

LEAVE YOUR PLOW

IT WAS WHEN JANET DIED of ovarian cancer, eaten from the inside out, that Mike decided to go into the ministry. He was forty-nine at the time, the kids were through college and (pretty much) out on their own, and he was tired of going to a meaningless job and sitting in a cube.

The corporation was all about appearances and everyone was a salesman—of himself. Mike did not relate to any of that. He was tired of it, the big talkers and little-doers, the endless tedious meetings with fancy PowerPoint presentations and posturing and jockeying for the floor. It all seemed so empty to him now, so pointless after his wife died, after he watched her die in agony and he himself died a little watching her.

His heart was for his family, and when Janet died his heart was broken, too broken to see any reason to go to work anymore just to pay for the house where he no longer felt at home. She had been the reason, he realized it now; he saw it clearly for the first time. She and the kids were the reason he crawled out bed on frozen January days and scraped the hard frost off the windshield and dragged himself in for “another day in paradise.”

There was one thing he had always wanted to do, though, or thought he wanted to do, and that was some kind of ministry. Their life was structured around their community church, his and Janet’s. Faith was like bread to them, like water. He loved God and the words of life and the love of the cross was strong in him. It was his inspiration, his thought-being.

But ministry? Really? Actually the idea had been suggested by many people over the years, including his pastors, but he was always too self-effacing to take it seriously. True, when he did readings in church something strange happened to him. He went into the grip of something—he did not know what. People noticed and commented on it. Then there was the Bible Study they asked him to lead. It turned out he was a bit of a natural. Everyone told him so.

In any case he had been thinking about the ministry for some time, somewhere in the back of his mind, more and more as the years went by and his job went round and round in circles. He and Janet

used to talk about it. Was he being called? Was it possible even to have a call at his rapidly advancing age? Why not? It had happened to others, people they knew. He felt alive when he was at church and doing things, thinking about how to spread the “good news.” This was exciting stuff for him.

His actual job? Meh. Not that he wasn’t grateful to have an actual job. But there wasn’t any joy in it for him anymore. He was not an “agent for change” or “serving the customer” or whatever the company blather de jour happened to be. He was a fixer for Management. He analyzed markets and helped them shape their forecasts and then correct with year-end adjustments when things went awry, as they often did. One percent over budget in sales and plus-territory for profitability—amazing the things you can do with price increases and inventory adjustments.

You know what it was all about, in the end? It dawned on him one day. It was about Management getting their annual bonuses and not looking like idiots at the next shareholders’ meeting. His entire job was about that and only that. And this began to grind on him over the years. He saw the CEOs come and go, good men, bad men, indifferent men. Some deserved bonuses and some deserved a kick in the pants. But it didn’t seem to matter. They all got their bonuses in the end because they had Mike and Mike knew how to make it happen.

Then Janet died and he was shaken. He went into a gray zone and stayed there for a long time. Getting up in the morning became harder and harder and smiling at people who didn’t smile back became positively painful—until he finally decided he’d had enough. Yes, he made that momentous decision they tell you never to make while you are still grieving. He would give up being one of the corporate dead in order to see if it was possible to live.

He told the kids what he was thinking. They were a little hurt when they realized it would entail selling the house they had grown up in but did not resist him. To tell the truth they were still so much in shock over the loss of their mother that they did not have the strength or will to resist. Besides, it wasn’t a complete surprise. They knew he had been thinking about it for some time. They’d heard him talk about it now and then when he thought they weren’t listening.

Once the decision was made, doors just seemed to open. He put the house on the market and it sold almost immediately. He was glad to be rid of it and all the painful memories of his beloved wife

coming home to die. She was there and she wasn't there. A flickering light, a glimmer at the top of the stairs; not a ghost exactly—at least he didn't think so—his own mind playing tricks on him—bringing her home—why couldn't she come home?

Of course she couldn't come home. That was one of the main reasons he had to get out of there. He gave the kids everything they wanted, and this seemed to mollify them—and him, his conscience—giving away everything their mother loved, which had to be done if he was going to move on, if he was going to pursue his new plan.

He knew it was hard for them. Janet had been their best friend, their confidante, their cheerleader, their strength and their support in good times and bad, always there for them no matter what, unconditional love and so much more. They loved her for it and it grieved them to come home to the place where she no longer was, where all they could think about was her cheerful greetings and how much they missed her, where their father was moping around sad and solitary and a little unkempt and trying to pretend he was happy—for their sake.

This hurt Mike too because he realized he couldn't fill that hole for them. She had her place in their lives, she was Mom, and he could not fill the aching void she left behind, and this made him sad and made him feel inadequate and small.

Anyway, the house sold for a good price. Mike moved into an in-law apartment in a local farmhouse and started sending applications to seminaries. Somewhat to his surprise the first one was accepted, at Gordon-Conwell. It seemed like another sign that he was on the right path. So he quit the precious job he didn't really want and said goodbye to his friends at work without fanfare and prepared himself for the next great adventure in his life: serving God and man.

It was at Gordon that he first discovered he had something of a knack for preaching. He did not have to be self-effacing because he was *supposed* to be preaching; and in this sanctioning he found a new freedom and voice. It wasn't necessary to labor for hours over a blank Word document like his younger peers. He could figure out what he wanted to say, jot down a few notes, and then stand up and open his mouth and a sermon would just come out of him.

He learned the secret of the One Grand Idea—find something big to talk about, something people were hungry for—and hang the whole sermon on that one thing. His message: “God is love.” The

cross and the commandment to “Love one another” was what inspired him. Love for God and for each other—the church living in humility and gentleness—this was the plain meaning of the text, in his view; this was paradise restored, the core of his preaching.

In his internship he discovered something strange. It seemed he was able to sense the mood of the congregation while he was talking and adapt on the fly. He was not committed to any set course because he wasn’t reading his sermons. He could wait for the wind to blow and follow where it led him. The more he opened himself up to this feedback mechanism, this strange intuition, the more the congregation seemed to respond. They leaned in close, they were together.

Oh sure, there were some outliers, the perennially unimpressed, the yawners, the snickerers. What was someone his age doing going into the ministry? What was this nonsense about talking without notes and looking right at them and even into their eyes while he spoke? Pastor Bob never did that. And did they really have to love their neighbor?

Pastor Bob told him to ignore the cavilers. Those were literally his words. “Get used to it,” he told Mike after he had been at the church about four months. “There are some in every congregation and more in some congregations than others. I call them the ‘joy killers.’ No, not the kill-joys. That seems too mild.”

And what did Pastor Bob think about Mike and his gift? He was impressed. He was not a great preacher himself and had the good sense to know it, but he was not jealous of Mike. After all, he could afford to be generous; Mike would be gone at the end of the year. Bob supported him and praised him lavishly, and Mike was grateful because he still wasn’t sure, changing course so late in life, following the call he thought he felt—did he really feel it?

Mike noticed an ad for an opening at a large church in southern New Hampshire when he was finishing up his internship. Almost on a whim he applied. Of course they don’t call it “applying,” but he knew what it was all about. He worked hard on his Ministerial Profile, a résumé with a nicer name. It felt a little funny to be so careful. Jesus called the disciples and they just came, didn’t they? Seems they didn’t need a Ministerial Profile back then.

He did the things he knew he would have to do in order to win over a call committee, having been on a couple himself. Not that he concealed anything; he was open about his beliefs. But he gave in

enough to the process to say things he knew they would want said and avoid the little traps into which he had seen many candidates fall.

Whatever he did, it must have worked, because the search committee came to hear him. They weren't conspicuous, twelve strangers sitting together in the third pew from the back in a half-empty church—not at all. Mike gave a particularly good sermon. Before he stood up, he prayed silently, “Lord humble me so that you can be glorified,” and then the Spirit descended on him in the stillness of a New England summer morning. The committee was all smiles afterwards and Mike and Bob both had a good feeling about what had just happened.

Twelve? Yes, twelve. The church they represented was large and growing and had a dynamic senior pastor. And a youth pastor. And a small group and Christian ed pastor. And a calling pastor. The opening was for “assistant pastor”—someone to help out with extra services and anything else the senior pastor did not have time to do. The number twelve did not make Mike think of the tribes of Israel or the disciples, however. It made him think of a jury.

Still, he felt confident enough to make a good impression. He shook hands firmly and looked each person in the eye. A few weeks later he heard from them again. They wanted him to come up to “meet” them. This was the way they couched the job interview. He prepared for it just as he would for any job interview. He researched Pine Cove Community Church and talked to all the pastors he could think of and made sure he was fully prepared to make a good impression.

The committee was impressed. He could tell. He gave straight-arrow answers to tough questions about doctrine and current controversies. He did not try to be coy about his beliefs, but they happened to be the beliefs Pine Cove was looking for in a candidate. It seemed they were well-matched in orthodoxy. Mike went home in high spirits, fairly confident of success.

They called and asked him to come speak at their church. It was a little out of the ordinary, like an audition, but Bob told him it was not unheard of. Mike was nervous about talking before such a large crowd—stumbled around in the beginning while he tried to get his bearings—but before long he was back in his groove and did pretty well. Anyway, they seemed to think so. They thought he would make a very acceptable assistant pastor.

Mike was amazed, even a little dazed. It had all gone so smoothly—selling the house, getting through divinity school without too much of a struggle, in spite of Greek and Hebrew, and then obtaining his first call. It was confirmation of his momentous decision to change paths mid-life.

PEACE AND GRACE TO YOU

IT WASN'T HARD FOR MIKE TO UPROOT AND MOVE, since he had pretty much divested himself of all his earthly belongings, letting the kids take anything they wanted and the dump take the rest. He arrived in his new home town with clean hands and a clean heart and was eager to get started and do some good, if he could.

The welcome was warm. Pine Cove was a thriving church, and everywhere he looked he saw a sea of smiling faces, there were so many people, happiness everywhere. His first impressions were confirmed, from his interview and later when he came to preach. It was a friendly church with sound teaching and committed Christians full of love and zeal.

How many times was he invited out to dinner in those first dizzying months! A wave of sympathy swept over the church as the news spread that he was a widower. He was glad for all the invitations and felt he was ramping up nicely on getting to know people and the crucial exercise of putting names to faces—crucial for a pastor, anyway.

He was very impressed with the people who were running the church, both their commitment and their competence. It was remarkable that so many high-powered people were willing to take time from their demanding work schedules to serve the church and the Lord. He was impressed with them as people. They were down to earth. They were loving and generous.

He was glad to see that his new church had taken up the banner of love and was actively living it. There was kindness everywhere he went in those happy days when they were all getting to know each other, gracious greetings and gracious words. He pinched himself. How had he wound up in such a church, so alive, so genuine and warm? How had he been so blessed?

Not everything went perfectly smoothly, of course, there at the beginning of his ministry and the new life he had chosen for himself. Mike had been on board for six months or so before he became aware of the Cantors. No, not worship leaders; a couple by the name of Cantor, who sang in a very different way, or so it seemed to him.

Fred Cantor was on the board of deacons and was a striking character with a strong-brewed personality. Apparently he was a potentate in finance in Boston; Mike found out later it was insurance. He knew the type well from his long sojourn in the corporation. They're the tall ones who stand out in meetings even when they don't talk, the ones with the Mysterious Influence over others.

Mike became much more aware of the Cantors, however, after he found himself invited to a Bible study at their house. Acutely aware, we might say. By that time he had visited many studies and was impressed with the level of Bible literacy in the church, which was by no means the case in other churches. Here was a church where small groups of parishioners were able to read the Bible together and discuss what they'd read with insight and sophistication.

But nothing prepared him for what he heard that night. It seems he stumbled into a discussion of the Revelation, and specifically a certain notorious chapter that he, until that moment, did not realize was notorious. Somehow he had managed to glide through divinity school without having his clothes snagged by this small chapter in the midst of a strange and indecipherable book.

Mike had set Revelation aside in his mind because it was imposing and he did not really understand it. Coming dead last among the sixty-six books of the Bible, it seemed like a caboose, optional and interesting but obscure, more difficult than rewarding. He was the kind of guy who went straight to the Beatitudes when he thought of the Bible. The esoteric visions of Daniel and John were harder to warm up to.

So we gravitate naturally to the things we like and understand; but now Mike was wearing the weeds of a teacher. Not that he saw himself that way, necessarily. In his mind he was still just a guy in jeans going to a Bible study at someone's home and feeling kind of awkward, a guy who not too long ago had been sitting in a corporation cube. But *they* did. He was the ordained pastor and presumably the expert in exegesis.

He could sense this deference in them, this two-edged sword, as he sat there in the comfortable leather chair in the Cantors' rec room with the fire glowing in the hearth. It was with some discomfort that he realized he did not have anything to offer them when it came to the passage under consideration. Someone read the words and he sat there listening like everyone else and he *was* just like everyone else

because the words were strange to him, exotic and strange. No grand insights came to mind.

He knew there were many opinions about Revelation. There were some who thought its dire prophecies had been fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem and unhappy events occurring within the timeframe in which it was written. There were others who saw it as a prophecy of the end times. Mike knew their interpretations could be colorful, although he had not expended the time or energy to find out exactly what they were and how he felt about them.

The traditional view made sense to him. He was content with it. This strange beast coming up out of the sea represented the different empires that had crushed the Jews, the most mighty and terrible of all being the Roman Empire, which prevailed at the very time John was writing on his hard rock. It made sense that the beast was Rome and its self-worshipping emperors, who had become increasingly vicious since the time of Augustus.

Mike used this soothing logic to put the controversy to bed in his own mind. It was about to be rudely awakened, however. Fred Cantor was leading the study, and it dawned on Mike, as his new friend unfolded his interpretation, that they were heading into murky waters. Somehow Fred had gotten the idea into his handsome head that the second beast, the one with the feigning horns of the lamb, was the Roman Catholic Church. This was the interpretation he now proceeded to unfold for his rapt listeners.

The presentation of this interpretation was not clumsy. Would that it were! But no, the same sophistication and thoroughness Mike had observed in other Bible studies at Pine Cove were on display here as well. Obviously Fred had spent some quality time with the passage and commentaries, parsing out the apparent meaning of the colorful symbolic descriptors and finding ways to ascribe them to Catholicism. It was all very convincing. No one protested.

Not until Brenda Carlson spoke up, that is. "I'm a little confused. Are you saying Catholics aren't Christian?"

"I'm talking about the church, the institution," Fred replied, his tone changing from plainspoken friendliness to the one you hear when something is in play. "I'm sure there are many sincere Catholics, but unfortunately they are deceived. It's counterfeit Christianity."

“I don’t think that can be right,” Brenda’s husband chimed in. “I don’t see how they can be counterfeit. I mean, look at all the Catholic churches out there.”

“Of course you don’t. Nobody does. That’s the whole point of the prophecy, to help us see things we can’t see. This beast has the horns of a lamb. It looks like Christ, but it isn’t Christ. It isn’t Christian. It’s fake, and in the end times it will be repudiated.”

There was complete silence in the room as the eleven participants—five couples and Mike—mulled over this startling claim. Mike looked at them and wondered what they were thinking. Could they actually be buying this?

“What do you say, Pastor?” he heard Brenda saying. “Do you really think this is about the Roman Catholic Church?”

“I believe it’s generally interpreted as being about the Roman *Empire*,” Mike replied cautiously. “The counterfeit could be the emperors who had themselves declared god.”

“That’s not what the commentaries say,” Fred said boring in. “I did a lot of research on this, and it’s pretty clear that the Protestant view is that this represents the pope.”

“Well, there are a lot of different opinions about it, because it’s so obscure. But I doubt there are too many serious commentaries saying it’s the pope. Especially since he didn’t exist yet.”

“How about Matthew Henry? Is he ‘serious’ enough for you?”

Mike blinked. “He’s very serious. But I can’t believe he said that.”

“You may not believe, Pastor, but he did. Here it is. You can see for yourself.”

He handed him a thick gray book, open to the appropriate page. Mike looked down at it and saw the passages that Fred or someone had highlighted in yellow: “Those who would think the first beast signifies Rome pagan by the second beast would understand Rome papal, which promotes idolatry and tyranny, but in a more soft and lamb-like manner.”

His first reaction was shock in comprehending that the second beast was indeed being linked to “Rome papal.” Was it possible? Did Matthew Henry actually believe the second beast was Catholicism? Then he latched onto “Those who would think” like a life raft. Henry was not equating the beast with the Roman church; he was saying there were some unspecified people who did. He was putting distance between himself and them.

For a moment Mike felt better. But then he began to wonder if this was just a rhetorical trick. Henry was insulating himself by putting all this speculation into the mouth of “those,” but it also seemed to be his own view. Or at least he was not offering any alternative views. Everything he had to say about the passage indicated that the beast and the pope were one.

Mike sat there blinking at the page while the room grew very quiet. “I wasn’t aware of this commentary,” he said at last. “To tell you the truth, I’m not really an expert on Revelation. I’ll just say it’s a very hard book, and we should be careful about drawing conclusions from things that aren’t really clear.”

“Not an expert. I see. But they seem clear to Matthew Henry,” Fred persisted. “It makes sense, what he’s saying. All of the things he talks about there make sense, it seems to me.”

“Well, not to contradict him, but I very much doubt that’s the case. I do know most commentators will say this is about the Roman Empire and their blasphemies.”

“So you don’t believe there’s a problem with the Catholic Church. You’re one of these relativists. Anything goes.”

“I wouldn’t call myself a relativist. I consider Catholics my Christian brothers and I respect them and their sincerity.”

“What about Luther? He called Rome the ‘whore of Babylon.’”

“He also told the burghers to slay the peasants,” Mike said laughing. In Mike’s mind, Luther was a complex man who sometimes said provocative things that were not supposed to be taken too literally, as in his *Table Talk*. This was a sophisticated perspective, however, as he surmised from the looks of dismay on the faces of his hosts.

He did not know it yet, but he had made powerful enemies. Fred was not happy about being corrected—contradicted, in his view—in his own Bible study. He felt Mike was wrong, but even if he wasn’t wrong there were other ways to handle things. It was not necessary to humiliate a man in his own home, in front of his friends, laugh at him.

The one who really turned, though, was Susan. Mike had gone after her man. Her husband was like a god to her, not only a wonderful provider but a man of faith and wisdom who studied the Bible and read commentaries and was no lightweight. She adored him for his integrity and the position of eminence he enjoyed in the church, in her view so well-deserved.

Mike, the new pastor, the guy in jeans, had disrespected him. That was just how she felt about the unfortunate incident. He did not give him his due, he made him look small and ordinary, and for this she would never forgive him.

A couple of weeks later Mike was summoned by Charles Ridley, the senior pastor.

“So what happened at the Cantors?” Charles said with a friendly but concerned smile.

Mike was surprised—he wasn’t expecting this. “Oh—I guess you mean the Bible study.”

“I heard there was a bit of a row.”

“Row? Well, no, not really. They had an interpretation of Revelation that was—well, less than edifying. I simply tried to add some perspective, that’s all.”

“I understand there was some sort of disparaging comment about Luther?”

“Luther can’t always be taken at face value. Sometimes you have to be careful when you cite him as an authority because he doesn’t always mean what he seems to say.”

“I don’t know if he does or he doesn’t, but you might want to consider treading a little more lightly with Fred Cantor in his own house. He’s not someone to trifle with. Besides, they were raised Lutheran. So they tend to be a little touchy on the subject, what with a Postmodernist lurking around every corner.”

“I’m hardly a Postmodernist—whatever that is,” Mike protested. “I was just trying to diffuse the situation with a little humor. They were saying the whore of Babylon is the Pope and Rome. I really don’t think we want to have that sort of thing going on in our Bible studies.”

“Well, as you may have guessed by now, I have my own differences with ‘Rome.’ But be that as it may, I’m just counseling you, as a friend. Fred Cantor is a remarkable man in many ways. I can tell you one thing—you definitely don’t want to get on his bad side.”

“Should I go to him—apologize?”

“Do you have something to apologize for?” Charles said, giving him a searching look.

“I guess maybe I was a little too flip. But this is something I feel strongly about. We can’t go around talking about the love of God

and the unity of the Spirit and then call the entire Catholic Church the whore of Babylon. That just doesn't seem very loving to me."

"Well, you know, you can overdo that love thing. It isn't the be-all and end-all of the Bible, like some people make it out to be."

Mike was shocked by this comment. "The Bible says 'God is love.'"

"That was what the old Thomists believed, too, and I suppose you know it was a major bone of contention with the Protestant theologians. Yes, 'God is love,' but God is a lot of things. 'God is light.' God is 'holy, holy, holy.' You don't want to get too cozy with God, as the Israelites found out at Mt. Sinai. That's a blind alley, too."

"But I thought God's holiness was his perfect love. Isn't that what Jesus was talking about when he said all the law and all the prophets were summed up in two commandments?"

"I'm not going to get into a theological debate with you. I'm just trying to give you some friendly advice. This is a big church with a lot of people who have diverse backgrounds and diverse opinions. You don't want people like the Cantors against you. Fred's the chairman of the board of deacons, basically your boss. They're good people, they really have the best interests of the church at heart, and we just need to remember that not everyone has the kind of training we have and knows things the way we do. Believe me, you're going to hear a lot of weird things in the course of your ministry. This is not the hill to make your stand on."

"So again—should I go apologize? I would be perfectly happy to do so."

Charles looked at him. "No, I think I would let sleeping dogs lie at this point. If you really don't feel you did anything wrong it could just make things worse. Let's let the dust settle and see where we are. He really is a good man, once you get to know him."

THE HOUSE BUILT UPON A ROCK

BUT WHAT WAS THAT HILL, IF NOT LOVE? The meaning of the Bible seemed clear to Mike—“Love one another”; “No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us”; “I pray that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide, how long, how tall, how deep is the love of Christ”; “the greatest of these is love”; “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God”—and on and on.

Mike was aware of the controversy to which Charles alluded. He remembered it being discussed briefly at Gordon. His professor did not seem inclined to dwell on it, and Mike was not inclined to dwell on it either—because it was painful. It was personal for him. If love was not the center and essence of the gospel and church life, which is what he believed and felt with all his heart, then what was he doing in the ministry?

A dark cloud entered into his soul through this discussion with Charles. Even as they sat there smiling at each other he could feel a spirit of opposition rising between them. Mike had been in difficult situations before. He’d had a couple of bosses who simply did not like him very much. It did not matter how hard he worked or how good his work was or how pleasant or cooperative he was—they had taken it into their heads to oppose him. One of them succeeded in making him miserable for about a year until she finally did herself in and was fired.

One of the great implacable truths of human existence is that some people simply do not like us. And now Mike had a dark foreboding about his relationship with Charles. He did not want to have this foreboding—more than

anything he wanted to be friends with Charles—but he could not pretend to be unaware of the negative signals coming from the senior pastor, something in his tone, something vaguely threatening beneath the show of warmth and ostensible Christian meekness. Was he headed into stormy waters in the very first church he served?

Because come on, Fred Cantor was wrong. Not only was there no Scriptural warrant for his attack on Catholics, but it was hateful and perverse. Fred was equating the Catholic Church with the whore of Babylon. Should Mike have let it stand? No, he could not. It went against everything he believed in, everything he stood for. It made him physically ill just to think about it.

But did Charles agree with Fred? He couldn't—but he was being cagey. He would not condemn him, and this restraint put him in de facto alliance with Fred, whether he agreed with him or not. Mike had heard Charles make occasional comments about Catholicism in worship services that struck him as being unfair or unnecessary, like the swipe he took at transubstantiation a couple of weeks earlier. At the time he had smiled along with everyone else at the prophetic utterance of the senior pastor—but now it came back to him and rubbed him the wrong way.

Was Charles a closet bigot? Was it possible that his new mentor, the spiritual leader of a large and prominent church, was a hater of Rome? It had been hundreds of years since the Puritans cut off the ears of Catholics who persisted in polluting the colony at Massachusetts Bay with their unwanted presence; but the prejudice itself, it seems, had not died. This came as a rude surprise to Mike, who had not grown up with this particular prejudice. His parents never breathed a word of it. Janet would not have let them attend a church that even hinted at it. Her lifelong best friend and godmother of their first daughter was a devout Catholic.

The same intuitive power that helped Mike with his sermons now turned against him with a vengeance and started telling him things he did not want to hear. In short,

he had a premonition that difficult times were coming his way. He thought about the irrationality of human existence. He thought about the best and kindest person he had ever known being attacked and destroyed by a relentless biological killer. If someone like Janet could be taken off in such a horrible way, then why should he be spared suffering? There was no reason why he should, none he could think of.

Suffering was headed his way and there was nothing he could do about it. This unpleasant thought took hold of him and would not let go. Not that he saw himself as being above suffering. “No servant is greater than his master.” Nor was he the sort of person who spent a lot of time wondering why “bad things happen to good people.” His view of human nature was much closer to Romans: “No one is righteous; no not one.” And from that point of view, why should he not suffer? Why should his life be any more pain-free than the Savior he worshipped?

Suffering is the way of purification. The Bible was clear on this. Men are sinners and suffering is to be welcomed as the means by which their dross can be turned into gold. Mike was not proud of his exchange with Fred Cantor. He had been far too glib. He had a Yankee’s congenial sharp tongue—and he knew what Proverbs had to say about men with sharp tongues who are too hasty to offer their opinions. He regretted that he was not as good as the man who wrote Proverbs. Then again, if he was so good why did he write? Books like Proverbs are written to scold ourselves as much as others. Solomon most of all was in need of his own instruction.

Life is a course of correction for the wise, and Mike knew he needed plenty of correcting. Still, he did not relish the prospect of suffering in his new calling. He could see it coming—ever so clearly, based on past experience—for the church was no different from the corporation in the matter of sinfulness. It wasn’t holiness that made the church different but repentance and the love of God and mercy.

Mike understood all this on an intellectual level, and on that same level he was willing to suffer. He could see suffering coming and he was willing to endure it.

But he did not want to suffer. He wanted everything to go well in his new calling. He went to Charles again in an attempt to heal the rift that he sensed opening up between them—but Charles would not understand him. He went right back to the Luther thing and his cagey position. Mike could not get around the roadblock that had been thrown in his way, could not maneuver himself out of the unpleasant situation his mentor was creating—not without saying something he did not believe—not without acknowledging that Fred might just be right and dropping his principled opposition.

This was something he simply could not do in good conscience. He felt in the strongest terms that Fred's coldhearted judgment was both wrong and contrary to the spirit of Christ. More than anything he wanted the church to be one. He hated the religious jingoism that caused members of the denominations to malign each other, just as someone from town A might condemn the footballers from town B. It was not possible for him to go to Charles and pretend that these were not his real feelings.

Unfortunately it was also impossible to go to Charles and reason with him about his position. He just seemed to get himself into more trouble. Charles had hardened against him, like Pharaoh hardening his heart. Since he could not win Charles over with honest persuasion, and since it was not in his nature to dissemble, his only option seemed to be to keep a low profile and hope that the Cantors would forget about the perceived slight in time. He kept his head down and applied himself diligently to his duties, working long hours and making no demands.

But there was one way in which he could not avoid giving offense, apparently. This was his natural aptitude for preaching, the gift that is so rare and coveted in churches. He had been given the Saturday night service. Charles

dismissed it as the “orphan service,” but Mike liked the low visibility. He eased right into his role. His sermons started out strong and only got stronger as he became acquainted with his congregation. He was a little surprised to see the numbers gradually increasing. The 60 or so souls with which he had been entrusted grew to 75 and then shot up to 100 and beyond.

People rushed up to him after the services to say how much they enjoyed his sermons and how meaningful they were. He overheard the whispers—“Such a good preacher! As good as Charles!” Mike was embarrassed by these comments. He did not want to be as good as Charles. It was not his intention or desire to challenge the senior pastor in any way. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition” were words that he loved and tried to live by. But Charles did not seem to feel the same way. The more the congregation grew, the more evident his coolness became.

But why? Charles was the star. Church was packed on Sunday mornings. People drove thirty miles just to hear him. No, there had to be some other reason for the coolness. For that matter, was it even coolness at all? Mike watched him with the other pastors. He seemed to treat them in much the same way—friendly but always keeping his distance. Besides, Charles did not actively mistreat him. There had been no more unhappy confrontations after the conversations about the Cantors. To tell the truth, there was hardly any contact between them at all.

But this is just what troubled him. He’d had such a good relationship with Bob Diamond during his internship. They would go out for breakfast in the little one-stoplight town and just chat. Bob took mentoring seriously, and Mike was grateful for the support. Of course Charles was a lot busier than Bob. Charles had a flock of about two thousand souls and a seemingly endless barrage of activities to oversee; Bob was lucky to see 70 in church on a Sunday and had an abundance of free time to lavish on receptive protégés—or his woodworking.

Charles was always in a meeting of one kind or another, if not at the church itself then in town or in Boston or some more exotic venue, connecting with various dynamic ministries and coming back with glowing reports that he shared during his sermons. He knew everyone at the top of the loose-ranged Evangelical hierarchy and seemed to consider himself one of them. This effort alone—to keep himself in the top echelon where he felt he belonged and where he said the church needed him to be—took up a huge amount of his time.

Mike got it. They had a busy church. That was why there were so many pastors and why he was there. They were a church on the move, a church with a mission. There were a lot of things to do and everybody was doing them—and at the top of this pyramid was Charles himself, a veritable whirlwind of activity and creative ideas, every day shaking things up and putting people on their toes and making them go “out of their comfort zones.”

Charles did not have time to be like Bob and take the other pastors under his wing. They had to fly on their own. In fact they were expected to lift him up. That was why they were there—to help his ministry soar. This was never openly stated, of course, but Mike saw it. And he did not object. He was willing to have such a role. After all, Charles had unique “gifts,” as he often reminded them. There are some gifts we have and some gifts we don’t have, and the way to make yourself and others unhappy was to try to be gifted in areas where you were not.

There were a lot of areas where Charles was not gifted, by the way. He was not gifted at working with young people, which was why they had a youth pastor. He was not gifted at visiting parishioners, which is why they had a visiting pastor. It seemed a lot of the things he wasn’t “gifted” at were the grubby things, the hard things, like visiting the old woman in the nursing home who was no longer one of the church’s bright lights—that sort of thing.

Mike was a little skeptical about this use of the concept of spiritual gifts. It was originally intended to draw the church together, not to single out individuals for special privileges. There are all kinds of gifts, according to St. Paul, and all of those gifts are vital to the body; thus no one has the right to lord it over others. It was human nature to boast and glorify ourselves, but the “more excellent” way was love. This was not what Charles had in mind, however, when he talked about his gift for preaching and teaching. Instead he seemed to be excusing himself from ministerial duties that he found distasteful.

Be that as it may, Mike did not mind the system at Pine Cove, on the whole. It was true that Charles was highly gifted in the pulpit. He was highly gifted at standing up in front of a congregation and providing them with an intense spiritual experience—there was no other way to put it. The church was packed on Sunday mornings, and it was definitely because of Charles. It had never been packed before; in fact it had almost closed its doors. They came to hear him preach and find out what incredible, moving, challenging thing he would say and do next. Without him and his extraordinary gift, they would not be there.

The other pastors were expected to complement Charles and fill in the gaps left by his various self-identified deficits. They were not there to be nurtured by him. And yet Mike could not help wishing for a little nurturing from the senior pastor. He longed to have a good relationship with him; he longed for them to be Christian brothers, to feel a sense of kinship and camaraderie and not just shared aspiration. None of this was forthcoming. There was no open breach in their relationship, there were no more arguments and no hostility on the surface, but Mike felt a certain tension between them. He felt a coldness from Charles, and it hurt him.

He was still trying to suppress these apprehensions as he blew past his first anniversary date. Outwardly everything was fine. After all, he was a bit of a rising star, with the

growing popularity of the Saturday night service. Then Bill Atkinson dropped by his office one summer evening. Bill was one of Mike's favorite people at Pine Cove. He had been there when Charles first arrived, when it was just another floundering New England Protestant church, and had supported Charles from the start, unlike those who fought his changes every step of the way and were eventually appeased with their own traditional service (albeit at eight in the morning).

Actually Bill was supportive of all the pastors; Mike was no different. But there was a connection between them. They were the same age and had been through the same corporation mill, which made it easy for them to talk. They also had a similar small-town Yankee background and the ironic affect that comes along with it. They understood each other implicitly, but not everybody else understood them.

Bill stuck his head in the door to Mike's office. "Mind if I come in for a moment?"

"Be my guest," Mike replied, although there was something about the way he said this that put him on his guard.

Bill closed the door behind him, and he noticed. "So listen, I just wanted to tell you what a great job you're doing. I don't get to Saturday night very often, but I went a couple of weeks ago and it was amazing."

"Oh, thanks. And right back at you. You are very supportive and it means a lot."

"Have you always had that—the preaching thing?"

"No!" Mike said laughing self-consciously. "I had no idea I even had any ability of that kind until I tried it. I was as surprised as anybody else."

"Well, you definitely do. In fact I'm starting to think you may mount a challenge to Charles himself," he said, looking at Mike with an inquisitive expression.

Mike just laughed. "I'm not interested in challenging anybody. Charles is amazing. I'm just trying to do the best I can and stay out of trouble."

“Speaking of which, is everything okay between you and Charles?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know. We had a deacons meeting last week and he said something sort of strange, so I didn’t know if something was going on. I hope not.”

Mike was now forced to choose whether he wanted hear this strange something. “You mean about me?”

“Yes, I guess. Or at least I thought it was strange. Maybe I’m missing something. Anyway, someone complimented you on your preaching and the way the Saturday service keeps growing by leaps and bounds. Charles looked at her and said, ‘Let’s just hope he can keep it going’—just like that. We were all kind of shocked. Someone asked him what he meant and he said all you ever talk about is love. ‘People could get the wrong idea,’ or something. Which kind of surprised me, because I thought that’s what it was all about.”

Mike was tongue-tied. He knew what he wanted to say on the subject of love, had been working on it in his head ever since his conversation with Charles, preparing himself and layering his defense with increasingly elaborate arguments, but for this very reason it now seemed like there was no purpose in replying. It was too complicated to explain.

For one thing, he was being caricatured. He did not *just* preach about love. He was the only pastor on staff who followed the traditional lectionary and disciplined himself to talk about the topics it raised each week, instead of simply defaulting to whatever was top of mind.

For another, he was far from being some sort of cultural accommodationist. Charles was implying was that his message of love made him soft on sin. But Mike did not portray love as a soft force. On the contrary, love was the hard edge between sin and righteousness. “The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, ‘You

shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

He did not put love in opposition to the law and accountability, as Charles intimated; he was not a smiling simpleton spooning out pabulum and pretending that anything goes and God cannot be provoked. But how could he explain all this to Bill when it was Charles who was sitting on the other side? The caricature Charles was using was effective for the very reason that it was a caricature. It demolished the complexity of his views. Most of all it was effective because it came from Charles and carried the full weight of his authority.

"I didn't realize he had reservations about what I was preaching," Mike relied carefully. "He hasn't said anything to me. I would be happy to discuss it with him."

"Oh, I know. I'm sure he just wants you to do well. And I may be reading too much into it. I wasn't going to say anything, but I happened to see you sitting here..."

"No, I'm glad you did. If I'm being talked about in deacons meetings, then I definitely want to know about it. I'm not a seasoned veteran, despite my age. I'm well-aware I have a lot to learn and a lot of room for improvement."

"Well, I don't know about that. As I said, I think you're fantastic. I love your sermons, and a lot of other people do too. I guess I was just worried that there was some kind of rift between you two guys, which I would certainly hate to see."

Mike sat there in shock after his friend left. Why was Charles making disparaging comments about him? Why didn't he come to him first if he had a problem with his preaching? Why choose a public venue where Mike wasn't even present to benefit from the correction? Was he sending a message? If so, it had been received. Mike was flanked and he knew it. If it came down to him against Charles, he knew he would lose.

Him against Charles! The very words were acid. He did not want to be against Charles. It was the last thing he

wanted. He had done everything he could to fit in and be a good soldier, had not presumed to challenge Charles in any way, although there were things he felt that should have been challenged. And his reward for this meekness and humility was a public slap in the face. Clearly that was the way Bill saw it. That was why he closed the door.

His intuition was right. Something had gone seriously awry in their relationship. Was it because of his doctrine? No, he was right down the middle when it came to that. In fact in some ways he was more orthodox than Charles. Was it because he preached about love? It seemed unlikely. All Christian preachers preach about love. They can hardly avoid it when the New Testament has so much to say on the subject.

No, something else had caused this outburst in front of the deacons. It came in response to someone commenting on the growth of the Saturday night service. Was this what was bothering Charles? Was he—*jealous* of Mike? Was he trying to dismiss the growth because it diminished his own success? If so, this would put them in natural opposition to each other in a way that could not be circumvented.

Mike fought this debilitating idea. It was ridiculous to think the senior pastor had any reason to be jealous of a junior associate and his “orphan service” when his own services were packed every week and he was the celebrated author of three well-known books on revival. What he had done to soften hearts in the granite state was legendary.

So he couldn't be jealous of poor Mike. Could he? Because if he was, then Mike now found himself in an impossible and bizarre situation. The better he preached, the more he put himself in jeopardy. He could not help getting better. Not only did he love preaching, but every week he learned something new about how to reach people and how to strip down his message to pure essence and carve out all unnecessary gestures.

He was getting better; he couldn't help it. Anyone who does something over and over again gets better, whether he

wants to or not—and Mike wanted to. But did this mean his relationship with Charles would only continue to get worse? It was a terrible thought, and he was not completely successful in his efforts to pray it away.