with her. It seemed like he was gone more than he was there and when he was there he didn't really seem there. He didn't engage with her in the way he once did, he didn't listen, didn't seem to care that she was carrying the bulk of the load with the kids.

One day, she stumbled upon her husband's open laptop computer. She was stunned and horrified to encounter a mountain of pornography in his browsing history and on his hard drive.

She was shattered. She felt confused, worthless, deceived, manipulated. She felt like the rug had been pulled out from under her feet, like she had been betrayed on the deepest and most hurtful level.

With fear and trembling, she confronted her husband about what she had seen. He confessed to it all and this sent her spiraling into a cycle of self-loathing and self-destructive behaviour.

She started to drink heavily. She made excuses not to be home, she started missing appointments and neglecting the kids. She even had a few flings with men she met at the bar.

She was determined to make the pain go away, whether by drowning it in alcohol or causing her husband the kind of pain that he had caused her.

After months of this—months of accusations and apologies, tears and confession, grief and anger—they together agreed to seek help. They knew they couldn't fix this on their own and they knew their children deserved better.

They had found this sexual purity program offered by Focus on the Family, and decided to give it a try.

Gradually, they began to put the pieces of their marriage back together again. Gradually, their family began to be healed. The woman credited this program with playing a huge role in saving her marriage and family.

“Ma’am?” The ushers were speaking to her again...

“You’re welcome to participate in the rest of the service, but I’m not sure our pastor will have time after the service, you’ll have to see. We don’t tend to promote those kinds of programs here. Sexual purity programs have done a lot of harm, after all, with all their impossible expectations and outdated gender norms...”

The woman sat down at the back for the remainder of the service. After the benediction had been pronounced, the woman made her way to the foyer. A few people said hello and made pleasant conversation with her. Most glanced warily at her nametag, smiled, and moved on.

She stood in the foyer until nearly everyone was gone. Finally, the pastor emerged from his study. He seemed tired, distracted, in a hurry.

“Would you be interested in learning more about this program?” she asked him politely.

He looked at her nametag, then at the promotional material. He smiled at her in a forced and vaguely condescending way.

“Um, well sure, you can leave me your materials. I’ll try to get to them this week. If I have time. It’s just that we don’t tend to give a platform to organizations like yours at this church.”

She smiled at him. She got responses like this quite a bit, so she was used to it. She left her material and thanked him for his time.

As the pastor walked out to his car, one of his church members drove by and rolled down her window. She wanted to confirm the time for an evening lecture at the local university later that night about the social construction of gender norms. It had been in the bulletin. The pastor reminded her of the details and assured her that he would be there.

She thanked him, and with a grateful smile departed saying, “I’m so glad to be a part of an intellectually and socially engaged church like this one! It’s so great to be part of a church where we can worship with like-minded people...”

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*“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, **I thank you that I am not like other people**—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’*

*“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’*

*“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. **For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.**”*

Amen.

