

THE PILGRIM

By Steve Stutzman

It was one of those days, stamped on my mind as a vivid image, and I can still see him standing there. He was an older gentleman, almost 60. He was not very tall, and years of very different life had had their effect. But he carried himself with a grace, poise and quiet confidence I have not often witnessed. He had been roofing, and the tiredness was also setting into his bones.

Lunchtime was over, and the crew was heading back to their job. They had stopped by my business to eat lunch, in the shade on my picnic table. I welcomed the break, and the fellowship—because I was hurting, seriously hurting.

Lunchtime chatter was mostly about current events in our local church, and the ruckus that was going on as it concerned me. There had been several meetings that culminated in me being accused and identified as problem central, and I was being dismissed, to put it very mildly. I was personally mostly in shock at the things that had been said to me, and about me; on top of that, I loved these people like my own brothers, and could not imagine ‘moving on’. I was full of vinegar about how wrong they had been, how evil I had been used, statements that were in error, etc.

The Pilgrim had said nothing. I knew he had opinions, but they were not coming out. I wanted them. I wanted the support, the validation, the vindictive indictment he could give from an educated perspective, to make me feel better in the midst of the turmoil.

I followed him out toward the truck. I asked from behind him about his opinion of the matters at hand. He slowed, then walked on. I asked again. He stopped. I asked the third time, and he turned to face me. His shoulders went back, his head came up, and his eyes blazed at me. I remember wondering if he really thought I was that wrong.

I would learn later he had his own history. Born to a pro-football player turned FBI agent, his father was a renowned figure in Dallas/ Ft Worth, and a security expert for General Dynamics. (see Wikipedia, I.B.Hale) Pilgrim, born a twin, was educated to be a small animal vet, and married into serious money. One day, while attending church as a routine, he met the Savior and became radically different. His wife hardly knew the new man, and definitely did not like him. While trying to downsize his lifestyle to something that would not torment his conscience, she snapped. One day a lawyer walked into the vet clinic and slapped down separation papers and a restraining order.

Pilgrim went directly home to confront the situation. The police were already there, and did not arrest him out of respect for his dad. But in about an hour, Pilgrim Bill signed over everything he had to his wife, put a few things in a backpack, strapped it on and walked away from the million dollar estate. That day he truly became PILGRIM Bill.

We met him years later through street witnessing in a ped-mall. He came home with a family from church, slept in a bed, had a shower. Bill showed high class in his background, meticulous about details, preferring excellent amenities, and very careful not to offend. He insisted on working for what he was given, and manual labor of roofing was his choice. He would hang around for several weeks---- sometimes months, accumulating several hundred dollars, then use it to buy the most expensive hiking shoes I had ever heard of. Then one day he would bid farewell, shoulder his pack, and head off down the road.

We had many, many conversations through the years. “The cross, the cross”, he would say. “embrace it. If you don’t you cannot be His disciple.” But that day, early on in our relationship, I knew little of this. I simply stood, bleeding inside, wanting desperately

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to believe somehow that I was right, that I was not a complete failure, that God didn't hate me and want me to die. And I was unnerved by those eyes.

"You really want to know, do you?" he said. His voice was lower than normal but very authoritative and clear. He hesitated, then spoke words that still shake my very core today.

"God does not care who is right and who is wrong. God is giving you an opportunity to die, and you are blowing it."

My whole world spun. You mean, it's not about right and wrong? Die? Opportunity? But I am right! When I looked up he was gone. Tears began to fill my eyes. That day, something fundamentally shifted in me. I went home that night and committed myself to that death, whatever it may mean. I withdrew myself from the conflict at church, and stayed home. I wept. I lay on the floor at night, after my family was in bed, sobbing. I suffered the stories and insults hurled at me. Once I was asked to physically leave the building of a church where I was sitting on the back bench. I wept the more. I let go of position, of respect, of dreams, of drive of motivation, of personality. The dying and weeping went on for days... Then months. I began to wonder if somewhere in this dark hole, I would lose my mind, and never return.

My wife just watched. She didn't interfere, or scold. She just watched me die. She saw me get up and head down the road, crying out to my Father, in the night watches. Sometimes she waited til I returned. Sometimes she never knew.

I cannot advertise today, loudly enough, or long enough. Die. Only in death, is resurrection found. Lay it down. Let it go. Release it. Weep. Let the pain wash over you. It cannot destroy that which is eternal anyway, only the human.

Pilgrim came back many times. He stayed with us and we built 2 rooms for him over our garage, still called the "pilgrim palace". He was homeless, by choice. He loved the cross, and longed continually for it to wreak its horrors upon him, that CHRIST might live fully in him. He went to Guyana, SA with missionary friends, and ministered to many. There he first showed signs of serious illness.

Back at my place, he tried to recover but could not. I finally took him to a doctor, grumbling and moaning all the way. The doctor sent him directly to the University Hospital. He got stronger there, and came home eventually. But not until much later did I realize that he had never told me what was actually diagnosed. He gave me oversight of his meager possessions and headed off to Nicaragua with more missionary friends.

Bill was medically trained, and he knew he was dying. He chose a mountain village, hired a nurse, and procured whiskey. When the pain got to deep, he drank. The nurse called me one day and told me Bill had passed from this world to the next.

I wish sometimes I had known then even the things we work with routinely now. I might have helped Bill with some of his personal struggles. I wasn't there when he died. We could not even ship the body out, and he was buried there the next day.

But I will never forget those words, burning a hole into my being, and resetting my course in life.

"God is giving you an opportunity to die, and you are blowing it."

In tribute to - William Kingsbury Hale, inscribed in our hearts as 'Pilgrim Bill', who never tired of telling stories of his adventures, and of talking about the glories of the cross.