

Chapter 6

The Little Methodist Church

The time had now arrived when I was confronted with an inescapable problem – the Christian training of my two children. My own religious dilemma I could compromise with, but there was no procrastination possible with Patricia Doris and James Lee. The decision had to be mine. My husband did not feel the responsibility of the children’s spiritual training as I did. Knowing that he would never consent to their being trained in the Catholic dogma, I made the only remaining decision - to take them to the little Methodist church in our neighborhood.

This neighborhood church had scheduled what they called a “church supper,” and my husband had bought tickets for our entire family. On the designated night, we attended this supper which was held in the church basement. The women very kindly made us feel most welcome. I shall never forget how the pastor’s wife took pains to convince us that our presence was indispensable to the success of the function.

We thoroughly enjoyed the evening. As we were leaving the pastor’s wife managed to leave me with the thought that if I did not come the following Sunday morning and enroll my children in Sunday school, the session could hardly go on at all. So I had little left to do but give my promise. So on Sunday morning, we all prepared ourselves carefully. I was to attend my first service in a church other than a Roman Catholic one. I delivered the children to their class held in the church basement, and then I sat waiting in the vestibule with the other mothers who had brought their children.

The morning service in this little Methodist church seemed very strange to me. I had been accustomed to the solemnity of the Mass read in Latin, the choir singing in the same language, the incense, lighted candles on the beautiful and elaborate altars, and priests in colorful vestments. This plain, simple service seemed to me to lack the reverence and sanctity of the Catholic ritual. Yet, I could not help but take note of the sincerity of the worshippers nor to fail to take food for my hungry soul in the reading and preaching of the Word.

Sunday after Sunday, I continued taking my children to Sunday School, sitting in the vestibule with other mothers until their class was finished. As we mothers became better acquainted, the conversation would often turn to things of God and prayer. One Sunday, one of the ladies said she felt I knew so much more about the Bible than they did and suggested that I teach them while we waited for our children, and so have our own class. I laughed and declined, explaining that I had never studied the Bible, and that what I knew I had learned only from the study of Bible history. Yet they were insistent and declared that even this knowledge was more than they possessed. So strangely I found myself, never having experienced real salvation and with no true knowledge of the Word, a Catholic who had cut ties with her faith, teaching an adult Sunday School Class in the Methodist Church!

Drawing upon the training I had received at the Women's Teachers College, I took pains in preparing the lessons, enlarging much upon the geographical and moral aspects of them. What I lacked in spiritual understanding, I compensated for with research and preparation. As I continued in the study of the Word, I began to face many truths that influenced me. Yet with typical stubbornness, when I would face the class I would tell them: "Now, you see, I was raised a Catholic and I don't believe this, but you are supposed to believe it." Their answer was always, "Well, that's fair enough with us." What we may have missed spiritually, we made up for with an education in tolerance.

My children were greatly enjoying Sunday School, and while I was not satisfied that God was wholly pleased with me, still I felt that somehow *His Hand* was drawing near to me again. We made many firm friends in the church. Our lives were enriched, and I began to feel as though we belonged. The Adult Sunday School class had grown. From the mothers' class of a few months back, it had become a real adult class.

Because of my study of the Word and with the influence of these new surroundings, I was going through different stages of conviction, and yes, of confusion. I had mixed feelings of frustration, condemnation, and insecurity, of conscience and dissatisfaction, and the working of the Word. For He says, "The entrance of His Word gives light," and this light was dispelling the darkness in my soul. This meant a battle, for light and darkness can never co-exist.

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One Sunday morning, a gentleman entered our class, a stranger. There was something about his bearing that made me feel undone, and I knew I could not teach that class in his presence. There was something about him that convinced me that he knew the Word, and how it should be taught. So I asked him if he would teach the class. He laughed and told me I was doing very nicely, but my feeling of insufficiency was intensified. At the close of the class, he asked me why I did not want to teach that day. I had the feeling that he knew the reason. I did not know the Lord through personal knowledge; my training had only taught me a distant awareness of Him. I tried to explain this to the man, but he only seemed to think it very strange that I did not know God with a personal knowledge.

Because of a sort of “inner light” that I saw reflected on this man’s face, and because of the quiet, calm smile that made one know he had a secret, in my vexation of spirit, I privately call him, “Mr. Shiny Face.” From that time on, whenever he came into my class, he always made me feel that I was talking about something of which I had no real knowledge.

But to return to that Sunday that Mr. Shiny Face first entered my class. During the service our minister announced that we would have a prayer meeting on Wednesday night. This term was so strange to me that when I returned home I asked my husband, “What is a prayer meeting?” He replied that he was not sure, but he supposed it was a meeting where they prayed! I determined then and there to attend this prayer meeting and see what it was all about. When I arrived on the Wednesday evening, there were not many people present, about twenty. Our minister spoke for a few minutes from the Word. Then he gave this word of encouragement: “Now, let everyone give a sentence prayer.” He tried his best to encourage us to pray aloud. There was no response until suddenly Mr. Shiny Face arose and knelt beside his chair. He was to the rear and side of me, so I could not see him. But when he began to pray, I was enthralled. When he would pray, “Oh, God!” something inside of me seemed to tie up in knots. I had never heard such a prayer in all my life.

Because of my previous religious training, I supposed his prayer was memorized. I thought to myself, surely he has studied elocution. Such expression, such vehemence, such supplication, I had never before heard. The intonation of his voice as it rose and fell caused me to feel my insufficient and undone condition. I could feel on the one hand Hell opening for me, and on the other, all Heaven trying to call to me. When

he finished, his face was bathed in tears, but it had not lost any of its shine. Upon my return home, I told my husband that I had never in my life met anyone with such a memory for prayer as that man had. I was certain he must have memorized that prayer from a prayer book. I decided in my heart that I must go back the following Wednesday night and hear that prayer again.

At the next Wednesday night prayer meeting, eagerly in attendance, I marked Mr. Shiny Face's place and sat where I would be able to watch him when he prayed. When the minister again urged the rest of us to give a sentence prayer, and no one would respond, Mr. Shiny Face again arose, knelt by his chair, and began to pray. To my utter amazement, he delivered a brand new prayer. And, this one seemed even more beautiful than the first, and longer as well. I was positive by this time that he must excel in intelligence, for surely no one could memorize prayers and give them with such sincerity and expression unless he were very well educated.

I attended each prayer meeting without fail from then on, and each time Mr. Shiny Face had a new prayer. Soon the minister decided to change the order of this prayer meeting. I realize now that Mr. Shiny Face's prayers were bringing God a little too close for comfort and little beyond even our minister's understanding, so he decided he would have different ones prepare to deliver a prayer at each meeting, instead of calling for volunteers.

I knew that one day my turn would come, and I made up my mind that I would excel Mr. Shiny Face. Therefore, I wrote and rewrote a beautiful prayer copied out of a prayer book, adding to it my own ingenuity until I was sure my prayer passed his in eloquence. But when it came to memorizing it, I could not manage it. So I took a piece of paper cut to the size of the hymn book, wrote the prayer on it, and pasted it in the book.

When it came to be my turn to lead in prayer, I was thus prepared. I told everyone to close their eyes and bow their heads. But one lady that I knew, who was full of mischief, had evidently guessed my secret. When everyone else had bowed their heads, I looked up and saw her peeking. I stared her directly in the eye and said, "Everyone, put down your heads and close your eyes!" Then I began to read my prayer with all the ardor and expression of which I was capable. But as I closed my prayer with what I thought was great success, I looked up and saw them all peeking at me! You may conclude with what chagrin and embarrassment I remember my prayer, particularly in view of my

present conviction that true prayer comes spontaneously and from the heart, not from literary invention and memory.

As I look back to this and other experiences, I see the mercy and the gentleness of God as He leads His dear children along. Surely what the Psalmist says is true: “He leadeth us beside still waters, and maketh us to lie down in green pastures.” Surely, “He does spread a table before us.” And, His “goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life.”

I did not know that in just a very short time, I would again be feeling *His Hand* on my shoulder - hearing His voice and seeing the vision that brought me God’s own salvation.